

7.6: Feedback and Assessment

Learning Objectives

1. Differentiate between feedback and assessment
2. Identify the importance of feedback and assessment in motivating group members
3. Identify seven characteristics of feedback and assessment which motivate group members
4. Identify eight appropriate subjects of group feedback and assessment

Any old farmer in Vermont can tell you that you don't fatten your lambs by weighing them. - Jonathan Kozol

To succeed as a team is to hold all of the members accountable for their expertise. - Mitchell Caplan

Jonathan Kozol's point about lambs was that improving something requires that we do more than just check to see if it's getting better. As we've noted in the past several sections with respect to motivation and collaboration in groups, such positive change also requires hard work, concentration, persistence, patience, and a willingness to invest personal energy and time on behalf of goals.

Although he said that weighing lambs by itself will not fatten them, Kozol didn't say that weighing them isn't important at all. If a farmer does nothing but feed and tend animals, after all, how will the farmer know if the feeding and tending are working? And the same thing goes for group communication: if members of a group do nothing but work hard and concentrate intensively on pursuing their goals, how will they know if they're actually moving in the right direction?

Feeding and tending of animals are necessary for them to grow, just as tending a group is necessary for it to progress toward its goals. But for farmers, as well as for members of groups, so are feedback and assessment. As Thompson, (Thompson, L. (2008). *Organizational behavior today*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education) wrote, "It is the feedback element that is the critical ingredient in producing change in behavior." Motivation, in short, depends on both feedback and assessment.

How Feedback and Assessment Differ

Feedback is a general term that simply means communicating with someone in response to a message from that person or with respect to a perception you have about him or her. In day-to-day conversations, it may be a straightforward descriptive comment about facts that happen to catch your attention, like "It looks like you just got a haircut." In a group, an example of feedback might be something like "You've completed your part of the project now."

Assessment, on the other hand, is one variety of feedback. It is an expression of judgment about the value, significance, or merit of a person's nature or behavior. Instead of just describing someone's haircut or indicating that the person has finished a project, an assessment might be more like "Your haircut looks great" or "It's about time you finished your part of the project."

When you transmit any message to other people, and particularly if you share an impression or perception about them, you're asking them to enter a communication transaction with you. They're going to have to focus on your message and use mental energy to decide how to respond. When, then, should you ask people to make this kind of effort by giving them feedback? What kind should you give? And how much? Answering these questions constitutes a normal part of everyday human life with people with whom we interact routinely, but it's a particularly challenging part of working in a group with people whom we may not know as well as we do our family or close friends. Offering assessment can be even more difficult, since it puts us at risk of making a mistake or upsetting other people.

One source of group motivation is a sense of movement and growth. Therefore, among the most useful tools in preparing to provide feedback and assessment are benchmarks. These are qualitative or quantitative descriptions of a group's initial conditions to be used later for comparative purposes. For example, a newly-formed student group might make a list of how many and which books they have read by a particular author or on a particular assigned topic.

Effective Feedback and Assessment in a Group

Feedback and assessment should be planned and delivered carefully and intentionally. If they are to motivate people in a group, they should possess the following characteristics:

1. Relevance. The feedback or assessment should deal with actions the group has decided to take, values the group wants to embody, and especially goals the group has set for itself.

2. Frequency. People are busy and are bombarded with messages all day long, every day. In order to maintain a sense of purpose and focus with regard to their group's activities, members need to be reminded regularly of what and how they're doing.
3. Simplicity. The more direct and readily understandable the feedback and assessment, the better. In the 1960s, a whimsical bumper sticker said "Eschew obfuscation"—which means "avoid unclear communication." Keep things simple.
4. Candor. People generally appreciate honesty. In order to improve what they're doing in a group, give them forthright information about where they stand.
5. Civility. Too much candor can turn into rudeness. Politeness in feedback and assessment makes them easier to accept.
6. Specificity. Everyone in the group needs to understand the message as close to the same way as possible. Do your best, therefore, to be precise and to avoid ambiguity.
7. Eclecticism. Especially in large organizations such as schools and corporations, surveys and polls used as assessment tools can become tedious and burdensome. It's a good idea to invest time in developing creative new ways to monitor a group's stature and progress.

Subjects of Effective Feedback and Assessment

In order to assist and motivate group members, it's important to select the proper items to collect and express feedback and assessment about. Here are some possible topics about which feedback can be given:

1. Group configuration/patterns. Are the boundaries of your group clear? Have those boundaries changed, or are they the same as when the group was formed? Hartley and Dawson, (Hartley, P., & Dawson, M. (2010). *Success in groupwork*. New York: St. Martin's Press) also suggested asking which members occupy positions of status at the center of the group and which members are on its edge.
2. Actions taken by the group. Does everyone agree on what the results of your group's decisions are? Have you kept track of what you've done with lists or other records?
3. Relationship of actions to goals. Which of your group's actions have been guided by its a priori goals, i.e., the ones it established intentionally and explicitly at the outset of its activities? What *ad hoc* actions, if any—that is, ones in response to specific unanticipated circumstances—have you taken since originating the group?

Other topics which your group should consider pertain to assessment, including the following:

1. Adequacy of communication processes. To what degree are your group's members satisfied with the quantity and nature of communication among yourselves? What communication practices do you especially appreciate, and which would you prefer to change?
2. Adequacy of progress toward goals. To what degree are your group's goals being met? If your group's level of progress isn't what you hoped for initially, are you nevertheless comfortable with the lesser results, perhaps because you encountered tougher-than-expected challenges along the way?
3. Group members' individual satisfaction/mood. Unhappy or disgruntled members don't add to the motivational spirit of a group. Try asking the simple question, "So, how are you feeling?" at the conclusion of every major group task. Probing individuals too often about how they're feeling about your group's activities can be distracting, and it can even cause doubts to expand. If you don't check often enough, however, small areas of disagreement or dissatisfaction can grow to damaging proportions. A plan for frequent, regular assessment will help group members feel supported rather than importuned by assessment of their satisfaction.
4. The group's satisfaction with itself. Does your group's "self-portrait" change with time? This sort of question can be posed in efficient, uncomplicated ways. In addition to asking individual members, "So, how are *you* feeling?", it's possible also to ask, "So, how do you think our group's doing?" Even fanciful questions like "What kind of animal are we?" or "What kind of plant?" can quickly help ascertain how positive your group's climate and outlook may be.
5. External views about the group. To remain motivated to collaborate, groups can benefit from asking for perspectives on their activities from outsiders. A fresh view will often raise thoughtful new questions for your group itself to consider.

As Mitchell Caplan's quotation at the beginning of this section indicated, success in groups does depend at least in part on drawing upon the strengths of their members. Feedback and assessment make it possible to determine whether those strengths are being properly exploited and maximized for the benefit of the group.

Key Takeaway

Feedback and assessment in groups should possess definite characteristics and deal with well-thought-out subjects.

Exercise 7.6.1

1. Think of a group of which you're a part which engages in regular, frequent assessment of its activities. Who conducts the assessments? How and when are details of the assessments shared with members of the group? What, if anything, would you do to enhance the assessment process in the group?
2. Consider this feedback: "The group is doing all right, but it could improve." How would you change the message to make it more helpful in motivating members of the group? State a possible revision.
3. In some cultures, delivering direct negative feedback to others is avoided. If you worked in such a culture or with a representative of one, what measures would you take to ensure that the positive outcomes associated in mainstream American society with direct feedback and assessment could be achieved in other ways?
4. What is the most creative feedback or assessment technique you've ever seen used in a group? How effective was the technique? What might have made it even more helpful in motivating group members?

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