Feedback is an important process in all areas of our personal and professional lives. The basic feedback process is a flow of information, in which the ‘sender’ relays a piece of information - the ‘message’ to an intended ‘recipient’ (see McDowall, 2008 for fuller discussion). Feedback does not necessarily have to come from other people. We get feedback from tasks and our own feelings and thoughts about what we do. Evidence from both organisational and educational settings highlights the feedback process as a major source of discontent. It is not uncommon to confuse feedback desirability with usefulness (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996). Dissatisfaction with annual appraisal processes has long been documented (Fletcher, 2004), with little buy in, either from managers or their direct reports. In education, students habitually rate satisfaction with feedback and assessment processes as the worst part of their academic experience (National Student Survey, 2006). This paper discusses factors affecting the different parties involved in feedback and concludes with specific recommendations for both occupational and educational settings.

Feedback source
Research on 360 degree feedback, in which employees are rated by colleagues and customers from a range of perspectives, has provided an opportunity to compare the impact of feedback from different sources. The evidence suggests that the actual source and credibility is important, with manager ratings having the greatest impact and feedback from peers considered less reliable (e.g. Bailey & Fletcher, 2006). Our own research in education shows that students unanimously prefer feedback from those whom they judge as authoritative i.e. lecturers rather than tutors (McDowall & Heinrich, 2008).

The fundamental question remains whether individuals are actually equipped to give accurate and unbiased feedback, based on factual evidence that does not distort the facts. Psychological research has long highlighted halo effects, where we continue to judge a person favourably in the light of a previous positive experience (e.g. Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) and ‘horns’ effect which relate to systematic negative bias. Indeed, in organisational settings bias and personality remain an issue (e.g. Arnold & Pulich, 2003); in educational settings strong halo effects have also been observed (e.g. MacDougall et al., 2008). There are no quick and easy solutions to these issues, however training for examiners and raters and clear standards and benchmarks are necessary precautions.

Feedback Message

Criticism or praise
There is a preconception that praise is good and criticism is bad. Hence, negative feedback is typically ‘wrapped up’ in the sandwich model in practice, where criticism is conveyed between two pieces of positive feedback. However, research into workplace performance feedback suggests that negative feedback given constructively (e.g. is job relevant and future oriented) can positively impact on performance, unless it is judgmental or undermining (Ilgen & Davis, 2000). A review
in educational settings suggested that giving positive feedback about a student personally has little effect, unless accompanied with some task level feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

**Message target**

A meta-analysis into work related performance feedback (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), found that feedback effectiveness decreased when it moved attention away from the task (e.g. the quality of work), towards the self (e.g. an individual characteristic). This has also been found in students, with feedback focused on the self, leading to a reduction in effort to minimise risk to the self (Black & William, 1998).

**Specificity**

Research shows that feedback can most successfully improve workplace performance, when it relates to a specific goal (Gomez-Mejia, Balkin & Cardy, 2001). This has also been found in academic contexts; students who were aware of their academic goals actively sought feedback (both confirmatory and disconfirmatory); resulting in better overall learning opportunities (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). However, balance is required, as overly specific feedback can render students less motivated to act on information (Goodman et al., 2004).

**Receiving feedback**

**Self-image and attributions**

Research suggests that an individual’s self-image affects the way in which feedback is interpreted. People high in perfectionism tend to make more internal attributions, in other words hold themselves responsible for failure following negative feedback; this has a de-motivating effect and decreases subsequent performance levels (Anshel & Mansour, 2005). In contrast, people high in narcissism tend to make self-serving attributions in response to feedback, attributing failure to task difficulty and success to their own ability (Stucke, 2003). An inflated self-image can lead to misunderstanding co-worker expectations and is associated with poor performance (Yammarino & Atwater, 1993).

**Self-esteem**

Research into recipient self-esteem supports our intuitive ideas. Individuals with low self-esteem show more extreme emotional reactions to feedback, whereas those with high-self esteem react more moderately (Ilies, de Pater & Judge, 2007). People with high self-esteem also tend to seek feedback consistent with their self-evaluations, whilst those with low self-esteem seek only positive feedback (Bernichon, Cook & Brown, 2003).

**Goal orientation**

Individuals predominantly concerned with achieving high grades or work outcomes (performance-goal orientation) tend to seek positive feedback and avoid constructive feedback. Those who focus on understanding how to do the task well, rather than the final assessment (learning-goal orientation) seek constructive feedback about how to improve in the future (Janssen & Prins, 2007). Focus on learning goals can be encouraged, for example, students on an MBA course told to do their best at each stage, performed significantly better than those who set year-end grade goals (Latham & Brown, 2006).

**Implications**

The implications that arise from the above discussion for both organisational and educational context in detailed in Table 1. In general, the evidence tells us what we
might already intuitively know. Individuals have subjective reactions to feedback, but regardless of these, they respond better to clear feedback, aimed at behaviours or issues, rather than the person, and linked to specific goals for change. It is also imperative that those who give feedback are appropriately trained and self-aware.

**Table 1: Feedback recommendations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Organisational Contexts</th>
<th>Educational Contexts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is the feedback for?</td>
<td>Those giving feedback should be mindful of potential individual reactions, and adapt their style accordingly</td>
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<tr>
<td>The source of the feedback</td>
<td>Ensure that those who give feedback are seen as credible</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise or criticism</td>
<td>Ensure that feedback is phrased constructively and backed up by facts particularly where the content is critical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>Feedback is more meaningful if it is associated with clear goals, ensure 'buy in'</td>
<td>Foster learning goals rather than performance goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ensure that goals are directed at a task, and mutually accepted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How specific do you need to be?</td>
<td>Spell out the implications and what is expected, including what is not the employees' responsibility</td>
<td>Specific feedback is good, but not so specific as to take the onus away from the learner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bias</td>
<td>Train those giving feedback, such as managers, in the relevant feedback system and make benchmarks transparent</td>
<td>Train and re-train assessors regularly, and put in calibration procedures to ensure consistent standards, whilst monitoring second marking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**References**


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