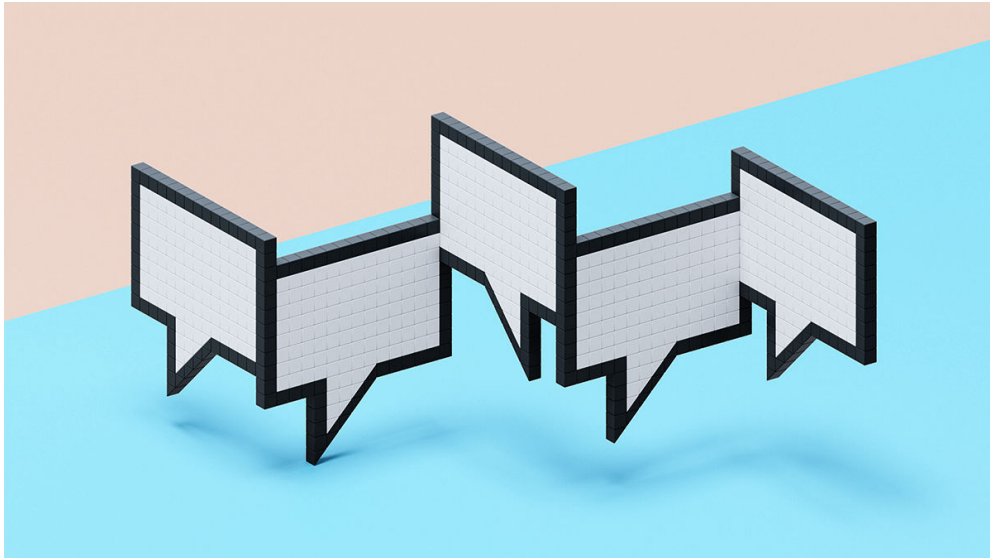**Digital Article** / Managing Employees

Why Feedback Can Make Work More Meaningful

Effective feedback can help imbue even the most mundane tasks with a deeper sense of purpose. *by Rachel Pacheco*

Published on HBR.org / January 24, 2025 / Reprint H08L36

Jorg Greuel/Getty Images

If you're like most managers, you probably hate giving constructive feedback to your team. It's awkward, it's uncomfortable, and it often doesn't work. You may question whether it's worth the trouble to tell an employee that what they're doing is wrong. Is it worth the risk of a long-drawn out conversation when there are more pressing things to do? Is it worth the risk of hurting a team member's feelings or opening the door for potential conflict? Perhaps you answer "no" and deprive your

---

employees of the constructive critiques that aid in their development —
and that they deeply crave.

For years, I've taught feedback in my courses, coached executives
on how to give feedback effectively, and run countless feedback
workshops. What I've found is that managers fully understand most
of the reasons why feedback matters. Managers have long been told
how feedback is critical to organizational success. They attend training
after training to learn how to give effective feedback in order to manage
underperformers and ensure that employees are on the right track with
their work. Managers also learn that feedback is a necessary ingredient
for a company culture built on trust, accountability, and compassion.

But what's often missing from the conversation about the importance of
feedback is the *real* reason why it matters: Feedback is a critical tool for
helping employees find deeper meaning in their day-to-day work.

Employees crave meaning. Once basic job needs are met (e.g., fair
salary, safe working conditions), meaning is what employees most
desire in their job. This desire is especially important for Gen Z.
Nearly 75% of Gen Z workers say that a sense of purpose in their
jobs is more important than pay, according to research by the job site,
Monster. And meaning matters: studies show that employees who have
more fulfillment and meaning in their day-to-day work have higher
productivity, greater retention, and overall greater job satisfaction.

The feedback that you give your team members has a direct impact on
day-to-day meaning. Effective feedback can help imbue even the most
mundane tasks with a deeper sense of purpose.

Here are three reasons why feedback can create more meaningful work, and how you as a manager can make sure your feedback conversations are designed for maximum meaning.

3 Reasons Why Feedback Creates More Meaningful Work

1. Feedback Helps with Mastery

Feedback — when done well — identifies behaviors that an employee can change. Feedback allows an employee to make adjustments to get better or perfect a skill. Mastery, and the process of gaining mastery and overcoming challenges, is a critical ingredient to meaningful work. From a young age, humans crave mastery. Think about the two-year-old who repeatedly tries to put two Legos together — and the sheer delight that happens when they finally "click." That delight can happen in the workplace as well. A manager's feedback aids in the pursuit of mastery by letting the employee know what they can do to continue to improve.

How can you ensure your feedback encourages mastery? First, don't be afraid of assigning challenging tasks and giving feedback along the way. Let your employee know upfront that the work might be harder than usual, but that you'll be providing support as they navigate it. Next, and most importantly, refrain from taking over a task or project when an employee is struggling. In the moment, it might feel like the "nice" thing to do is to take over the reins, but by doing so, you're depriving your employee of both the joy of overcoming a challenge and the opportunity for more meaningful work. Last, when giving feedback, identify opportunities for your employee to apply what she learned in tackling one challenging task to another context.

2. Feedback Highlights an Employee's Impact

Well-structured feedback starts with an observation of a behavior and then points out the impact that behavior has on an individual, a team, a project, or an organization. This impact helps the employee understand why their work matters, and by extension why they matter at work.

Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist, conducted a study that showed that when call center employees better understood the impact their work had on individuals, not only were they more productive, they also found more satisfaction and meaning in their work.

But, it's not just highlighting how individuals might benefit from your work that creates meaning: when an employee understands how their work is used elsewhere in the organization, the employee finds more satisfaction and meaning in their day-to-day tasks.

Think about a junior employee spending all night putting together a financial model, only to have his boss say: "Good job" when the model's received. Now think about that same employee receiving an email saying:

> *Thank you for the financial model. The model, which was well-organized, had a big impact on the meeting I had with a potential investor. It allowed the investor to immediately understand our forecasts and ask thoughtful questions. Partly because of this, the investor was able to quickly decide to move forward with the investment.*

Through this second email, the employee learned both how his organizational skills impacted the investor, and learned about the end results of his work — the investment was made.

To ensure that you're always highlighting the impact in your feedback conversations, start your feedback — both constructive and positive — in the following way:

- What's the observable behavior that can be changed, adapted, or reinforced?
- What's the impact of that behavior? Why does this behavior matter to you, the organization, the team, or the client?

3. Feedback Helps Employees Feel Seen

According to a 2021 Grant Thornton study, 45% of workers don't feel that their needs are understood by their employers. Feedback lets the employee know that they, and their work, are noticed. Even what might be considered "negative" feedback is an opportunity for the manager to connect and better understand the *why* behind someone's behavior. A manager might say, "I noticed that the deliverable you've been working on wasn't sent on time. Is everything okay?" Perhaps the employee responds with their inability to prioritize tasks at that moment. Or a lack of understanding of what the deliverable should look like. Either way, the feedback enables the employee to be understood and seen by their manager.

Furthermore, a feedback conversation that ends with suggestions for improvement signals, "I care enough about you to have thought about what you can do to improve, grow, and develop." It's far more powerful than empty praise. Psychoanalyst Stephen Grosz writes, "But isn't this attentiveness — the feeling that someone is trying to think about us — something we want more than praise?" A critical ingredient to meaning at work is the feeling of connection to others, and that you matter to others. Feedback enables that.

You can make sure your feedback helps an employee feel seen in a few simple ways. First, approach feedback as a conversation. Pause, ask questions, and be curious about why your employee did something a certain way. Second, always end a feedback conversation with actionable ways an employee can improve to make sure the employee knows you care about her development and growth. Make sure you take

time to answer: What are the actions the recipient of the feedback can take to adjust, change, or reinforce a behavior?

· · ·

Nearly 80% of workers would rather have a manager who helped them find meaning in their work than a 20% increase in pay, according to research by Shawn Achor. But you might struggle as a manager to understand how you can help your employees find more meaning in their day-to-day work. Giving feedback can help create more meaningful work for your employees through mastery, impact, and connection.

This article was originally published online on January 24, 2025.

RP

Rachel Pacheco is an executive advisor and coach, keynote speaker and teaching professor of management at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business. She is the author of the award-winning book, *Bringing Up the Boss: Practical Lessons for New Managers* (Matt Holt Books, August 2021) and *Manage What Matters: How Leaders Create Meaning from the Mundane* (Matt Holt Books, August 2026).