



Upward Feedback Guide

Description

Successful talent management requires strong manager employee relationships. Managers who share high-level themes of their upward feedback and solicit performance-improvement suggestions during in-person conversations with their direct reports establish solid working relationships with their direct reports.

By doing so, managers demonstrate their own “coach-ability” and a genuine commitment to development, paving the way for open and trusting coaching partnerships with their direct reports.

Any manager may pursue upward feedback on their own, but given the potential risks, it is best if the manager operates within an established process that is well communicated and understood broadly in the organization.

Establishing such a program is beyond the scope of this guide, so the information presented here supports operating successfully within an established process.

Instructions

The first step is to gather the upward feedback by whatever means are feasible. These include 360 feedback instruments and annual performance reviews. It may also include direct feedback sessions with direct reports, though those are more rare.

Review the information below about successful upward feedback programs, pitfalls and remedies, and tips for receiving feedback.

Develop your plan to communicate the high level themes and how you will engage your direct reports in conversation about your development. You may want to review the plan with your manager before implementation.



Upward Feedback

Program Success Factors

- Senior leaders are perceived as being committed to development
- Senior leaders are held accountable for development
- Middle managers are committed to their own development
- Middle managers want senior leaders to be involved in helping them learn and grow
- Senior leaders promote a healthy, positive foundation for successful mentor or coaching partnerships
- Middle managers feel comfortable discussing their development areas with senior leaders
- Middle managers trust and respect the advice of senior leaders

Walking the Talk

By engaging in an upward feedback process, organization leaders demonstrate openness in communication and a commitment to learning and growth. They “walk the talk” of valuing learning and development. Two broad approaches are suggested:

1. Managers share high level themes of upward feedback, discuss action steps that they are committed to achieving and ask direct reports for suggestions for improvement.
2. Direct reports provide managers with suggestions on action steps for improving as people managers.

Potential Pitfalls and Suggested Remedies

There are several common challenges related to implementing successful upward feedback strategies. They are:

1. Managers struggle to accurately interpret the feedback they receive from direct reports.
2. Inexperience with upward feedback conversations
3. Ambiguous, unrealistic suggestions in the feedback.
4. Receiving constructive feedback can be difficult.

The following tables offer suggestions for addressing each of these challenges.



Challenge 1:

Managers struggle to accurately interpret the feedback they receive from direct reports.

| Process | Questions |
|---|---|
| Step 1: <i>Look at the "Big Picture"</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are the ratings consistent and approximately equal across the factors?• Are there noticeable higher or lower ratings across the factors?• Does a single key strength or development opportunity emerge?• Is there anything about the ratings and rankings that surprise you? |
| Step 2: <i>Compare the Highest and Lowest Rated Behaviors</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is your reaction to your highest and lowest rated behaviors?• Do you agree or disagree with what you see? Are you happy, surprised or disappointed?• Do you feel you need additional clarification or more information from your direct reports? |
| Step 3: <i>Review the Results for Individual Behaviors and Written comments</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Which two or three behaviors are most often cited as key development opportunities?• Which two or three behaviors are most often cited as key strengths?• Are there any behaviors that are in both groups (if so, it might indicate you might be overemphasizing your key strengths)?• What do the written comments tell you? Are there any common themes? |

Challenge 2:

Inexperience with upward feedback conversations.

| Tips | Questions |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Manage the Session | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can I give them a quick review of the upward feedback process?• How can I reemphasize why I think upward feedback is important?• Did I thank them for giving me feedback and acknowledge the risks they took?• How much time do I want to spend talking during the session and how much time listening? |
| Set a Positive Tone | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can I describe the process in which I determined my key strengths and key development area?• Am I being open about my areas of key strengths and key development opportunities?• Am I willing to receive more feedback?• Is everyone participating in the discussion and, if not, how can I include them?• How can I avoid being defensive about the upward feedback I received from my direct reports?• What emotion might I expect to feel during the session and what might I expect my direct reports to feel? |
| Establish a Course of Action | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can I focus on using the upward feedback in the long?• How can I solicit everyone's feedback on potential action steps?• How can I tell my direct reports how I plan to address key development opportunities?• How can I leverage the support from my direct reports in assessing and achieving my development goals? |



Challenge 3:

Ambiguous, unrealistic suggestions in the feedback. (This guides those providing feedback.)

| | Questions |
|--|---|
| Individual Team Member Reflection | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the top themes for me to bring up that I provided my manager during the formal review process?• What would I like to see my manager do better, and what are my recommendations for doing so?• How can I reframe complaints about the past into suggestions for moving forward? |
| Team-based Collaboration | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can we demonstrate to our manager that we are committed to providing ongoing feedback, have their best interest in mind and avoid assigning blame?• What are the specific yet "generic" examples of the group's (as opposed to specific individuals') experience with the manager as a people developer?• What actions would we like to see our manager either start doing, continue doing or stop doing? |

Challenge 4:

Receiving constructive feedback can be difficult.

A simple, conscious decision to begin viewing feedback as positive, as a "gift" from another person, is a key ingredient for receiving feedback well. View feedback as an opportunity to see yourself as others see you and learn from that. It is helpful to develop a "mental reminder" to say to yourself whenever anyone gives you feedback. This mental phrase should be something simple like, "Stay open," "Open," or "This is a gift." Saying this mental reminder to yourself will minimize the potential for becoming defensive.

| When you ask for feedback: | |
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| Be open to feedback — ask for it. | This promotes an environment in which honest responses are welcome and useful. |
| Listen carefully. | Listening is the key to understanding and leads to clear and effective action plans. |
| Ask for examples and details. | This will make developing an action plan easier. |
| Take notes/keep a journal. | This will show the person giving feedback that you care about what he or she is saying, and things will be easier for you in the action step. |
| Thank the source. | Again, this conveys respect and appreciation for the person giving feedback. Also, thanks will end a potentially difficult session positively. |
| Act on the feedback. | Make a conscious effort to be proactive and set the feedback in motion. |
| Focus on how the behavior can help you and your company. | Avoid getting defensive and letting the feedback session turn into a battle. |
| Ensure that you clearly understand the feedback before you accept it. | You can't act on what you don't understand. |