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Why Employees Are Fed Up With Feedback

BY CHEYNA BROWER AND **NATE DVORAK**

- Critical, demotivating feedback leads to disengaged employees
- Four out of five employees who received negative feedback are job hunting
- Managers need to deliver feedback that is both positive and effective

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Oliver is having a very bad day. During his end-of-year review, his boss told him that his priorities are wrong, his approach is unfocused and his performance is mediocre.

Then she handed him a printout of a mandatory, multistep process he must follow, had him agree in writing to a weekly "accountability checklist" and sent him back to work.

The thing is, Oliver's boss is right. Oliver focuses on the aspects of the job that he likes. He lets too much slide off his radar, and he isn't getting enough done. But she's wrong if she thinks he'll be motivated to improve -- while she was doing the next employee's performance review, Oliver was scrolling through job postings.

Good or bad, feedback ought to be effective.

Feedback can, and sometimes should, be tough to hear. However, if an employee feels demotivated, criticized, disappointed or depressed after a feedback session with their boss, the manager failed. Oliver's boss failed in a big way -- nothing she said helped him improve. Or made him want to.

Congratulatory or corrective, feedback should motivate employees to do better work, position them for success and engage them. Reviews like Oliver's just deflate people. Gallup research shows that only 10.4% of employees whose manager's feedback left them with negative feelings (felt criticized, demotivated, disappointed or depressed) are engaged, and four out of five say they're actively or passively looking for other employment.

On the other hand, workers whose manager's feedback left them with positive feelings (felt inspired to improve or positive about knowing how to do their work better) are 3.9 times more likely to be engaged than employees who felt hurt, and only 3.6% of them are actively looking for another job.

Employee Engagement After Feedback

■ Engaged   ■ Not engaged/Actively disengaged

	Engaged	Not engaged/Actively disengaged
Positive	50.5%	49.5%
Negative	10.4%	89.1%

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Employees Looking for Other Employment After Receiving Feedback

■ Not looking   ■ Passively looking   ■ Actively looking

	Not looking	Passively looking	Actively looking
Positive	58.3%	38.1%	3.6%
Negative	20.4%	50.5%	29.1%
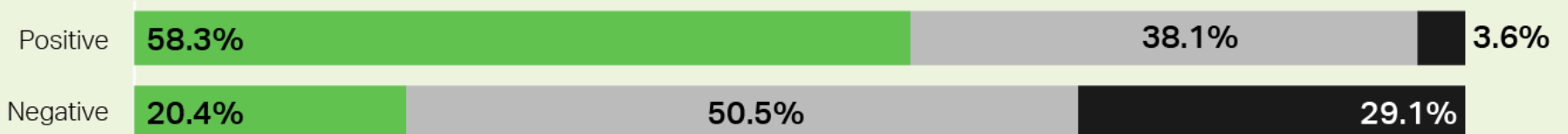
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But this doesn't mean positive feedback is necessarily *effective* feedback. Employees can walk away from a performance review feeling more engaged than ever, but without hearing what they need to know to improve.

That's probably because, as Gallup research has discovered, managers generally don't know *what* to say -- only 14.5% of managers strongly agree that they are effective at giving feedback.

I am effective at giving feedback to others.

	Managers %
Strongly agree	14.5
4	50.5
3	21.3
2	13.6
Strongly disagree	0.0

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This highlights a clear opportunity for leaders to ensure their managers know how to provide feedback that makes workers feel engaged and motivated -- and keeps them off the job posting websites.

Keep performance reviews both positive and effectual.

First, managers must understand that positive feedback is not false or partial feedback. To be effective, managers have to be truthful and comprehensive. But even unwelcome feedback can be given in a way that helps, not hurts. To keep performance reviews both positive and effectual, managers should:

1. **Start with wins.** Managers can inspire employees to improve by discussing recent successes and asking employees to brag about victories from *their* point of view. Managers and workers may chart wins from different perspectives, but both points of view stoke employees' confidence -- helping them to figure out what led to their wins, and do more of it.

2. **Focus on specifics.** General feedback doesn't do much for employees. Oliver's boss said his work is mediocre, but she didn't tell him what great work in his role looks like. So whether discussing successes, wins, mistakes or failures, the more specific and focused the conversation, the more employees can learn and plan for the future.

3. **Pair encouragement with constructive feedback.** In some instances, employees need correction. Mistakes happen, and when managed appropriately, they can be learning experiences. But managers need to ask what the worker can learn from the mistake. Employees appreciate a <u>coach who helps them learn and get better</u> each day, and they don't always know what went wrong -- or even that something did.

4. **Keep conversations frequent.** Having meaningful conversations <u>at least once per week</u> keeps managers continuously attuned to their employees' performance and workplace needs. And that routine assures employees that they'll get the opportunity to be recognized, ask questions, discuss performance hurdles or blueprint their near-term work. Frequent conversations keep performance surprises to a minimum and help prevent big misses. And while these conversations may focus on different topics, they should always include goal setting, check-ins and project updates. Annual reviews, if your company does them, should be about reflection and evaluation.

Clearly, the point is not to say a negative thing in a positive way. It's to say positive and negative things in ways that improve workers' performance. It helps if managers operate under the premise that people want to do good work but sometimes lack information or specific talents for their role.

That's one of the mistakes that Oliver's boss made. Instead of noticing his strengths -- the things he focused on, sometimes even to the detriment of his role responsibilities -- she zeroed in on his weaknesses. Had she started the conversation with his successes, she could have encouraged him to find ways to recreate them. And if she'd explained how Oliver's negligence created barriers to his performance, they could have found solutions together.

But if you ask Oliver for his takeaways, he'd say the worst thing was the "accountability checklist." He looks at it as a record of his year's screw-ups and failures without a shred of advice about fixing his priorities, performance or approach. And because he doubts his boss will fix hers, he's leaving.

His boss probably won't miss him. But her form of feedback -- more criticism than coaching, more checklists than check-ins, more disengagement than inspiration -- is creating more Olivers all the time. And more bad days for everyone she manages.

Ensure your managers have what they need to give effective feedback:
- Use Gallup Access for tools and advice on giving motivating feedback based on the core elements of engagement and employee strengths.
- View Gallup's webinar "How to Make This Year's Performance Reviews More Effective for Your Employees" for practical tips on improving the review process.
- Discover research-backed insights and best practices for delivering high performance in the changing workplace with Gallup's Leading High-Performance Teams course.

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