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Leadership Newsletter

How to Give Good Feedback on Goals

Do your employees make quarterly or yearly goals? If so, you probably have a system in place whereby you or another employee meets with them to go over their goals. However, these meetings are probably pretty quick—after all, how can you really tell people the goals they set for themselves aren't a good idea? It's just an easy approval, right?

But if you're not giving feedback on goals, you're missing out on a valuable opportunity to ensure your employees are reaching their fullest potential. If you're afraid of giving negative feedback or withhold information that could help an employee succeed, you're doing both that employee and your company a disservice. If you focus only on negative feedback, never emphasizing the positive, you're going to damage your relationship with the employee, which will, in turn, damage his or her morale and work performance.

Goal-setting isn't something to take lightly or a project that can be finished within 10 minutes. To set good, meaningful goals, you'll probably have to have a real conversation with your employees and give them some significant time to formulate goals. If we make goals too quickly, we risk making goals that are shallow or too simple.

Coming up with good goals is more of a trial-and-error process. It's also hard for one person to make goals by himself or herself. The person may understand some behaviors he or she struggles with or some changes he or she should make performance-wise, but your insight as a supervisor or manager can work wonders. An important part of managing your employees is ensuring they aren't just satisfied with where they are but are instead always striving to improve in their roles. That's where real growth happens within a company—when employees are focused and motivated.

So, how do you give good feedback on goals? Here are a few tips to help you get the conversations started.

Start with the Positive

Kick off the conversation by highlighting some positive things about the goals the employee has proposed. By beginning with something you like about the goals the employee set, you'll start the conversation off in the right tone and help empower the person. Is there something about the goals he or she has chosen that seems to make a lot of sense? Something that relates directly to the worker's role that will benefit from improvement?

Try and pick out a few things you like about the goals he or she has decided on before walking into any less-than-positive feedback. You can also highlight things you've noticed the employee doing, especially those that are "keep" behaviors instead of "change" behaviors.

Connect Employee Roles to the Company at Large

Sometimes, it can be hard for employees to see exactly how they fit into a business—especially if they're lower-tier. Remind them why what they do is vital and how it plays into your company's larger mission. For instance, they may feel like just call center agents, but empowering them to understand that customer service is essential and that without customers, your business wouldn't exist can leave a lasting impression.

It can also help them understand which metrics are the most important to hit and why their goal-setting process should be taken seriously. Their goals should also be related to the success of the business. Personal development goals are great, and they can be included in a larger list of goals, but your employees' main focus should be on bettering the business and improving their job performance.

Concentrate on Impact

Goals should fall in that sweet spot of not too difficult and not too easy. They should feel like a challenge but not an insurmountable one. If a goal is too easy to hit, it isn't going to have a real effect on the employee's work, but if the goal is too difficult, it can be incredibly demoralizing. You should help your employees discover goals that will have a real impact on their work and team. That's part of why feedback is so crucial: If you're able to narrow in on behaviors employees could improve on, you have a great place to start when it comes to setting goals that will have a real impact.

Focus on Metrics

Metrics can seem a bit heartless or dry. It's tempting to think that how you make customers and employees feel is more important than any other measure. And while it's terrific to focus on things like customer satisfaction, finding a way to quantify those feelings is essential. If you can't put a number to things, how are you going to be able to improve them? Also, metrics can take all of your own personal bias out of employee/supervisor interactions. With numbers on hand, you can objectively determine whether that employee is doing a good job.

For instance, the marketing director may drive you crazy, but if his or her goal was to double your company's e-mail list and he or she managed to triple it, it may help you see this person in a different light. It can also help you be objective when it comes to yearly reviews. ("You never get things done on time" sounds a lot harsher than "There were seven separate times this year when your weekly financial updates were late.")

Numeric, quantifiable goals are important for employees, as well. If you don't have a clear "did you or did you not hit this" goal in place, it can lead to awkward tension and a confusing conclusion.

Ask for Their Feedback

At the end of the day, employees need to be on board with the goals, as well. This should be a conversation, not an order. Employees are going to be the ones putting the wheels in motion to achieve the goal, so they shouldn't feel like it's impossible to reach, too easy, or not aligned with their role. Make sure to incorporate employees' thoughts, as well, not just charge in and take over the goal-setting process.

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