How Managers Self-Sabotage When Giving Negative Feedback

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Communication gaps between managers and their employees widen when delivering criticism.

Studies show that managers consistently fail to communicate corrective feedback clearly. This failure often leads to misunderstanding, negatively affects performance and is a major source of frustration for employees and HR professionals.

Delivering negative feedback can be uncomfortable and difficult for managers

Prior research has found that managers often cloud criticism in a favourable light, leading employees to interpret feedback more positively than expected. The predominant assumption regarding this phenomenon, referred to as ‘feedback inflation’, is that managers intentionally sugar coat criticism to avoid interpersonal conflict. Consequently, commonly used interventions for reducing feedback inflation tend to focus on relieving managers’ discomfort about communicating negative feedback.

However, **our research[1]** shows that feedback inflation is largely due to a cognitive bias called the *illusion of transparency*, in which people tend to believe that their internal dialogue is more apparent to other people than it actually is. The assumption that their own intentions are easily discernible by others prevents them from making the effort required to communicate their thoughts in clear, direct and understandable ways.

Negative emotions, in particular, tend to have a very strong impact on internal states since people feel the effects of negative thoughts in a more pronounced way than positive ones. It follows that distortive effects of the illusion of transparency become more dominant when expressing negative information. In other words, the more negative the message, the less likely it is that people will put in the effort required to communicate with clarity.

Across an extensive series of studies, using actual performance appraisals within an organisation, role-plays with experienced managers, MBA students, undergraduates and online participants, we tested the effects of the illusion of transparency as it relates to performance feedback and confirmed it to be a pervasive bias that affects the clarity with which feedback is delivered. We found that the difference between what managers assume their employees have understood and what their employees actually understand increases as the feedback becomes more negative. This is due to the managers' assumption that their opinions are already evident and that employees perceive the feedback more negatively than they do. Managers misjudge the effort required to communicate their feedback and leave employees with impressions too vague to comprehend.

Failure to communicate

Consider the situation of a manager, frustrated by her employee's consistent failure to meet deadlines, feels anxious and annoyed about having to explain something that is so obvious to her when she is already overwhelmed by other responsibilities. The more stress she feels, the more likely she is to assume that her employee is cognizant of her opinion. She says to her staff member, "I am pleased with your progress but I would like you to work on your time management skills." However, as she is so preoccupied with her own internal dialogue, she believes that she has expressed, "You need to be aware that your poor time management skills are having a negative impact on the rest of the department. Meeting deadlines is not optional. You need to rectify this ..." The manager's lack of direct communication leaves the employee with the idea that, apart from a few minor issues, his performance is sufficient. He is vaguely aware of her concerns but is not motivated enough to rectify the situation. This inevitably leads to a problematic downward spiral.

Fighting our innate tendencies

Interventions currently in use that aim to reduce feedback inflation may be insufficient, as they tend to focus on reducing intentional rather than unintentional feedback inflation. Our findings point to a new set of effective ways for managers to improve the way they communicate their feedback.

Transparency illusions occur because people are simply not motivated enough to examine and correct their communication methods. In line with this reasoning, we ran further tests to examine whether it is possible to motivate and encourage managers to be more accurate when delivering feedback. We found that managers who are motivated to be accurate are less likely to assume that their employees see things the same way that they do. They set higher standards for themselves by paying attention to and correcting their own expectations. They realise that their feedback may be subject to misunderstanding and take the time to rephrase or clarify exactly what they mean.

Motivate managers to give clear and direct feedback

Our tests demonstrated that reminding managers that their feedback will not be as evident to their employees as they expect it to be, significantly enhanced the accuracy of their feedback. As managers face many demands, it is important to note that one-off training events may not be sufficient and a more structural or permanent solution would be to put measures in place to remind them to focus on clear communication prior to each feedback meeting. This will ensure that conscious awareness of their feedback delivery is at the top of their mental to-do list during an appraisal meeting.

Further tests confirmed that managers felt more accountable, and were therefore more conscious of delivering clear and direct feedback after their employees specifically requested more accurate feedback prior to a meeting. Employees should consider asking their managers for candid feedback and remember to ask follow-up questions throughout meetings to prevent incorrect assumptions.

Our final study focused on using incentives to increase accuracy motivation by linking managers' financial compensation to the clarity with which they gave negative feedback. The results confirmed this to be an effective means of encouraging managers to communicate more clearly. In fact, this method proved to be the most effective for reducing both intentional and unintentional feedback inflation.

Some managers may fear that communicating negative feedback will lead to interpersonal conflict, but it is entirely possible to deliver it in a clear and direct way while remaining respectful and considerate of an employee's wellbeing. While fighting our innate tendencies may be uncomfortable, making a conscious effort to address problems directly will not only prevent future misunderstandings and conflict, but will also promote harmony and build stronger, more meaningful working relationships between managers and employees.

[1] Our co-authors were Mary Kern of Baruch College, Gail Berger of Northwestern University, and Victoria Medvec of Northwestern University.

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https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/how-managers-self-sabotage-when-giving-negative-feedback

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