# Performance Management Company

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## This newsletter

# Feedback

**Feedback is the Breakfast of Champions.**

**Decent performance could NOT occur without feedback about that performance; feedback allows for an understanding about what occurred, if the behavior matched with the expectations or goals, and what to do differently to correct it if need be.**

**Pocket Billiards:**
One of the things I like to do is play pool. Simple game on the surface but a very complicated game if one is to be competitive and perform at high levels.

Pool is about the simple act of hitting a round ball with a stick and having that action cause the round ball to hit another ball and cause some outcome. For most players, that desired outcome is to allow the ball to roll off the table into a hole, which is called a pocket. Pocketing the balls is the goal.

But the different games have different rules and some games are more complicated by the fact that the balls must be pocketed in some order. And in order to pocket more than one ball, some attention must be paid to the position of the first ball struck (called the cue ball) as it rolls *after* it strikes the second ball (called the object ball).

Speed of the stroke to hit the cue ball is one factor as is the position of the hit on the object ball. A "full hit" will transfer all the cue ball's energy to the object ball while a glancing hit will transfer only a little of that energy and a glancing hit will also cause that object ball to go away at some angle. (I could go on and on about top and bottom spin, side spin, angles of deflection, throw, and then get into the strategies of safety play, etc.)

Needless to say, precise practice develops skills a lot better than simply shooting around and a good understanding of stance and "stroke mechanics" helps develop some consistency and match desired outcomes with expected ones.

*Okay. So, Feedback?*

Consider what might happen if you were to play blindfolded. Would there be any impact on speed of learning or performance? There is still a lot of feedback available since you could still perceive all the body clues and cues, you could hear the hits of the ball, the hits of the object balls against other balls and the rails and, hopefully, the sound of the object ball falling into the pocket.

But even with all that feedback being available nearly instantaneously, it would still be hard to develop a strong game. Similarly, this would also occur if you could not feel your muscle movement and even, somewhat, if your hearing were impaired. The latter would also make being coached a more difficult endeavor.

And what if your only "sight" were to see yourself on a video monitor 30 seconds after you hit the ball. Could you learn from that?

**Music:**
Could you learn to play a piano if you were deaf? Sure. And there are all kinds of examples of that. Beethoven went deaf in his early 20s and continued to write music since he had a good understanding of the principles. Supposedly, he took a piano apart and would listen to the soundboard vibrations when he hit certain keys. But how difficult was that, and how hard would it have been to learn music composition without hearing the sounds?

If YOU were going to learn a new instrument, how hard would it be to become an accomplished player if you were denied the simple benefit of hearing the notes for 15 seconds? A delay of only a few seconds makes it difficult for an accomplished pianist to learn to play a pipe organ (since it takes some time for the air pressure to make the different sized pipes vibrate and produce sound).

How about shooting free throws on a basketball court while seeing the basket in a mirror? Instantaneous visual feedback, yes, but screwed up kinesthetic linkages. What about typing when there is a delay between hitting the key and seeing the image on the screen – I know that happens, occasionally, with a bad internet connection: totally frustrating and you cannot correct the wrong keystrokes right away…

No sense going on, but I wanted to make the point about how much we *require* good, immediate and accurate feedback to generate high levels of expert performance.

So, let's transition to the workplace.

# Workplace Performance

We expect high levels of performance in the company workplace. And we hope that there is sufficient feedback to generate self-corrective behavior, right?

So, consider the following as a test of key performance-driving characteristics of a good workplace feedback system. Circle the ones that you feel your workplace does quite well:

1. Information on performance is based on actual measured accomplishment and not on estimates or opinions about how results were accomplished.

2. Information highlights areas of performance that have *quantifiable* value to the organization rather than more general areas of preference.

3. Performance information routinely goes to the people who do the work, rather than mostly to management. People see summarized results.

4. Information shows *current* levels of performance rather than being delayed by a period of time; it is timely enough to provide for self-correcting actions.

5. Results are reported regularly and systematically and not on a haphazard or occasional basis.

6. Data is available quickly to the people doing the work -- *ideally right after each task is completed* -- but realistically as soon as possible.

7. Information shows *individual* performance results rather than only group results.

8. Results are measured against some kind of performance goal or standard. This could be individual or group oriented or could be related to some level of past performance that might be exceeded.

9. Performance is measured by the numbers and not by the more subjective evaluations of "good" or "satisfactory."

10. Performance information is collected and summarized by the performer rather than by somebody else.

11. The figures and style of information presented is easy to understand and clear as to its source.

12. Trends in performance (positive and/or negative) are made apparent by graphs or charts that show the results over time. Information is shown visibly, either publicly or privately.

13. Data is expressed in a *positive* way. This means "results achieved" and accomplishments rather than failures, complaints or errors.

14. Information is summarized to interested levels of management to insure recognition of achievement and continued positive involvement of others.

*(If you got to this point and have NOT completed your self-analysis, please consider going back and doing that!)*

**Rationale**:
Here are some thoughts on why these kinds of factors are important in performance management and the development of high levels of accomplishment:

1 – **Results**. Some people may appear to be very busy or doing a good job, especially if you are there and watching them. Others may work at a slower pace and not appear to work as hard. Personalities differ and opinions about accomplishments may not reflect actual results. Good measures of results need to be implemented. Results are Results!

2 – **Impacts**. Be concerned with results that produce bottom-line impacts. Sometimes, we get focused on issues of little or no importance to profits or quality or revenue. While a poor producer may chew gum and come in late, it is better to focus on the productivity than on the gum or lateness. Feedback should focus on the most critical issues in the workplace – the things that have the highest overall impact.

3 - **People need performance data**, not just feedback from management. In the absence of specific information, people will often assume that all is okay. Alternatively, some

managers may only say something when results are not good, missing on the opportunity to comment positively. Information on results provides balanced feedback.

4 - **Delayed feedback** is poor–and not much better than receiving no feedback. Delayed feedback is ineffective in changing behavior. It is of little real value to know the results of a month ago since it is unlikely that the behaviors associated with that performance would be remembered.

5 - **Regular feedback** helps to set the expectation that performance will be measured and that it is important. Haphazard feedback does the opposite.

6 - **Immediate feedback** is much more effective than delayed feedback and the best time to measure is right after task completion. Sometimes, this is not cost effective so some delays might be introduced.

7 - **Top performers** can sometimes go unrecognized, so feedback on individual performance is mandatory. Paradoxically, many poor performers do not get effective performance feedback. Recognition of individual accomplishment is necessary for correction of poor performance as well as reinforcement of desired or improved levels of accomplishment.

8 - Having **specific and realistic performance** goals provide the personal motivation toward mastery as well as the drive needed to meet that goal or exceed it. Meeting goals is self-motivating. Standards of performance should be obvious and understood and having historical performance results is often useful.

9 - It is **much more effective** when someone knows they need to do "x" rather than simply getting feedback that things are okay. Numbers help to specify the expectations and goals that are desired.

10 - **Self-collected feedback** is seen as more accurate since they did it themselves. It creates active involvement with the performance system. It also insures better understanding of how the measure is calculated.

11 - Information that is **not understood is ineffective** and even confusing. If people either do not understand what the information represents or they question its base, it will be less effective in changing performance.

12 – **Reinforcement is sustaining.** Small improvements caused by changes in behavior will "extinguish" if not noticed and reinforced. Since performance improvement generally occurs in small steps rather than big jumps, it is crucial that the system capture this information and that management reinforce the improvement when it occurs. Often, these improvements will be noticed only when compared to trends.

13 – **Avoid the Negative.** Regular negative information (such as error reports) has a tendency to be ignored or debunked and thus becomes an ineffective motivator over time. People tend to learn ways to avoid the negative as opposed to improving the positive.

14 - Without the **observable support** of top management, few feedback and performance improvement programs are maintained. Top management will not support programs in the absence of reliable and actionable information. Top managers are generally unlikely to continually request and review information that is not positive and current, reflecting issues of performance related to bottom-line impacts.

I trust that this analysis will be insightful and that it may cause some changes in how you are currently measuring and managing people. If properly designed and presented, feedback systems can generate a wide variety of positive performance outcomes.

## *Have fun out There!*

Note: Much of the development of the checklist used here is attributed to Ken Junkins and others associated with EJ Feeney Associates and with working alongside Tom Gilbert and other people focused on performance management back in the late 70s and early 80s. The principles behind this analysis are quite solid when it comes to developing high performance workplaces. There are also strong links from this to the issues involved in mastery and in intrinsic motivation.

Background and Perspective:

This Feedback Analysis was designed to be a general framework for performance improvement and a "thought tool." As such, it is most certainly not perfect or applicable to all situations.

The tool is grounded in a variety of behavioral principles and is meant to be a creative discussion tool for workgroups or individuals looking to improve their results and performance – it is not a diagnostic program for actual enhancement of performance feedback programs.

At the same time, this works quite well to get people thinking about performance, best practices, expectations and goals and objectives. It is really good for *that!*

It is my personal experience that most performance-related feedback systems actually score quite poorly on these 14 points. Generally, the information that people get about their results is delayed, inaccurate or subjective. Getting a score of 4 or 5 generally translates to mean that performance is probably okay; it also translates into a reality that a few often simple adjustments in the existing performance feedback system will make the feedback much more effective.

Having a score of 4 or 5 will NOT be a strong indicator that you are optimizing the performance of people in the workplace.

**The cautionary note is that extrinsic reinforcement systems often simply get in the way of generating overall high results.**

If there are big rewards for individual performance, people are motivated to "work the measures." They will do ONLY what the system is rewarding and tend to let other key things slide. In my experience, that is why Deming was so against measurement and appraisal -- he felt that tying the two together was wrong and that it was too demeaning to workers in the short-term and long-term. Feedback should be developmental.

And Dan Pink and Dr. Alfie Kohn have written very extensively on the large body of research that supports the reality that extrinsic rewards are self-defeating and inherently negative. Consider the reality that half of your workforce are, in reality, below average performers. Extrinsic rewards can actually be punishing to many of them, confirming their low-performance status.

Effective feedback is critical to any performance and the other factors of a good feedback system are really straightforward.

So, the REAL purpose of this document is to simply get you to consider a variety of aspects of your existing performance feedback system. A score of 14 is well nigh impossible. But an improvement of +2 will often make a great deal of difference.

If you are interested, I can send this along as a worksheet that you can give out for scoring by a group of people, combined with a discussion form that you can use to talk about things. It really is a simple tool to get people talking about choices and possibilities.

A team of people from the organization can also play with redesign of things, which has all sorts of other positive impacts!

- Discomfort with the way things are can produce change.

- Change can result in improvement if directed and focused.

- Improvement may have a bottom line payoff and simply start the whole cycle over again.

**Some changes you cannot do. But some you can. By using simple tic sheets and self-measurement forms, for example, you can improve feedback and thus performance.**