

ECONOMIC & POLICY UPDATE

VOLUME 21, ISSUE 6

Editors: Will Snell & Nicole Atherton



People Skills: Appropriate Feedback

Author(s): Steve Isaacs

Published: June 29th, 2021

Farmers manage crops and cattle, machinery and marketing, land and labor. That last one may be the most difficult. People are the most important resource in a farm business. Nothing productive happens unless people are doing something with the crops, cattle, machinery, marketing, and land. However, managing people is often the least developed of the skills necessary to run a successful farm business.

Giving appropriate feedback to employees or family members is important. Most folks want to know how they're doing. Students want to know grades, really. Athletes want to know the score. And employees want to know if they are doing it right.

If you think praising people when they do something right and criticizing them when they do something wrong is all there is to knowing how to provide feedback, then don't be surprised that things aren't going well in the people part of the business. Dr. Bob Milligan with Dairy Strategies suggests that there's more than Positive and Negative feedback. Another category is Redirective. Let's look at all three.

POSITIVE

Hopefully, things go right most of the time. So, the majority of the feedback to employees should be easy, right? If so, why isn't there more of it? Too many managers probably feel that if things are going well, don't mess with it. Further, it's not easy. Giving compliments and praise does not come easy for many managers. Why, I dunno. Genuine gratitude and praise for work well done are among the most valuable rewards a manager can provide. Management guru Ken Blanchard says, "Find people doing the right thing and acknowledge it."

Here's an acronym to help fuel the Positive feedback engine, STAG. Positive feedback to employees should be Specific, Timely, Appropriate, and Genuine. Attaboys are nice, but for what? Say what it is that they've done well..."Glad you saw that calf wasn't acting right." Don't wait till tomorrow, or

certainly not till the next performance review. Say it while you're treating the calf. Make the feedback appropriate...she saved the calf, not the farm, but the calf is important. And be genuine. People can tell patronizing from genuine...every time.

REDIRECTIVE or NEGATIVE

Sadly, things don't always go well...stuff happens. Managers tend to react negatively when "stuff happens" and the appropriate response and feedback can make the difference in improved performance in the future. Here's where the distinction between Redirective and Negative feedback is important.

When things go wrong there's a tendency for employees to blame the situation or circumstances for the problem while there's a tendency for managers to blame the person. This "attribution theory" is simply an attempt to link the cause of behavior to the "situation" or to the "person." This is important. If the bad outcome is truly a result of the situation, and the manager blames the employee, the employee will justifiably think they are being treated unfairly. However, if the bad outcome truly results from the actions and behavior of the person, then the feedback needs to be directed toward changing the behavior.

In other words, something other than Negative feedback is needed if the problem is a result of the situation. This is Redirective feedback. Redirective feedback is focused on correcting the situation, not disciplining the employee. Fix what caused the problem.

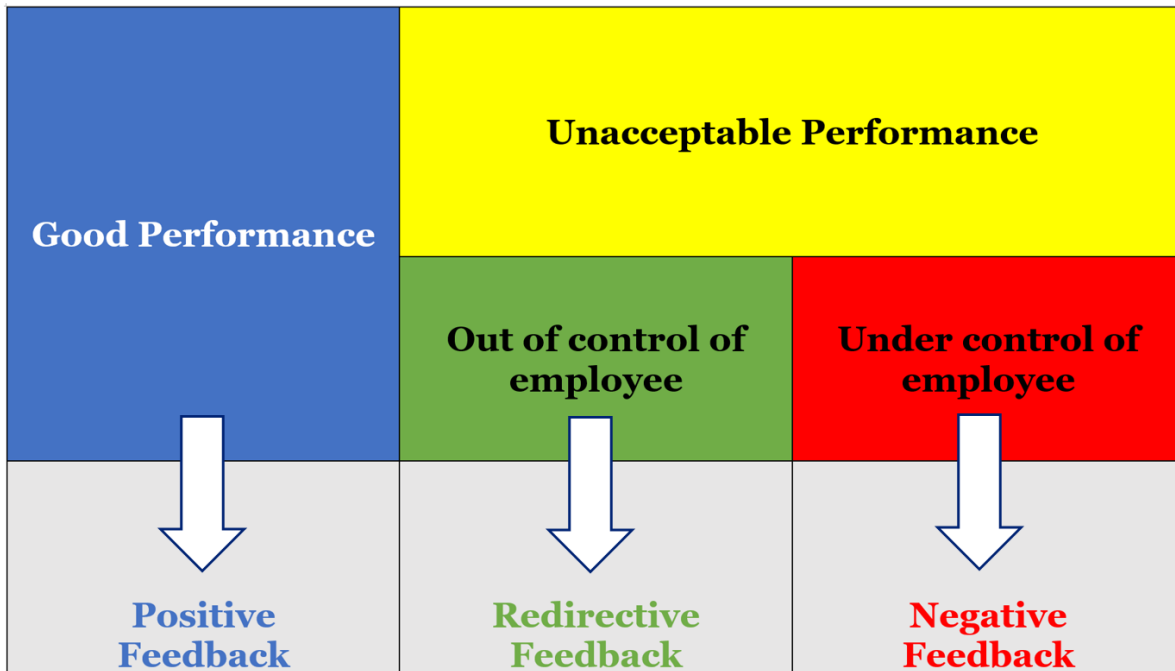
On the other hand, if the behavior of the employee is what caused the problem, try to change the behavior. The employee must understand that their behavior (not the situation) is what caused the problem. This is where Negative feedback is appropriate. If Negative feedback is used, be absolutely certain that it was the behavior, not the situation, that caused the problem, and that the employee understands that the behavior must change.

An example. A worn, but well-maintained roller chain on a piece of equipment that breaks probably did so because of wear...the situation. Use Redirective feedback to evaluate the maintenance and replacement procedures to anticipate and prevent future problems. However, if maintenance and lubrication of the chain was the responsibility of the employee, and they acknowledge that they had not lubricated the machine in the last fifty hours of use, and the broken chain is dry as a bone, then Negative feedback is the appropriate response. The employee's behavior must change, and consequences should be severe enough to ensure change happens.

If there is any uncertainty about "situation" versus "person," then use Redirective feedback. If it was the situation then the employee does not feel treated unfairly and the result is the same...improved performance. If it was the person, then hopefully they will figure it out and can change their behavior, and the result is the same...improved performance.

Redirective feedback can bridge the chasm between Positive and Negative feedback. If an employee does something right or wrong, then Positive or Negative would suffice. When the situation created the problem and circumstances can be improved without blaming the employee for something that really wasn't their fault, then employees don't feel they were treated unfairly. They can be part of the solution. Knowing what type of feedback to provide and when to give it is a key to improving performance and morale. Problems are more likely to occur and less likely to be remedied by using the wrong feedback.

This graphic helps illustrate the Positive/Redirective/Negative feedback concept. Please note that it is not to scale. Hopefully, the blue box will be the dominant state of most businesses. However, when “stuff happens,” it helps to know how to respond appropriately. Graphic courtesy of Dr. R.A. Milligan, Senior Consultant, Dairy Strategies, LLC.



Recommended Citation Format:

Isaacs, S. "[People Skills: Appropriate Feedback](#)." *Economic and Policy Update* (21):6, Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Kentucky, June 29th, 2021.

Author(s) Contact Information:

[Steve Isaacs](#) | Extension Professor | sisaacs@uky.edu