

# Guidelines for Effective Use of Feedback

By Roger Neugebauer

One of the most critical challenges facing a child care director is improving staff performance. A variety of tools are available to help a director meet this challenge: in-house training, annual appraisals, workshops, conferences, college classes, and training films. One of the least glamorous of these tools, providing feedback, is, in fact, the most effective.

With proper feedback, teachers can better control and improve their own performance; without proper feedback, teachers operate blindly, not knowing when their efforts succeed or fail. According to George F. J. Lehner, "... feedback helps to make us more aware of what we do and how we do it, thus increasing our ability to modify and change our behavior ..." (Lehner).

Just how blindly teachers operate without feedback was demonstrated in a study at the University of Michigan (McFadden). Twenty pre-school teachers were interviewed about their teaching philosophies and methods. They all expressed a preference for teaching based on the discovery model. They expressed attitudes favoring a non-authoritarian, nondirective approach by the teacher. They preferred to show verbal concern and approval rather than disapproval. This was how they described their teaching.

Yet when they were actually observed in the classroom their behavior was quite different. Observers found their classrooms to be predominantly teacher controlled and teacher centered. Their statements to children characterizing support, approval, or encouragement were fewer than ten percent of their total statements (Schwertfeger). Without feedback teachers may well be operating with false assumptions about the nature of their behavior and its effect on children and parents.

But as anyone who has tried to give advice to a teacher about her teaching style well knows, being effective at giving feedback is not an easy task. The natural tendency is for teachers to become defensive when feedback about their performance is presented. This reaction occurs when the receiver perceives a threat to her position in the organization, to her standing in the group, or to her own self-image.

When individuals become defensive, they are unlikely to accept, or even hear, feedback that is being offered. Instead of focusing on the message, a person reacting defensively "... thinks about how he appears to others; how he may be seen more favorably; how he may win, dominate, impress, or escape punishment; and/or how he may avoid or mitigate a perceived or an anticipated attack"

(Gibb).

Defensiveness is increased when the receiver perceives feedback to be critical. As Douglas McGregor observes, "The superior usually finds that the effectiveness of the communication is inversely related to the subordinates' need to hear it. The more serious the criticism, the less likely is the subordinate to accept it" (McGregor).

Since teachers need feedback to improve their performance, it is important that a director become skilled at giving feedback that is helpful in a way that does not arouse their defensiveness. The following are recommendations on giving effective feedback:

- **Feedback should focus on behavior, not the person.** In giving feedback, it is important to focus on what a person does rather than on what the person is. For example, you should say to a teacher "You talked considerably during the staff meeting" rather than "You're a loudmouth." According to George F. J. Lehner, "When we talk in terms of 'personality traits' it implies inherited constant qualities difficult, if not impossible, to change. Focusing on behavior implies that it is something related to a specific situation that might be changed" (Lehner). It is less threatening to a teacher to hear comments about

her behavior than about her traits.

- **Feedback should focus on observations, not inferences.** Observations are what we can see or hear in the behavior of another person. Inferences are interpretations we make based on what we hear or see (Lehner). Inferences are influenced by the observer's frame of references and attitudes. As such, they are much less likely to be accurate and to be acceptable to the person observed. Inferences are much more likely to cause defensiveness.

- **Feedback should focus on descriptions, not judgments.** In describing an event a director reports an event to a teacher exactly as it occurred. A judgment of this event, however, refers to an evaluation in terms of good or bad, right or wrong, nice or not nice. Feedback which appears evaluative increases defensiveness (Gibb). It can readily be seen how teachers react defensively to judgments which are negative or critical. But it is often believed that positive judgments – praise – can be very effective as a motivational and learning tool. However, studies have shown that the use of praise has little long-term impact on employees' performance (Baehler). Often praise arouses defensiveness rather than dispelling it. Parents, teachers, and supervisors so often "sugarcoat" criticism with praise ("You had a great lesson today, but ...") that "when we are praised, we automatically get ready for the shock, for the reproof" (Farson).

- **Feedback should be given unfiltered.** There is a tendency for a director to sort through all the observations she makes of a teacher, and all the comments she receives about a teacher, and to pass along that information that she, the director, judges to be important or helpful. This filtering of feedback may diminish its value to the teacher. According to Peter F. Drucker, "People can control and correct performance if given the information, even if neither they nor the supplier of information truly understand what has

to be done or how" (Drucker).

- **Feedback should be given in small doses.** George F.J. Lehner has observed that "to overload a person with feedback is to reduce the possibility that he may use what he receives effectively" (Lehner). Accumulating observations and comments to share with a teacher in periodic large doses may be efficient for the director in terms of time management, but it may make the feedback too voluminous for the teacher to deal with effectively.

- **Feedback should be given on a timely basis.** If a teacher is given feedback about an incident in her classroom on the day that it occurs, she is much more likely to benefit from this feedback than if it is given to her days or weeks later. When feedback is given close to an event, the recipient is likely to remember all aspects of the event clearly, and thus is able to fit the feedback into a complete picture. When feedback is far removed from the event, the event will be less well remembered and the feedback will make less sense.

An extreme, but not atypical, example of untimely feedback is the annual appraisal. An annual appraisal is an effort to give feedback about performance over the past 365 days. Not only does this concentrated dose of feedback cause information overload, it also is offered at a time removed from the behavior itself. As such it "is not a particularly effective stimulus to learning" (McGregor). Studies have shown that to be effective, performance appraisals "should be conducted not annually, but on a day-to-day basis" (Levinson).

- **Feedback should be given to the teacher as his tool to control his own performance.** A teacher is much more likely to benefit from feedback if it is given without strings attached, to use as he sees fit. If a director provides feedback ("The children were restless during

circle time today") and then offers advice on how to use it ("I think you should have it earlier in the day"), the teacher is very likely to react defensively over this effort to control his behavior. "The real strength of feedback," according to Drucker, "is clearly that the information is the tool of the worker for measuring and directing himself."

- **Avoid giving mixed messages.** Through their bodies, eyes, faces, postures, and senses people can communicate a variety of positive or negative attitudes, feelings, and opinions. While providing verbal feedback to a teacher, a director can communicate a conflicting message with her body language. For example, when verbally communicating a nonjudgmental description of a playground scene, a director may be telecasting very disapproving signals to the teacher with the tension in her voice or the expression on her face. When presented with such mixed messages, a teacher invariably elects to accept the nonverbal message as the director's true meaning. As a result feedback gets distorted, and an atmosphere of distrust is created. "Right or wrong, the employee feels that you are purposely hiding something or that you are being less than candid" (Hunsaker).

To avoid communicating mixed messages, you should not give feedback when you are angry, upset, or excited. Wait until you cool down, so that you can keep your emotions under control as you talk. Also you should develop the habit of monitoring your voice tone, facial expressions, and body language whenever you give feedback. Being aware of your body language can help you keep it consistent with your verbal language (Needell).

- **Check for reactions.** Just as you give messages with your body language as you give feedback, the recipient signals her reaction to it with her body lan-

guage. You should tune in to these signals as you talk. As Phillip Hunsaker recommends, "Constantly be on the lookout for nonverbal signals that indicate that your line of approach is causing your employees to become uncomfortable and lose interest. When this happens, change your approach and your message accordingly" (Hunsaker).

- **Be open to feedback yourself.** To develop an effective working relationship, you need feedback from your employees on their reactions to your behavior as much as they need feedback from you. According to organizational psychologist Harry Levinson, "In a superior-subordinate relationship, both parties influence each other, and both have a responsibility for the task." In order to accomplish this task, they must be able to talk freely to each other, and each must have the sense of modifying the other. "Specifically, the subordinate must be permitted to express his feelings about what the superior is doing in the relationship and what the subordinate would like him to do to further the accomplishment of the task" (Levinson).

- **Encourage a team approach to feedback.** As director, you have a myriad of important tasks in addition to upgrading staff performance. Therefore, it is not possible for you to free up enough time to provide staff members all the feedback they need to improve their performance. In order to provide an ongoing flow of feedback information, you need to enlist all staff members to be feedback givers to each other. First, you must create an atmosphere in your center that encourages staff members to accept responsibility for helping each other improve. Second, you need to train staff members on the proper ways to give feedback. Feedback given in a judgmental, personal or untimely fashion can be devastating and can poison interpersonal relations. Training can take the form of reviewing the guidelines discussed above in a staff meeting, by doing some role-playing, and

by having staff members give each other feedback on how they give feedback. Most of all, staff members can learn to be effective feedback givers if you serve as a good model in the way you give feedback.

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