



How to Counsel Subordinates

By Richard Martin

A current management fad is that we only truly improve by building on our strengths. Peter Drucker started this trend back in the fifties, but it has become increasingly popular in the last decade or so, especially with the writings of Marcus Buckingham, et al. Building on strengths is indeed the best way to improve performance and the key to success, whether in business or in life. With that said, however, there are many times when people must be counselled in order to ensure that they are performing according to expectations and to their full potential.

This process is known as counselling and, as leaders and managers, we should all be adept at it. Counselling isn't necessarily a negative thing though. It can involve periodic reporting on progress. On the other hand, it can involve something less benign, perhaps providing some much needed corrective counselling to a subordinate. Let's look at two paradigmatic approaches: one focused on providing essentially positive feedback and the other on providing essentially negative feedback. The former is called the "sandwich" approach and the latter is called the "reverse sandwich" approach.

In the "sandwich" approach, the aim is to provide a subordinate (or anyone for that matter), with some feedback on performance. It gets its name from the fact that corrective feedback is sandwiched between essentially positive feedback. I learned this technique as an officer in the Army, and it is quite effective. Contrary to popular belief, military leaders don't like criticizing subordinates and, just like everyone else, they really do abhor giving negative feedback. Soldiers are just like everyone else and don't really like to be told their faults. The sandwich method gets around that.

Here is how it works. Whenever you are counselling someone, you start by giving them their strong points. The military method, usually used on leadership courses, is to give the person at least three positive points. It is important that these be based on observed behaviour, and not inferred motivation or intent. The advantage of starting with strong points is that it immediately opens up the person being counselled. They feel appreciated for their strengths and the corrective actions which will be required can be framed as building upon these. An added benefit, as alluded to above, is that the person doing the counselling also feels better before giving corrective feedback.

Once you have gone over the most salient strengths of the person, you can then introduce some corrective feedback or, if you prefer, points to improve. It is usually prudent to frame these as building on strengths, especially those that have been just mentioned during the first part of the counselling session. This can easily lead to a joint discussion on the best means of improving the performance of the person being counselled. In particular, as a supervisor, you can get the subordinate to agree to a basic plan of action, with objectives and how you and the organization will support them.

The final piece of the sandwich is to recap the counselled person's strong points. This closes the loop and provides the individual with additional positive reinforcement. Also reviewing the plan of action to build on those strengths will provide additional reinforcement and show how both parts of the discussion are tied together. In doing this, it is critical to focus on observable and observed behaviour, and to discuss objectives which can be measured or assessed, whether quantitatively or qualitatively.



So much for giving basically positive feedback. The same basic method can be readily adapted for more difficult cases of employee counselling. One way to do this is to put more emphasis on the corrective measures. In more extreme cases, however, it is better to adopt the “reverse sandwich” approach. This involves starting with the “meat” of the discussion and counsellng the individual first on weak points or areas needing corrective action. In this case, it is best to focus on only one area of improvement. This is because the person being counselled may take the news hard. In that case, reeling off a number of weaknesses won’t work because the person will stop listening after the first one.

Once again, it is important to keep criticism to observed behaviour and performance. It may be necessary to look at motivation and intent, but this usually follows in the next phase of the discussion, which tends to be more diagnostic and focused on finding the reasons for the poor behaviour or performance. During the middle part of the counselling session, you enumerate some of the areas where the individual has been performing properly. This is essential so that the subordinate doesn’t feel that he or she is a hopeless case. You can also involve the individual in the diagnostic. This is where motivations and intent sometimes come into play. On the other hand, by asking the person to explain their performance you may learn some surprising and useful facts. It may be possible that the individual is intentionally malicious, but more often than not, the problem stems from inadequate qualifications or from miscommunication. In this highly probable situation, it is usually very easy to come up with a corrective plan of action.

In the final part of the session, you must reiterate the original corrective feedback and relate them to the need to improve on the stated strengths in the middle part of the discussion. At this point, it is also critical to create a plan of action with the subordinate so that they know exactly what is expected of them, as well as how you and the organization will help them.

As managers and leaders, we all have an obligation to our organizations and our people to ensure that they are performing to their peak potential. Providing corrective feedback is always harder for a supervisor than telling an employee how great they are. However, by following the “sandwich” and “reverse sandwich” approaches, you have a ready-made method to help your subordinates and employees build on their strengths and mitigate their most egregious weaknesses.