

OMBUDSLETTER

#9

Receiving constructive feedback on staff member performance

In our interaction with colleagues at all levels, we have learned in the Office of the Ombudsman that how something is said is very often just as important as what is said. When people communicate in the workplace, either in written or oral form, the real issue can be clouded by contradictory signals. For example, body language can reflect sincerity or indicate indifference or hostility. This kind of tone is also a feature of emails or other written forms, where a single, well-chosen word can be encouraging just as easily as a poorly chosen one can be destructive –without even considering the overall tenour of the message. This is particularly true when a supervisor provides feedback and the supervisee receives it, a situation where both the sender of the message and the receiver have a professional responsibility. The supervisor must take care to phrase the message clearly, in neutral language, and deliver it in the same manner, while the supervisee must be prepared to listen to the message or read it in as objective a way as possible. If this does not happen, then communication can easily be interrupted because the addressee does not always interpret a message in the way the sender intended.

We come across this situation very often in our work.

In this Ombudsletter, we want to give some pointers about receiving constructive feedback. It is, of course, easier said than done. Still, a staff member who receives feedback should remember that an emotionally appropriate reaction after professional feedback may lead to further mutual understanding between both parties.

First of all, it is very important to set aside enough time and an appropriate place for feedback. While both parties have a role to play in this, the person receiving the feedback can take the initiative. This will help you to listen carefully about what the supervisor is saying during the feedback session and will increase your understanding of any suggestions.

You can also state your interest and willingness to listen to feedback through verbal and non-verbal expressions (remember what we said above about this!). There are many resources you can tap into to help you to listen actively, here are a few:

- ⇒ Use phrases like “That is interesting!” or “I never saw it from that angle!”

- ➡ Nod to indicate understanding – not necessarily agreement
- ➡ Face the sender, move forward in your chair
- ➡ Keep a friendly face, expressing your willingness to listen
- ➡ In some cultures, maintain eye contact

If you feel that you cannot share or comprehend the supervisor's point of view, paraphrase the remarks by saying something like "If I understand you correctly ..." You can also ask for further clarifications, which might include a request for specified information. For example, your supervisor may mention that "you did not meet expectations sufficiently". You could respond by saying "What did I do that makes you think I was not performing well?"

Try to keep a cool head and be aware that the intention of feedback is to improve your performance. If you feel very emotional about the comments ask for a break in the conversation to give you time to think about them again and respond with a calm and appropriate reaction.

When you are certain that you have clearly understood the supervisor's comments and suggestions, you can move to the next stage. It may be that you can both thank each other for a positive meeting. If there is a need, you can discuss alternatives and possible changes that will contribute to improved performance in the future. An evaluation of possible support and the availability of other resources might also be helpful. A mutually agreed solution is a good pre-condition for an improvement in your future performance.

If you have the impression that some aspects were missing in the feedback, now is the time to say so and initiate a dialogue concerning what you would like to discuss.

At the end of the session, thank the supervisor for the time and effort put into the exercise. At this point you can also say what in your opinion were the positive as well as the negative aspects of the feedback if you feel this is important.

Remember what we said at the beginning of this Ombudsletter about shared responsibility and above all: **how** you say something is as important as **what** you say.

The Ombudsman Team is always at your service to coach you in the best ways to manage constructive feedback . The Office of Human Resources will also help you with specific feedback questions.