



THE PLAYBOOK

The Feedback

Over a third of feedback makes performance worse. What separates the feedback that helps from the feedback that harms, and the four sentences that keep it on the right side.

Paul Prado Pacardo

Executive Assistant & Operations · me.kabuhayan.app

Contents

The advice everybody repeats

1 The finding most feedback advice ignores

2 Task, not person

3 Close to the work, not close to the review

4 The four sentences

5 Asking for it, and receiving it badly

6 Praise, and why it is harder than it looks

7 When feedback is not the answer

Specific, close, and about the work

The tool: the feedback prep card

The advice everybody repeats

Almost everything written about workplace feedback assumes more of it is better. Give it often, give it candidly, normalise it.

The best evidence available says something more uncomfortable.

607 EFFECT SIZES FROM FEEDBACK INTERVENTIONS

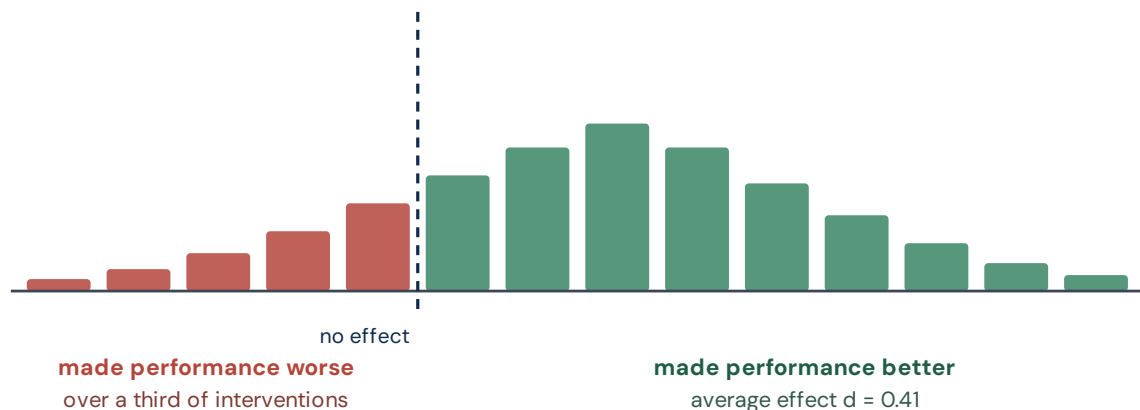


Figure: Kluger and DeNisi, 1996, 607 effect sizes across 23,663 observations. Feedback helps on average and harms often.

Kluger and DeNisi published a meta-analysis in *Psychological Bulletin* in 1996 covering 607 effect sizes across 23,663 observations. On average, feedback improved performance, at an effect size of 0.41. But over a third of feedback interventions made performance worse.

That finding is thirty years old, it is widely cited in the research literature, and it is almost entirely absent from practical management advice, which is strange given that it is the single most useful thing to know about the subject.

It reframes the whole question. The task is not to give more feedback. It is to give the kind that lands on the right side of that distribution, and the difference between the two sides turns out to be fairly specific.

The finding most feedback advice ignores

What separates helpful feedback from harmful feedback, in the research, is not tone, timing or how much praise you wrap around it.

It is **where the recipient's attention goes**.

Feedback that directs attention to the task tends to improve performance. Feedback that directs attention to the self, meaning to the person's standing, ability or worth, tends to reduce it, because attention spent managing how you feel about yourself is attention not spent on the work.

WHERE THE FEEDBACK SENDS THEIR ATTENTION

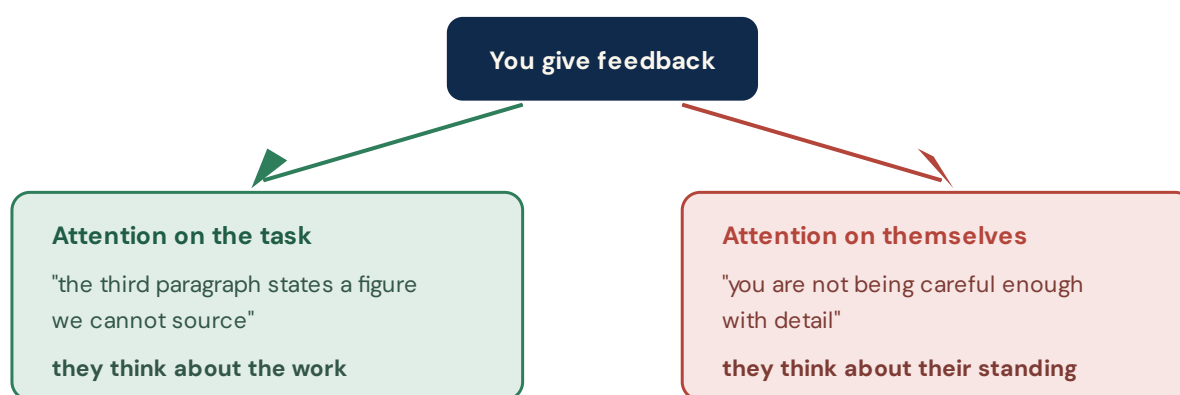


Figure: the same concern, two destinations. Only one of them produces a change in the work.

This explains several things that otherwise look like folklore. It explains why the sandwich method often fails: wrapping criticism in praise makes the whole exchange about evaluation, which is a message about the person. It explains why vague feedback is worse than blunt feedback: with nothing specific to act on, the recipient has nowhere to send their attention except inward.

And it gives you a usable test before you open your mouth. **Does this sentence describe the work, or the person?**

Task, not person

The rewrite is usually small and it changes the destination entirely.

01 "You are not detail-oriented"

A claim about who they are. Nothing to act on, and it invites a defence of their character rather than a fix.

02 "The third paragraph states a figure we cannot source"

A claim about the artefact. Checkable, fixable, and it says nothing about them at all.

Same concern. One produces a conversation about the document, the other produces a conversation about their worth, and only the first one changes the document.

Three habits keep it on the right side.

Point at the artefact, not the pattern. "This report" rather than "your reports". If it genuinely is a pattern, that is a different and slower conversation, and it should not be smuggled into a comment on one piece of work.

Describe what you observed, not what you inferred. You saw a document with an unsourced figure. You inferred carelessness. Only the first one is information.

Say what the impact was. Not to add weight, but because it is the part that makes the correction obviously worth making. "We would have to withdraw it if a client checked" is a reason, not a reprimand.

Close to the work, not close to the review

Timing matters less than most advice suggests and in a different way than people expect.

The common instruction is to give feedback immediately. In practice, immediately is often wrong: immediately after something went badly is when the person is least able to hear it and you are least able to describe it precisely.

The useful rule is close to the work, not close to the review. Within a day or two, while the specifics are recoverable and before the work has moved on. Not six weeks later in a review, where it arrives as a verdict on a period rather than a comment on a thing.

Feedback that arrives at review time is not feedback. It is a judgement with no opportunity to have acted differently.

Two practical consequences.

If you are saving something for the review, give it now instead. Anything that surprises somebody at an annual review should have been said months earlier, and the surprise is a failure of the process rather than a revelation about the person.

And separate it from the one-to-one if the one-to-one is theirs. If every weekly meeting contains an assessment, people attend defensively and stop raising the things you most want to hear.

The four sentences

The structure I use, which fits the research and takes about thirty seconds to prepare. It is on the last page of this document as a card.

01 The situation

Where and when, specifically enough that we both know which thing we are discussing. "In the client report that went out on Tuesday."

02 The observable

What was actually there, in the artefact or the behaviour. Not the inference. "The revenue figure had no source attached."

03 The impact on the work

Why it matters, in terms of the task rather than of your feelings about it. "If the client checks it, we have to withdraw the number."

04 The next action, agreed rather than instructed

"Can we add sources to figures in these reports?" A question invites them into the fix. An instruction hands them a verdict.

Then stop talking. The most common error after delivering good feedback is filling the silence with reassurance, which converts a clear task-focused comment into an ambiguous exchange about how they are feeling.

WRITE THE FOUR BEFORE YOU SPEAK

Thirty seconds on a card. The reason is not formality. It is that the act of writing the observable forces you to notice when you only have an inference, which is exactly the case where the conversation would have gone badly.

Asking for it, and receiving it badly

If you are on the receiving side, two things are in your control and both are underused.

Ask for something specific. "Any feedback for me?" reliably produces "no, you are doing great", because a general question has no safe specific answer. "Was the structure of that report clear, or did you have to re-read anything?" produces an answer, because it is about a thing rather than about you.

Ask about a decision rather than about yourself. "Would you have handled the client call differently?" is easier to answer honestly than "how am I doing", and the answer is more useful.

Then receive it in a way that does not make it the last time. Not by pretending to agree. By asking one clarifying question, saying what you will do, and stopping. Defending your reasoning in the moment is the most common way people quietly stop receiving feedback, and it rarely feels like defensiveness from the inside; it feels like providing context.

You can disagree later, in writing, once you have thought. Almost nothing is lost by not disagreeing immediately.

And if the feedback is genuinely about you rather than the work, and it is vague, it is reasonable to ask for the specific instance. "Can you tell me which piece of work gave you that impression?" is a fair question and often reveals there was only one.

Praise, and why it is harder than it looks

The same finding applies in the other direction, which almost nobody mentions.

Praise directed at the person produces the same attention shift as criticism directed at the person.

"You are brilliant at this" is a statement about identity, and identity statements make the next difficult piece of work threatening, because now there is something to protect.

Praise the work and the decision, specifically. "The way you structured that around the three options made the choice obvious" is usable. "Great job" is pleasant and carries no information at all.

Praise the thing you want repeated. This is the whole mechanism. If somebody raised a problem early and it was inconvenient, say that raising it early was right, because that is the behaviour you need again and it currently cost them something.

And be careful with public praise for individuals in a small team. It is not free. In a team of six, praising one person specifically and repeatedly is information about everybody else, whether you intended it or not.

What people most often want, and rarely get, is not more praise. It is knowing that the specific difficult thing they did was noticed.

When feedback is not the answer

Some problems present as performance problems and are not, and feedback delivered into these situations is at best wasted and at worst damaging.

They do not know what good looks like. This is a standards problem. No amount of feedback fixes an absent definition of done; show them an example instead.

They do not have the authority. They are being asked to own an outcome and cannot make the decisions inside it. Feedback here is unfair and they know it.

They are overloaded and cannot say so. Feedback about missed work when the real problem is capacity teaches people to hide, which makes the next quarter worse.

The process is broken. If three people make the same mistake, it is not three performance issues. It is a process with a hole in it, and the fix is a checklist rather than a conversation.

THE QUESTION TO ASK FIRST

Could a capable, willing person have done this correctly with what they had? If the honest answer is no, the problem is not with the person and feedback will not touch it.

Specific, close, and about the work

The evidence here is genuinely useful and genuinely uncomfortable. More feedback is not better. Over a third of it makes things worse, and the deciding factor is whether it sends somebody's attention to the task or to themselves.

Everything practical follows from that. Point at the artefact rather than the pattern. Say what you observed rather than what you inferred. Give the impact on the work. Agree the next action rather than instructing it. Then stop.

And check first whether feedback is the right tool at all, because a standards problem, an authority problem, a capacity problem and a broken process all look like performance problems from a distance.

The card overleaf takes thirty seconds to fill in and its real function is not the conversation. It is that writing the observable forces you to notice when all you actually have is an inference.

Paul Prado Pacardo

Senior Executive Assistant, Operations and Project Manager.
Ten years supporting C-level leadership. Available for remote work.

me.kabuhayan.app
[linkedin.com/in/paulpacardo](https://www.linkedin.com/in/paulpacardo)
pacardopaul18@gmail.com

Feedback prep card

Thirty seconds, before you speak · v1

Four sentences

Write it before you say it

1. The situation

which specific thing, and when

2. What was observable

what was actually there, not what you

concluded

3. Impact on the work

in terms of the task, not your reaction

4. Next action, as a question

agreed, not instructed

Check before you go. Does every sentence describe the work rather than the person? Could a capable, willing person have done this correctly with what they had? If not, this is a standards, authority, capacity or process problem, and feedback is the wrong tool.

Close to the work, not close to the review. Say the four sentences, then stop talking rather than filling the silence with reassurance.