



Keyword: Balanced Feedback

## Providing Balanced Feedback

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by Kevin Eikenberry

Feedback.

We all want it, we all need it, but we don't always know what to do with it – and we don't always know how to give it.

There is much good advice and wise counsel that can be shared about how to give feedback more effectively; however, in this article I want to focus on providing *balanced* feedback as one way to make it more useful, accepted and effective.

But before we get too far into making feedback balanced, we must define the four types of feedback:

**Negative feedback**, or corrective comments about past behavior. These are things that didn't go well.

**Positive feedback**, or affirming comments about past behavior. These are things that went well and need to be repeated.

**Negative feedforward**, or corrective comments about future behavior. These are things that don't need to be repeated next time.

**Positive feedforward**, or affirming comments about future behavior. These are things that would improve performance in the future.

In sharing these four types of feedback with many people and groups, most people feel that they seldom get all four types of feedback.

In fact, for many people when they think of feedback, they can only think of negative feedback – often this is the lion's share of what they have received in their life.

When you think about the types of feedback this way, it isn't hard to see that each type can be valuable, which leads to the point that balanced feedback is very desirable. However it is hard to expect ourselves or others to give balanced feedback if we unfortunately have never (or rarely) received it.



## Providing Balanced Feedback (continued)

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Think about yourself for a minute.

When you really want to improve your performance and reflect what you have done as a way to critique and improve yourself you very likely look at all four types of feedback. You start by asking yourself what you did well and what you need to change. Then you look forward and think about what you want to do the next time (and what you don't want to do).

If it works for you, it will work for others.

I encourage you to think about all of these perspectives before you give someone else feedback - and then share more than one perspective with them. You will give advice the other person is much more likely to hear, not be defensive about, and most importantly, decide to apply.

Once you have observed a wider view of someone's performance, and determined that you want to give them both positive and negative comments, then you must decide how to deliver that message.

### Delivery of Balanced Feedback

Many articles and books on feedback suggest the following approach:

Positive feedback / negative feedback / positive feedback.

This "sandwich approach" makes sense conceptually - by putting the negative feedback in the middle, others will likely be more open to it. Mainly because they have heard something positive first and last, the relationship should be maintained, even if the negative comments in the middle are pretty hard to hear.

This approach can work extremely well, unfortunately most people botch it up so badly, that the approach itself is often considered ineffective.

Why?

Too often the intent of the sandwiched feedback wasn't to make *balanced* comments at all, but only to make the negative feedback more palatable.

And why is this?

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## Providing Balanced Feedback (continued)

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Not because positive/negative/positive doesn't work, but because people have very specific negative comments to share, but the positive "bread" in the sandwich is too general or vague so it is deemed insincere and unhelpful.

### The Solution

The sandwich approach to feedback can be very effective if the intent is to truly give balanced feedback. When the positive comments are as specific and genuine as the negative feedback, it will be a much more useful and positive experience for the receiver.

The next time you have to give feedback, think balanced – both positive and negative and past and future – and then deliver that balanced perspective in a balanced way. When you do this you will help the other person succeed more quickly and more easily, and you will have truly made a positive impact on that person and his or her results.



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