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Responding to Critical Supervisory Feedback

by Tom Sebok

Receiving “corrective feedback” from your supervisor about your work performance can be very difficult. You may feel angry, sad, or threatened - especially if the feedback is in writing. Responding effectively while experiencing any of these emotional states can be even more of a challenge.

Strategies That Have a Lower Probability of Success

You may wonder, “What are my rights?” or “How do I defend myself?” It is certainly important to make yourself aware of your rights as this could be very useful information. And of course you want to feel your job is safe. But taking an adversarial approach initially such as threatening to file a grievance or writing a long detailed letter to the supervisor (or her/his supervisor) arguing with every point raised is not likely to persuade her or him that you are right and she or he is wrong. And assuming you will be vindicated if you take your case to a higher authority may be a faulty assumption. (Remember that your supervisor’s supervisor probably gets all or most of her/his information about you from your supervisor.) Accusing your supervisor of being biased or out to get you is likely to be seen as evidence that, not only do you have a performance problem, you are unwilling to accept feedback. To the supervisor, that’s two problems, not just one.

Strategies That Have a Higher Probability of Success

Although there is no easy “one-size fits all” approach to dealing with this situation, there are a few guidelines that are likely to help and there are some obvious “potholes” to be avoided if at all possible. Often, the best way to protect your job is a counter-intuitive approach that avoids taking an adversarial stance for as long as possible. First, it is important to *understand* what concerns your supervisor about your work performance. You must understand this before you can respond appropriately or do anything to address the problem – even if you are convinced that the supervisor is wrong. What has your supervisor told you about her/his concerns? Can you name them specifically? If you can’t, this is a clue that you may need to think about this! Understanding how your supervisor sees something does not mean you agree with her/him. But, if you hope to resolve the issue satisfactorily, it is essential that you know what genuinely concerns your supervisor.

Think about your goal(s). It’s likely your primary goal is keeping your job. Given the importance of the supervisor in your work life, another goal may be to minimize difficulties – or even to improve relations – with your supervisor. Even if your only goal is to get your supervisor to consider your point of view, the approaches that follow are more likely to enhance your chances of being successful, whether done in writing or verbally.

- 1) First, indicate your sincere interest in clearly understanding and finding *mutually satisfactory* ways to resolve the concern(s) raised by your supervisor.
- 2) If any of your supervisor's criticisms of your work performance seem fair or reasonable to you, acknowledge responsibility for them, and indicate what you have already done and/or what you plan to do to address them. Then, ask the supervisor if this plan will address her/his concerns (if you were to carry it out). If the supervisor says, "yes," do what you said you would do. If the supervisor says, "no," ask for suggestions about how to improve the plan.
- 3) If you and your supervisor disagree about the legitimacy of one or more of her/his criticisms, indicate that it appears you see these things differently, name the difference in a neutral way, and ask questions to clarify your understanding of why your supervisor sees things the way she/he does and how your supervisor arrived at her/his conclusions. Think about the answer your supervisor gives you. If what she/he says makes sense to you, suggest a plan to address the concerns and make sure your supervisor agrees with it (see #2 above). If what she/he says does not make sense to you, you may need to ask more questions until it does.
- 4) If there are objective criteria that might be used to help bring your perceptions and those of your supervisor closer together, suggest using them. For example, if you have different perceptions of what time you have been arriving at work in the morning, you might suggest using a time clock or agreeing that you'll stop in to say hello to your supervisor when you arrive at work. Or, you and your supervisor could agree you will send her or him an email to verify the time of your daily arrival. This will demonstrate your willingness to address your supervisor's concern(s) as well as your willingness to use fair methods to assess whether or not you are making the desired changes.
- 5) If you believe the supervisor has drawn inaccurate conclusions without considering all the relevant facts, use the phrase "given that" and ask questions about how she/he would like for you to have handled the situation differently – or how she/he would like for you to handle it differently in the future. For example: "Given that I needed A and B from my colleagues before I could begin working on C, what would you like for me to have done differently when my colleagues did not give me A and B in a timely manner?"