

2+2 Equals Better Performance

Alternative Performance Appraisal with Feedback and Encouragement

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Introduction

Trying to open a new box of videotape with an outer wrap of plastic covering can be very frustrating. Many learn to dread the battle to find a loose corner, and finally to pry a bit of plastic wrapping loose with their teeth. The task doesn't get easier over time. The ritual is repeated with continued frustration.

For others, however, it is a simple matter to find the tab of the zip tape which has been pre-positioned to easily tear off one end of the wrapping. But the videotape comes with no instructions on how to remove the wrapper, and if a person is not aware of the zip tab he is unlikely to discover it in the course of opening the box. Often, there is no one to ask. Even more often, the person does not think to ask.

What is missing is feedback. Without feedback, there is little opportunity to improve performance. In the many tasks of life, feedback is a very uncertain process, and even when it is available it is often not presented in a way that makes it most useful or most likely to be considered. Our behavior changes most powerfully when feedback is given and received in a positive environment where trial and error is encouraged. When we first try to modify our behavior, we are unlikely to perfect a new skill instantly. It is often the trial and error process itself which is integral to achieving the desired performance.

For instance, it is almost impossible to learn to ride a bicycle without falling off. Falling off is a necessary part of the learning process. Trial, error and the resulting feedback lead to a very sharp, positive learning curve. Trying to learn to ride a bicycle simply by studying a manual, even a very good manual which describes the trial and error process, is basically impossible. The same is true in our worklife -- whether in the classroom, the workplace, the battlefield or the sportsfield, feedback and encouragement are prime sources of success. Without adequate feedback and the opportunity for trial and error experience, we will not be able to develop fully, our professional capacity. Yet, in many aspects of life and professional practice, feedback is not readily available. Where it is available, it is often not given in an environment of encouragement and may not recognize the benefit of trial and error learning.

In this paper, we propose a new approach to feedback and encouragement called 2+2. The approach is very simple, takes relatively little time, and can be implemented in an organization either in place of, or as an informal supplement to an existing performance appraisal system. The model was first developed in Namibia in the UNESCO sponsored in-service teacher education project, UNESCO - NAM/92/005, and further developed in China in the UNDP sponsored basic education project, UNDP/CPR/91/420, and in the PRIME (1) school reform project in the Norfolk, Virginia, Public Schools. After discussing the 2+2 approach, we will focus on two different, but related venues for its application: the workplace and the school. We hope that the examination of these situations will help to highlight the 2+2 feedback process and to encourage its use.

The 2+2 Feedback Model

A fundamental principle of human motivation is the importance of feedback. Positive behavior is less likely to continue if it is not recognized and reinforced while dysfunctional behavior may well continue if corrective feedback is not offered. Motivation theory strongly suggests that much of the problem behavior exhibited by employees and managers alike (whether in schools or businesses) can be traced to poor feedback mechanisms.

There are many models of feedback, often known more formally as performance appraisal (PA). We find it ironic that the feedback process, and the intrinsic satisfaction which can come from the process of the mastery of a task and the improvement of performance, has been turned into a process cloaked with fear and dread. The feedback given in performance appraisal becomes solely associated with evaluation and the possibly negative consequences of judgment. It is a process which is often feared and avoided by supervisors and subordinates alike. All too often, its developmental potential is lost.

It is the task of another discussion to examine why and how PA has developed into such a negative process, or the merits of such a development. Instead we propose a very simple, positive process which will accomplish most of the objectives of PA -- offering substantial opportunities for performance improvement without the intimidating complexity associated with most PA systems. The 2+2 system we describe is already being successfully implemented in schools and we hope it will soon be introduced into business organizations as well.

The 2+2 feedback model is based on powerful principles of teaching and learning including the following:

- Learning is substantially enhanced by joy, confidence and trust.
- Focused learning is more likely to be successful than diffuse learning.
- Consistent, regular feedback is more powerful than infrequent feedback with the same content.
- Multiple sources of feedback are useful.
- Feedback is likely to be more successful if the person or persons providing feedback look forward to providing the feedback.
- Peer feedback can be as powerful (even more powerful) than "supervisory" feedback.
- Too much feedback can be as ineffective as not enough.
- If the person receiving feedback feels that he or she has a choice in how to respond, there is more likelihood that the feedback will change performance.
- To be useful, all feedback does not have to be accurate or timely.

- Giving and receiving feedback is a process which can mature over time and still be productive as it matures.
- The credibility or quality of feedback is not necessarily related to the length of observation or the status of the observer.
- The feedback process benefits the observer, sharpening analytical skills and providing perspective on his or her own performance and skills.

Based on these principles, 2+2 is an observation protocol. It can be used any time it is desirable to have a formal and systematic record of observation on one hand, or casual and informal feedback at the request of an individual who feels he or she needs some feedback in a given area on the other. 2+2 was initially developed as an alternative to more formal, elaborate evaluation visits, but is now used in much broader contexts, essentially whenever it is desirable to provide feedback based on observation.

2+2 involves the giving of two compliments and two suggestions to a colleague (senior, junior or peer) based on the observations of a person's behavior or performance. The observer is asked to identify and record the most important compliments and suggestions for improvement based on an observation session (which may last for as little as several minutes or as long as several days).

2+2 is very flexible. Even inexperienced observers can find behaviors to compliment and make suggestions for improvement. As the sophistication of the observers improves through experience, so will the quality of their suggestions. 2+2 can be used for "general" observation comments or the observer can be cued to focus compliments and suggestions on specific aspects of performance. It may be desirable to suggest a focus for the 2+2 observation, but allow the observer discretion. If the observer feels that behaviors other than those chosen for focus are more important to comment on, they can honor their own sense of priority.

If observers are sophisticated (trained supervisors or evaluators, for example), 2+2 can, over time, result in a comprehensive evaluation. The theory is simple. Each time an observation takes place, behaviors noted for compliment and suggestion are deemed to be most noteworthy. If the observer has a record of earlier compliments and suggestions, the scope of evaluation gradually broadens. Eventually, elements of performance not noted in 2+2 observations can be assumed to be satisfactory but not noteworthy. Meanwhile, strengths and weaknesses are systematically recorded and improvements can be documented.

A key design feature of 2+2 is the informality of the observation session. A "session" may involve nothing more than the routine observation of a supervisor as he or she interacts with a subordinate. In the classroom, a session may involve a casual five-minute visit from a colleague who stays just long enough to note down two compliments and two suggestions. Of course a session may also be much more structured. The key is that all participants need to know in advance what to expect. In the classroom it will be useful to make sure that students know about the system, that the observational visits are as natural and welcome as any other collegial activity and that this is not in some way a form of monitoring or a signal of distrust. In the workplace, all levels of employees must understand these same principles.

Overcoming the isolation of the classroom and the workplace is an important goal of 2+2. Instead of relying solely on an often poorly implemented and intimidating formal PA system, frequent, focused feedback and encouragement is fostered. By simplifying the feedback task, and expanding the possible and legitimate sources of feedback well beyond the supervisor, opportunity for individual development increases.

2+2 is designed to benefit both the observer and the observed. When 2+2 is successful, observation is viewed positively by all who participate, a major advantage over traditional evaluation. All are encouraged to be free in giving and receiving comments. If those observed are assured that all comments are for their benefit and that they are free to take the suggestions or ignore them, suggestions for improvement are most likely to be seriously considered.

Focus and balance are two pivotal concerns in 2+2. It is well known that behavior is more likely to be influenced if feedback addresses no more than one or two elements at any one time. Behavior is also more likely to change if suggestions for improvement are balanced with compliments. While the precise number of exactly two compliments and two suggestions is not the issue; focus and balance are key design features. The 2+2 process can provide needed balance and focus -- initially as a supplement to more formal evaluation, perhaps later, as an alternative to it.

2+2 for Employees and Managers

In the workplace, performance appraisal (PA) is often not carried out on a regular basis because of a number of difficulties. Supervisors complain that PA takes too much time, often has no clear purpose, requires subjectivity, and usually involves the delivery of bad news. Peers are seldom involved in PA for many of the same reasons as well as the fact that the competitive environment in many organizations (where employees often compete for limited promotions and rewards) discourages employees from helping each other. Given these considerations, it is not surprising that PA may be given such a low priority that it is conducted in a superficial manner if at all.

This is where 2+2 can help. Using 2+2 at first as a supplement to the more formal appraisal system, supervisors, peers and subordinates at all levels can be encouraged to participate in an informal practice of complimenting and suggesting. All levels of employees can be encouraged to be on the look out for critical incidents which are worth noting either as effective behavior to be reinforced or less than effective behavior for which improvements can be suggested. Through the use of the 2+2 format, employees at all levels can be encouraged to give feedback to their senior, junior and peer colleagues.

In order for employees to feel comfortable doing this, a climate of safety must be fostered where two things are fairly certain. First, they must be assured that feedback provided will not be used for any formal purpose such as promotion or pay determination. That is left for another, more formal system. Second, the feedback provider must feel comfortable that there will be no risk of punishment or retribution because the receiver is offended by the feedback. While policies and procedures can be established that will help reinforce these points, even more important is the fostering of a spirit of collaboration where feedback is offered and received in a spirit of helpfulness. This will likely require some substantial time, and a demonstrated commitment from the top of the organization.

2+2 for Teachers and School Administrators

This same spirit of collaboration can facilitate improved feedback in schools. In the classroom the teacher is isolated and no tradition exists to encourage teachers to visit each other and provide feedback and support. A new tradition of openness is needed, a system of observation and feedback which will give teachers a new perspective on their current performance and the confidence to try new approaches in anticipation of feedback and encouragement to help them gauge their success. Colleagues may begin to work together more systematically, feeling less isolated in their efforts to improve their performance.

Using 2+2, school administrators may substantially increase their classroom visitations knowing that brief focused visits will be well received. This will allow administrators to inject themselves more routinely into the instructional development process. Groups of faculty members may undertake instructional development programs, confident in collegial support. School faculties or sub groups may choose to develop specific new skills of instruction, their close collaboration insuring both a higher level of success and a quicker cycle of improvement made possible by constant feedback.

2+2 empowers those who work with it. It gives confidence to everyone involved that they have important things to say, new perspectives which can lead to the improvement of their colleagues' performance - as well as their own. And everyone can look forward to receiving suggestions for their own improvement. Vital to their looking forward to suggestions is the core notion that they are free to accept or reject suggestions they receive. The old notion that teachers or employees must mindlessly heed the call of managers and administrators is now clearly seen to be counter productive to the effectiveness of the

organization. Unfortunately organizational traditions still promote the old notions. 2+2 can signal new thinking and demonstrate a functional commitment to new organizational behaviors.

Conclusion

2+2 is not only a new approach to performance appraisal, it serves as a symbol of new employee - employer relationships. It helps condition administrators and teachers alike to become sensitive to new expectations. It is both symbol and substance, process and content, instrument and portfolio.

Performance appraisal must sometimes be open-ended and responsive to the uniqueness of each relationship. In other cases, it needs to be programmatic, seeking to develop, shape and assess systematic, new behaviors. 2+2 responds to both needs. It can be as open-ended as saying to an observer, "Use your own judgment, sense your own priorities for highlighting successes and opportunities for improvement." Or it can provide an observer with a specific agenda, focusing on specific behaviors or attitudes in a programmatic sequence.

2+2 is deceptively simple. It is easy to use. It encourages observers and those observed to examine their behavior more closely and to try new approaches. Used properly it creates a "zone of safety" making risk more acceptable. Exposing weakness may take on a positive rather than a negative connotation as the critical focus is coupled with encouragement and recognition for strengths as well.

We believe that 2+2 can help transform a working or teaching environment into a more productive learning environment. Feedback and encouragement are keys to higher productivity and 2+2 is a performance appraisal system which, in itself, can be motivational and encourage better performance.

(1) Public School Restructuring through Innovative Mainstream Education