

Feedback: A Powerful Tool for Sales Managers

By Jim Naro, President of The Naro Group

From research in psychology, we know that positive reinforcement or feedback will encourage the behaviors we want to be repeated. In sales, positive feedback not only shapes beneficial behaviors for new sales people who are on a learning curve, but it also helps maintain established behaviors for those more experienced. And if used properly, positive feedback can improve performance that drives revenue.

For instance, a sales manager can tell a sales person that they did something particularly well on a call, such as listening to a prospect and then thoughtfully responding to the customer's expressed or unexpressed concerns. This kind of feedback will reinforce behavior and lead to good results.

On the other hand, behavior followed by negative feedback will tend to have an adverse effect on behavior and performance. Unfortunately, negative feedback, even if specific, can "spill" over and affect other behaviors. In sales, this often results in apprehensive sales people who become dependent on their managers for direction.

A positive approach to feedback gives people something to focus on for the improvement of their performance. For instance, offering specific feedback on an observed behavior, such as how a sales person can effectively handle customer issues is much more helpful than simply saying, "You screwed up."

Shape and Reinforce Behaviors

As mentioned above, positive feedback can help you shape new behaviors and maintain established behaviors. In shaping new behaviors, it's best to provide positive feedback continuously as a sales person is incrementally developing a new skill. Once he or she has mastered that skill, you can maintain the behavior by providing positive feedback as the need arises. And the reward of winning will, in and of itself, provide positive feedback.

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About The Naro Group

The Naro Group specializes in helping technology companies capitalize on their investment in sales process and sales training. Contact Jim Naro, President, by email at: jnaro@TheNaroGroup.com.

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The Many Flavors of Positive Feedback

There are several approaches to providing positive feedback, including neutral feedback, constructive feedback, and balanced assessments. Here's a quick overview of the first two.

- **Neutral feedback**

This type of feedback is actually neither positive nor negative. Rather, it is a way of raising awareness in sales people that their performance is below par and making them responsible for fixing it.

One way of applying this is at the weekly activity level, such as with call goals. If sales people fall short of an agreed-upon call rate, you can remind them of what was agreed to and ask them to correct their performance. If the problem persists, you can then note the bad performance, and take action. This might include asking a sales person why he or she thinks the problem still is occurring and what changes they could undertake. You can also propose a change, provide assistance, and follow up frequently. This provides you with an opportunity to use positive feedback for incremental improvement to shape better behavior.

- **Constructive feedback**

You hopefully are viewed as a credible and trusted in the eyes of your sales force, with one-on-one relationships with each sales person. If that type of relationship exists, then you can provide feedback that is viewed as objective, with the understanding that the person receiving the feedback can improve his or her performance with preparation and practice.

The Balanced Assessment

One of the best options for positive feedback in sales is a balanced assessment. This type of feedback provides an opportunity for learning within context and gives sales people the chance to build confidence and become more motivated.

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One way to conduct a balanced assessment is to set up a joint call with the sales person so you can observe a particular skill that you know needs improvement. This could be an introductory call, a call to discuss needs and solutions, or a call that involves a final negotiation. Have the sales person prepare for the call and pre-brief you on the objectives of the call and the expected outcome. Once on the call, let the sales person maintain control, as you are not there to demonstrate your expertise. When the call is complete, you can conduct an assessment, such as this one with Joe:

- After the call, ask Joe what he thought went well and what he observed as not going well. You can also ask Joe what he would do differently next time.
- After Joe's self-diagnosis, you have the opportunity to provide your own feedback. First comment on Joe's observations, noting if you have anything to add.
- If you have something to add for correction, first start with a positive to reinforce something Joe did well. This could be reinforcement such as, "You did a nice job getting the prospect to share an issue that we can help them with."
- As you discuss corrective behaviors, keep your comments as objective as possible by framing the feedback in terms of what you saw and heard. For example, you can say, "Once you started talking about our product, I noticed that Emily, the prospect, started to look at her watch and became disengaged."
- You can then make a suggestion for Joe for the next time. You might say, "Next time, try asking additional questions about the impact of that issue on her company's operations. You might ask, for instance, 'How much more time does it take?' or 'What additional costs are associated with that?'"
- You can end the balance assessment by giving Joe a vote of confidence and be willing to role play with him before the next call so that he is better prepared.

When Needed, Coach

With any of the approaches here, if you don't see behaviors changing, it may mean there are other barriers, such as unwillingness on the part of the sales person to change. This may require more extensive coaching where such issues about choice and consequences can be addressed properly.

If you have any questions on implementing a feedback or coaching process, send me an email at jnaro@TheNaroGroup.com or call me at 603-881-7712.



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