How to be a
SUPERSTAR MANAGER

How to be a superstar manager

Managers are a key part of any organization. They ensure that work gets done, guide the company's employees, track deadlines, and much more. With that much responsibility, a good manager can have a huge positive impact. And a bad manager, can do a lot of harm.

In this special report, we've collected the best of Business Management Daily's advice on how to be an effective manager. We'll explore topics like providing feedback, and other management best practices that will help make you a high-performing and well-liked manager!

Manager checklist — Are you a "good" manager?

"Am I a good manager?" Simply being the type of person who routinely thinks about this question points to an affirmative answer. Leaders willing to reflect upon their management skills demonstrate self-awareness. This self-awareness develops confidence in what they are doing well and keeps top-of-mind possible improvements to their managerial style.

People differ, of course, in their definition of a good manager. However, successful managers generally demonstrate competency in several basic areas.

The following manager checklist pinpoints some of the most important management skills. Each management area is followed by instances of it in action. Grab a piece of paper or open a notepad on your computer to keep track as you go and rate yourself for each item using this scale:

- 2 = I regularly do this.
- 1 = I sometimes do this.
- 0 = I never do this.

Manager checklist category: Constructive feedback

_____. I schedule one-on-one check-ins with each direct report to provide individualized, constructive feedback.

_____. I offer employees specific comments and examples rather than vague statements so they know exactly what they are doing well and what they need to improve upon.

_____. I deliver objective, respectful feedback so as not to treat someone like a child or let emotions get the best of me.

_____. I complete formal performance reviews in a timely, thoughtful manner.

_____. I ask team members for constructive feedback on my [leadership](#) style so that I know what I'm doing well and where I can improve.

- Total for this category: _____

Manager checklist category: Communication

_____. People can count on me for timely responses to their questions.

_____. I have a system in place, such as a daily e-mail blast, that ensures all staff members receive pertinent news whether they work on-site or remotely.

_____. I sit down to go over priorities with individual staff members to ensure each person understands exactly what he should be accomplishing.

_____. After talking to an employee, I ask her to summarize the conversation or restate important points so that I'm certain the person truly understands.

_____. I make a point of being the best listener possible by giving others in a conversation my undivided attention.

- Total for this category: _____

Manager checklist category: Organization

_____. Meetings I call have a set agenda and a purpose.

_____. My direct reports know our performance goals and the steps needed to reach them.

_____. From information to objects, I can find what I need pretty quickly in my workspace.

_____. I break down projects into manageable parts and check in with relevant employees at preset intervals.

_____. I maintain a master calendar to manage time and stay on track.

- Total for this category: _____

Manager checklist category: Backbone

_____. I possess clear standards regarding office conduct and am not afraid to call out inappropriate behavior.

_____. I realize my job sometimes involves delivering bad news, and I know how to convey such information in a direct, mature way.

_____. I enforce rules without being swayed by excuses or employee drama.

_____. I am able to admit when I have made a mistake, and I apologize appropriately.

_____. My team members can count on me to stick up for them in company meetings or in exchanges with clients.

- Total for this category: _____

Manager checklist category: Onboarding

_____. I realize the importance of a direct manager's presence on a new employee's first day and make certain I'm available on the start date.

_____. I encourage existing staff members to personally reach out to welcome a first-time employee during the person's first week.

_____. I follow a formal onboarding program that ensures job duties, human resources paperwork, and the like are covered when someone starts a new job.

_____. I know that new employees like to have someone at the company besides a manager to turn to, so I assign a mentor during the first week.

_____. I welcome the eagerness of new employees and am certain to provide meaningful work for them to do from the first day on.

- Total for this category: _____

Manager checklist category: Awareness

_____. I make a point of walking around the office just to get a feel for how things are going in the workspace.

_____. I have a solid grasp of the strengths and weaknesses of my team as a whole as well as of individual team members.

_____. I understand we all are not motivated by the same things, so I try to figure out what will spur each individual to maximum performance.

_____. At any given time, I have a pretty good sense of the mood of my staff.

_____. I know enough about each team member to sit down and hold a friendly, individualized conversation about something other than work.

- Total for this category: _____

Manager checklist category: Trust

_____. I admit when I don't know something.

_____. I am comfortable delegating work and giving stretch assignments because I know my direct reports will seek me out if any problems arise.

_____. I hold everyone on staff to the same standards and do not play favorites.

_____. I avoid micromanaging and instead encourage check-ins with me as needed.

_____. I maintain an open-door policy.

- Total for this category: _____

Manager checklist category: Attitude

_____. I smile and greet each team member every day.

_____. I value teamwork and roll up my sleeves to pitch in however I can during busy times.

_____. I give credit where it is due.

_____. I say thank you and sincerely mean it.

_____. Whether a mistake is mine or someone else's, I treat it as a learning experience, focus on improvement, and move on. Total for this category: _____

Manager checklist category: Work-life balance

_____. I understand the need for flexible scheduling and do what I can to accommodate employee requests.

_____. I do not send emails or texts in the evening or on the weekend because people need time to unplug, and I only call their cell phone if there is a true emergency.

_____. Except in extenuating circumstances, I grant vacation time without a problem and try exceptionally hard not to bother the person who is away.

_____. I encourage sick employees to stay home and get better.

_____. I do not leave PTO on the books; I take days off in order to recharge.

- Total for this category: _____

Manager checklist category: Growth

_____. I talk to other leaders at the company to learn more about the organization as a whole.

_____. I maintain a relationship with a reliable mentor.

_____. I read trade journals, attend industry conferences, or take professional development classes to keep my knowledge up-to-date.

_____. I make time to expand and solidify my network.

_____. I take time out to brainstorm.

- Total for this category: _____

Evaluating your score

Add together your points from each of the 10 categories. Since the successful manager checklist has a maximum score of 100, think of your overall number as a percentage. Then, just like back in school, you can convert to a letter grade (A: 90-100, B: 80-89, C: 70-79, etc.) to judge performance.

Dissatisfied with your grade? Look back through the manager checklist quiz. Were there certain categories in which you did not score many points? If so, set goals to improve in these areas. Maybe you'd benefit from taking a course on time management or listening to a webinar on keeping negativity out of the workspace.

Or, maybe your responses point toward a need for greater consistency. Your actions and behaviors are on the right track; they just must become par for the course instead of something done occasionally.

And if you achieved a high score, congratulations!

10 Qualities every good manager needs to have

A single definition of a "good manager" does not exist. Leaders possess a variety of management styles, so finding a modus operandi that's authentic and effective for you proves more valuable than trying to live up to some preconceived notion.

That said, the best managers typically have many things in common. They generally demonstrate competency in several basic areas critical to productivity, interpersonal relationships, and morale.

The following offers a look at some of the actions and behaviors oftentimes associated with being a successful manager. As you read about the qualities of a great manager, reflect on where you stand. Perhaps further development of certain traits would be in your best interest. Or, maybe you're on the right track but simply need to develop greater consistency.

Qualities of a good manager: Offers constructive feedback

Employees need to know exactly what they are doing right and what things need improvement. Specific, positive feedback makes them feel confident in their abilities and encourages the continuation of desirable actions. Saying "good job" is nice. However, stating "I really like how you kept your calm around that irate customer" increases the odds of such an interaction happening again. Similarly, pinpointing behaviors requiring change paves the way for actual improvement. Telling someone "Records show you've been late five times this month" is quite different from stating "You don't act like you care about this job."

Scheduling regular one-to-one check-ins with direct reports provides the chance for individualized, constructive feedback on a timely basis. Deliver it objectively and respectfully. Do not treat someone like a child or let emotions get the best of you.

When the time comes for formal performance reviews, complete them thoughtfully. Employees interpret a half-hearted effort as a sign you don't

particularly care. Allow time for follow-up, as workers likely will have questions about the contents. Use the review as a springboard to conversations about goals and improvements.

And don't be afraid to turn the tables. Great managers seek constructive feedback from team members. Leaders benefit from knowing what they are doing well and where they can improve.

Qualities of a good manager: Effective communicator

When instructing and informing are critical components of your job description, effective communication skills are a must. The best managers put a system in place, such as a daily email blast, that ensures all staff members receive pertinent news whether they work on-site or remotely. Likewise, successful managers build a reputation for answering questions from employees in a timely, thorough manner. This promptness and accuracy enables team members to do their best work.

Stating things, however, is not enough. Great communicators pay attention to comprehension. After talking to an employee, they may ask the person to summarize the conversation or restate important points. This repetition ensures the person truly understands.

And good leaders act as role models by putting away their cell phones during conversations. By giving others in a discussion their undivided attention, successful leaders better grasp what their employees are trying to say. Such attention also allows managers to pick up on body language, tone, and other cues offering insight into attitudes or emotions.

Qualities of a good manager: Organized

When you're the one responsible for the group, disorganization sets everyone up for failure. Direct reports must know performance goals and the steps needed to

reach them. Break down projects into manageable parts, and check in with relevant employees at preset intervals.

Use time management skills to stay on track. A master calendar is a must for keeping tabs on deadlines and other important dates. When you call meetings, set an agenda to avoid forgetting important matters or wandering off course. Start on time. It shows respect for employees and their own time management efforts.

And while it may not seem like the biggest deal, know the location of everything within your work environment! Wasting time trying to find the Company X file or even the stapler takes away from using that energy on more productive activities.

Qualities of a good manager: Backbone

Some managers spend a good amount of time worrying about popularity. A better goal, however, is to aim for respect. The nature of the job oftentimes requires saying or doing things others will not like. The position also involves making difficult decisions. Successful managers realize these potentially problematic things go with the territory and remain strong.

Effective managers must possess clear standards regarding office conduct and not be afraid to call out inappropriate behavior. They exhibit zero tolerance for bullying, tasteless "jokes," gossip, and other negative influences on company culture. They enforce rules across the board without being swayed by excuses or employee drama. When instances arise where they need to deliver bad news, great leaders know how to convey such information in a direct, mature way.

However, having a backbone does not mean a manager is inflexible or domineering. In fact, effective managers own their mistakes and apologize appropriately. Solid managers gain a reputation for commitment to fairness and doing the right thing, even when that may be uncomfortable. Team members relish that they can count on their leader to stick up for them in company meetings or in exchanges with clients.

Qualities of a good manager: Takes onboarding seriously

Smart leaders know that a positive initial employee experience significantly impacts employee satisfaction and retention. They make a point of being around and available on a new hire's first day. They follow a thought-out onboarding program to ensure pertinent information gets conveyed and vital paperwork completed. However, the best managers also know new employees are eager to start making a difference. They assign meaningful work from the get-go to promote employee engagement.

Good managers recognize the importance of belonging, so they encourage existing staff members to personally reach out to welcome a new colleague. Assigning a mentor is another important move. New employees like to have someone at the company to turn to besides their direct boss.

Qualities of a good manager: Awareness

At any given time, a manager should possess a pretty good sense of staff mood and employee engagement. Effective managers often accomplish this by making a point of walking around the office just to get the big picture of how things are going in the workspace. Hiding behind a desk all day doesn't offer insight into company culture, morale, or how workers interact with one another.

The best managers also are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their team as a whole as well as of individual team members. Knowing every person is not motivated by the same things, a successful leader tries to figure out what will spur each employee to do their best work.

Awareness should not be limited just to work-related issues. Knowing enough about each team member to sit down and hold a friendly, individualized conversation demonstrates interest in someone as a person, not just as a worker. Such interaction strengthens bonds and connections to the organization.

Qualities of a good manager: Trustworthy

Trust is a two-way street, and the best managers build a solid road. They hold everyone to the same standards and don't play favorites. They admit when they don't know something rather than faking it or avoiding the issue.

Since nobody likes someone constantly looking over his shoulder, great leaders avoid micromanaging. They trust their staff to check in as needed and ask for help if any problems arise. These managers comfortably delegate work and give stretch assignments because they know their direct reports will come to them as needed. The door is always open!

Qualities of a good manager: Positive attitude

As stewards of company culture, managers set the tone for their team. Others observe and follow their behavior. Simple actions such as smiling and greeting people start the day off right. Politeness and respect are a way of life.

When the going gets tough, great managers exhibit a can-do spirit. They not only rally the troops but also pull up their own sleeves to pitch in however they can. They value collaboration and hard work, sincerely thank workers for their efforts, and give credit where it is due.

And when mistakes happen? Whether it's their own error or someone else's, the best managers treat missteps as a learning experience. Instead of endlessly rehashing the problem, they focus on improvement and move on.

Qualities of a good manager: Values work-life balance

The best managers know that people have lives outside of the office. They understand the importance of flexible scheduling to overall well-being and do what they can to accommodate employee requests. Respecting the right to recharge, they do not send emails or texts in the evening or on the weekend and only call if there is a true emergency. Likewise, they grant vacation time without a problem (except in extenuating circumstances) and try exceptionally hard not to bother the person who is away.

Concern for work-life well-being isn't limited to employees, though. Great managers know they too need time to recharge. They stay home when sick in order to get better (and to set the proper example for their staff). They leave early sometimes to catch a child's soccer game. They realize vacation time is something they've earned, so they don't leave PTO on the books.

Qualities of a good manager: Always growing

The best managers know the importance of lifelong learning and obtaining new skills. They read trade journals, attend industry conferences, or take professional development classes to keep their knowledge base up to date. To enhance their leadership skills, they may turn to books, podcasts, or TED talks on areas in which they determine they could use improvement.

Growth comes from meaningful relationships, too. Talking to other leaders at the company aids in discovering more about the organization as a whole. Expanding and solidifying one's network expands career paths, influence, and ways of thinking. Great managers cherish keeping up with others, even if only via LinkedIn much of the time. And maintaining a relationship with a reliable mentor offers a readily available source of guidance.

Lastly, growth comes from challenging the status quo. Great managers take time out to brainstorm, innovate, and think about their company's future. They also reflect on their own behaviors and actions, realizing that self-awareness is one of the premier qualities of a great manager.

6 management best practices you can implement now

While each manager has his or her own individual management style, certain management practices exist that great leaders tend to have in common. Attending to these areas results in a positive, productive work environment.

It is one thing, though, to know the importance of a concept to successful management and quite another to put that management skill into action. For

instance, wanting a reputation as a "good communicator" is noble, but what can a leader do to actually merit that description?

To that end, we've identified six best practices for managers followed by suggestions as to actions and behaviors that support each one. See which might work for you to boost your management skills to a higher level.

Build trust

Good relationships start with trust. Workers who trust their leader speak up about little problems before they develop into big ones. Innovation thrives since people are confident that their ideas will get treated respectfully. Implementing change proves easier because employees don't fear underlying motives. Morale flourishes because team members know their manager has their back.

Solid ways to strengthen bonds of trust include:

- **Conduct regular one-on-one meetings** with each member of your team where you both give feedback. Tell the person at least one thing he did well and one thing he can improve on that happened since the last meeting. Have him do the same thing for you! Employees will start seeing feedback as a two-way street built on constructively examining both positives and negatives.
- **Admit your faults.** Many employees are worried about coming to their manager with issues and shortcomings for fear that acknowledging their weaknesses could be held against them. That's an unhealthy way to work. Make such conversations normal by owning up to your flaws. If you make a mistake, acknowledge it and note what you learned from the error. You will find your employees much more willing to have an honest conversation with you.
- **Quit micromanaging.** Employees interpret such behavior as you not trusting them to do the right thing. Drive home the point that you expect team members to come forward on their own accord when they need help or

encounter a problem. Set up periodic check-ins for updates on progress, but don't bother them too much outside of that scheduled time.

- **Delegate more often.** Not only will you spare yourself the stress of trying to tackle too much on your own, you send the message that you think enough of the other person to handle the responsibility.

- **Manage expectations, not tasks** — especially with remote workers. Employees should not feel like you are trying to "catch" them not working. Provide clarity about benchmarks, and trust individuals to manage their own time effectively in order to meet them.

- **Call out bad behavior.** Business leaders who allow off-color jokes, participate in gossip sessions, or stay silent when team members blame or bad-mouth one another, lose the trust of staff members hurt by those words.

- **Admit when you don't know something** rather than lie or avoid the issue. Especially in the midst of an ever-changing world due to the pandemic, situations will arise where you simply can't give a good answer. That's OK. Reassure others of your commitment to timely, accurate information as available with a response such as, "I understand your concern about this matter. I will continue to seek solid information and convey it as quickly and thoroughly as possible." By admitting when you don't know, employees are more likely to trust you when you do tell them something.

Communicate early and often

Operate under the assumption that people want to do good work. To do so, however, they need timely, clear, thorough information that specifies what to do and how to do it. Their questions require answers so that they can progress toward meeting defined expectations.

Managers looking to improve communication may want to try the following:

- **Proofread your emails** and other correspondence before sending. Ensure the accuracy of dates, metrics, and other critical info, as mistakes can come back to haunt you. Also, read for clarity and tone. Upon second glance, you

might determine a sentence or two needs rewording for better understanding, or you might want to choose different phrases to emphasize a certain point.

- **Set specific points throughout the day to answer emails**, and let others know what those times are in the line after your signature. Staff will know that you aren't ignoring their messages and will have a better idea of when you'll get back to them.
- Deliver emotional or confusing news face to face. Use Zoom if an on-site meeting is not possible. You'll be able to better judge comprehension, and body language will clue you in on reception.
- **Listen with your full attention.** Turn off electronics during conversations, and look at the speaker. Try not to interrupt. When it's your turn to speak, summarize what the other person said in order to confirm understanding.
- **Walk the floor at least once every other day.** You'll get a better idea of what's going on around the office and people's general temperament. This stroll also provides the opportunity for team members to grab you for a quick comment.
- **Host office hours once a week.** Staff members can drop in to talk about any topic without fear of disturbing you. If remote, hold virtual office hours to serve the same purpose.
- **Keep remote staff in the loop.** Off-site workers feel like second-class citizens if they are always the last to know. Send an email blast to everyone at the same time, regardless of location. Or, schedule a video conference where all team members attend virtually whether from the office or at home.
- **Commit to holding tough conversations as the need arises.** Someone should not first hear about a major problem at an annual performance review. Rather, bring the worker in for a private conversation when something happens. State things factually rather than emotionally (as in "You've been late three times over the past two weeks" instead of "Why are you too lazy to get in here on time?"). Calmly discuss what must change, the rectification steps involved, and the repercussions for not following through. Agree to meet in two weeks to evaluate progress.

Stay organized

Disorganized managers not only make their own lives more difficult, they impede the progress of those around them. Both within their individual department and at the company as a whole, people depend on managers to keep things running like a well-oiled machine. Confused priorities, failure to make the best use of time, and inattention to detail can prevent the organization from reaching full potential.

Strategies for improving organizational skills include:

- **Set an agenda for each meeting.** This action enables others to see what will be covered and come prepared to discuss these issues. Attach relevant documents to allow time for reading them beforehand.
- **Stay on top of who, what, where, and when** through project management apps and management software. Popular choices include Asana, Hive, Basecamp, Zoho, Trello, and Monday.com. Do your research before committing: the best selection is the one that works for your needs *and* that you'll actually use consistently.
- **Make the most of your to-do list** by composing it at the end of the workday when things are fresh in your mind. You will be able to hit the ground running the next morning instead of trying to remember where things stand.
- **Set a specific time each week for housekeeping.** Go through your physical inbox. Put things at your desk where they belong. Organize emails into files. Decluttering provides a psychological boost, and you'll feel good about not wasting time down the line on trivial matters like finding the stapler when you need it.

Onboard with care

You will never have as captive of an audience as you do during an employee's first days on the job. What you do and say, and especially how you make someone feel, influences retention, loyalty, and morale.

Be ready to make a positive impression through actions such as:

- **Make sure you are around and available on a new hire's first day.** Someone excited to join your team will start to deflate if bored and made to feel like a nuisance who others got assigned to baby-sit.
- **Work with human resources to provide a structured onboarding experience.** Follow a master checklist to ensure all paperwork gets completed and policies covered. Realize, though, that a new hire wants to start making a difference, not just handle bureaucracy. Create a small project he can work on with colleagues; he'll get his feet wet and start bonding with others.
- **Assign each new hire a mentor.** This action gives the person someone else besides you to turn to with questions, and it develops the leadership skills of your seasoned employees.
- **Request that team members personally welcome new hires.** They can send emails briefly introducing themselves, their role at the company, what they like about working here, and a personal fact or two.

Create a positive environment

Company culture influences retention, loyalty, and productivity. Workers who feel connected to the organization, its people, and its purpose have a sense of satisfaction that keeps them coming back to do their best day after day.

What helps make somewhere a great place to work? Managers can try these measures:

- **Smile and greet staff members each morning.**
- **Establish rituals that promote togetherness.** Celebrate birthdays with a bagel breakfast. Go out for a drink together when KPIs (key performance indicators) for the month exceed expectations. Collect toys for disadvantaged kids each Christmas and spend a Friday afternoon in early December wrapping and delivering them.
- **Create a Slack channel** on which you and others can give a shout-out for exceptional performance or kind acts.

- **Make a point of always submitting something to the company newsletter.** Staff members will appreciate this public recognition of achievements, and your department will gain a reputation as a thriving work environment.
- **Pen hand-written thank you notes** around the holiday season or year's end. This personalization shows you truly value the individual and want to make a sincere effort to recognize what each person brings to the team.
- **At the end of every staff meeting, take a moment to reflect on the bigger picture.** How does the team's work fit in with the overall company mission?
- **Sit down with team members individually** once or twice a year to set professional goals. People enjoy knowing you're interested in their career development and future with the company. Maximize potential for achieving business objectives by constructing SMART goals together. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound. Framing goals within this set-up zeros in on what to accomplish and the necessary steps.
- **Get a sense of what motivates different members of your staff.** Talk to them one on one, or send a survey around. You may find some people like tangible rewards such as gift cards or small prizes. Others may want increased opportunities, such as the chance to head a project or represent the company at a conference. Adjust your appreciation methods accordingly.
- **Watch for burnout.** If somebody seems overly tired or stressed, evaluate what that person has on her plate and make adjustments. Tell people to unplug during non-work hours in order to fully recharge. Practice what you preach by not texting or emailing at strange times, even if you don't expect people to respond until later.
- **Remember that you set the tone, so be a good role model.** Use your accumulated PTO. Stay home when you're sick. Give people the benefit of the doubt. Roll up your sleeves and pitch in when you see someone struggling. Practice random acts of kindness.

Look ahead

Successful managers do not get so wrapped up in what's going on today that they fail to see tomorrow. They look at the big picture and what will be necessary for both themselves and the company to reach new heights.

Forward-thinking actions might include:

- **Set aside time for strategic planning** by scheduling it into your calendar at regular intervals. Forecasting workloads and resources necessary for upcoming projects provides time to evaluate critical factors such as needed material and labor.
- **Tend to your network.** These connections provide information and advice beneficial to your current job as well as to future career moves. Once a week, send an email to someone simply to see how the person is doing, or thoughtfully comment on an acquaintance's LinkedIn post.
- **Commit to professional development** and honing management skills. Use the educational benefits provided by your company to take one course or seminar a year in an area in which you feel out-of-date. The pandemic significantly increased what colleges offer online, so take advantage of that scheduling flexibility.
- **Encourage lifelong learning among your staff, too.** Identify together what soft and hard skills would prove useful to obtain. Create specific plans on how to go about gathering them. Perhaps you could set aside one Friday afternoon a month for team members to watch TED talks on relevant topics. Or, maybe money exists in the budget to bring in an instructor to teach advanced PowerPoint.
- **Brainstorm once a week.** Great managers are always looking for new ideas, effective initiatives, and solutions to problems. Dedicating time directly to letting the mind flow can end up producing amazing results.

How to give positive feedback and lead your team to success

When it comes to giving positive feedback, it can require a new way of looking at things. There's an old adage that says "no news is good news." But we've come to learn that's not necessarily the case. No news might just mean that the bad news hasn't come to your attention yet, not that it isn't brimming beneath the surface. After all, that's why we get car inspections, go to annual checkups, and have annual performance reviews.

Today, we know that effective feedback on an employee's performance is important. How do employees know if they're doing a good job? Do they need to make a few adjustments? What if they're doing an overall bad job? Without feedback, everyone's working blindly.

Quite a bit has been written about providing negative (or better referred to as *constructive*) feedback. However, positive feedback is just as important for maintaining employee engagement, building a healthy company culture, and building on an employee's strengths. And if done wrong — it can actually be quite harmful.

Why is positive feedback important?

There's a common misconception that people want positive feedback simply for affirmation. It's something given to make people feel good, and it's perhaps even looked down upon. "They need me to tell them they're doing a good job!" While it's true that most people do like to be recognized for their hard work, that's not the only reason that positive feedback is a key part of a healthy work environment.

Positive employee feedback is vital in every work environment for both employees and businesses to thrive. It takes the guesswork out of the workplace, acknowledging when an employee does good work, and encouraging them to do more of it.

Giving constructive feedback is good too, but it's not enough to just alter behaviors that aren't going well, you also need to reinforce things that are to get the most out of your team. Otherwise, they'll be left to keep guessing whether they're doing a good job or not and may stray even further from the right path.

Imagine that you're a project manager, and you've been using the same process since you started. However, for this new project, you make some process improvements that you think will smooth out some pain points you identified. The project goes on, is finished, and you hear nothing out of the ordinary. Should you keep implementing the new way or go back to the old way? Great question. If you want an employee to keep replicating good behaviors, you must tell them.

What is positive feedback?

Before we continue, it's important to establish what we mean by positive feedback. For the sake of this exercise, I'd like to define positive feedback as "Providing useful, specific, and actionable feedback to an employee regarding what they did well on a specific task and the impact of that work."

To better define this, let's look at two examples.

Example 1:

Picture yourself coming into a check-in with your boss. "You're doing a great job!" they say "You're a really valuable member of the team!"

This might be heartwarming to hear (perhaps), but it's not exactly helpful. Based on our definition here, this is not positive feedback. They're words of affirmation, yes, but they're not useful, specific, or actionable.

Example 2:

Picture yourself coming into the same meeting with your boss. As you're going over your notes, they say "You're really doing a great job managing this project right now. Your excellent attention to detail has kept things moving quickly and

you managed to catch a few errors that could have pushed back our timeline if not addressed quickly."

That's positive feedback. The employee understands what they did well and can replicate it. Even better, they know why it's important. If they didn't catch those errors early, the whole timeline for the project could have been impacted. Better keep doing a detailed review early on in the process.

How to deliver positive feedback

It's pretty simple, but when done poorly, it can actually be more harmful than good.

Be specific

The key to positive feedback is to make it specific and actionable. In the first example given, simply expressing that an employee is doing a great job and is a valued team member is great for a holiday card, but not useful as actionable feedback.

In the other example, we talked about how they performed well on a specific project. Even better, it tells them how they did well — their attention to detail was valuable. Why? It kept things moving quickly and helped catch errors that could have delayed the project.

Excellent. This employee now understands what to keep doing. In a formal review, you could even go a step further and have more tangible examples.

"The way you sent weekly updates on the project status to the whole team ensured all the key stakeholders stayed up to date on changes to deadlines and anything that needed quick approval."

"Because of your attention to detail when reviewing the proposal before it went out, we were able to catch a few mistakes where updates weren't made to the final document before it was sent out to the client."

Those are specific and actionable examples of feedback an employee can now take and apply to future work.

Be genuine

People are better at reading you than you probably realize. That's why it's vital that when you give positive feedback, it's genuine. When you're being honest, your body language is going to reinforce your words. We've all heard someone say something positive before, while their tone and body language are telling us a completely different message.

If you don't have something positive to say, then don't pretend. It'll be obvious and leave everyone feeling worse afterward.

Do it one-on-one

Feedback is sensitive, even when it's good. Congratulating someone for hitting a milestone in front of the whole team is probably fine in most cases, but feedback is personal. You want to leave room for more discussion. Maybe they want to ask for additional insights or talk about a specific aspect of the project or your feedback. This is better suited for a one-on-one than in a team meeting or group setting.

Additionally, giving feedback in front of a group, even a small one, can make the subject self-conscious and uncomfortable. Many people don't like such high-profile recognition. It even could make other team members jealous or self-conscious. *Why didn't I get any positive feedback for putting in extra effort too?*

Don't use the feedback sandwich

We're all familiar with the feedback sandwich, and for a long time, managers thought it was the best option. Slap the negative feedback in between two positive comments and it'll soften the blow. But it's really not the best way to achieve your goal.

1. The sandwich feels contrived. Just about everyone is familiar with this now, when someone sees it, they know what to expect. It cheapens the positive feedback, you're giving it because you have to follow the method, not because you want to. It's nearly impossible for it to sound genuine in this case.

2. It cheapens both the positive feedback and constructive criticism. The value of the positive feedback gets lost in the sandwich. However, it also can distract from and lighten the constrictive criticism. Critical feedback should be delivered confidently, not hidden within the layers of a sandwich so you can barely taste it.

That doesn't mean that you can never do both. It's perfectly reasonable to discuss the positives and negatives of a particular project and an employee's performance during it. However, be sure it doesn't contrived and that you give both positive feedback and constructive feedback the time and attention they deserve individually.

When positive feedback can go wrong

It may sound counterintuitive that positive feedback can be bad, but bear with me. When positive feedback is too general and shallow, it can come off as fake and contrived.

"You're doing great, Sue!" doesn't feel so authentic. Even worse, it can feel sarcastic or forced. *How am I doing great? Did they really mean that? Maybe they weren't happy with my performance on this project? What am I doing great on?*

Additionally, an employee could easily misinterpret something so general. Maybe they think you meant they're doing great on something that you actually think they could improve on. Oops. Or maybe they think that you're not really invested in them and their work. After all, you couldn't take a few moments to explain why they're doing great?

With specific and detailed feedback, you take the guessing game out and make the feedback appear authentic — because it probably is authentic.

When to give positive feedback

What time is appropriate for giving positive feedback will vary from team to team and organization to organization, but there are a few general guidelines.

1. **Give positive feedback as frequently as it feels authentic.** Don't force yourself to say something positive if you don't mean it. If an employee is doing great work, let them know.
2. **Don't go overboard.** If you give positive feedback 4 times a day, or in every email, it might start to lose its effectiveness. It's no longer special and it's hard to know which bit of feedback was most valuable and that they should remember.
3. **Don't do it too infrequently.** After all, the purpose of positive feedback is to help someone learn what they're doing well and what they should keep doing. If you save it for an annual review, that's probably too late. You've let a year go by without giving much direction.
4. **Do so in a timely manner.** Reinforcing positive behavior isn't helpful months after the fact. Provide positive feedback while it's still fresh.

What the cadence is, however, will depend on you. If you have weekly meetings with your direct reports, then that's a good time to give feedback — positive or negative. Otherwise, you might have one-off conversations here and there. If you don't have regular meetings (though you probably should), then it would be a little awkward to call a meeting just to congratulate someone on handling a project well.

So in short — do what feels natural for your team. If you don't have any genuine positive feedback to give someone on your team every couple of weeks, then there are probably larger problems that need to be identified. Don't cheapen it by going overboard, but don't withhold it either — positive feedback is a tool for

steering your team in the right direction, not just for making them feel warm and fuzzy.

In summary

Providing positive feedback may have a reputation for being just warm and fuzzy in some businesses. However, in truth, it's a vital leadership skill that should be part of any leader's toolkit. Being shown appreciation when an employee goes the extra mile is nice. Receiving feedback on how things are going is a vital part of performance management.

If you're not used to providing positive feedback, then it's never too late to start getting in practice. It's a great way to expand your communication skills and lead your team to success.