Feedback Definition, Types and Examples

Best Practices for the Modern Workplace (and Life Outside it).

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CAMERON CONAWAY



“A WORKPLACE FEEDBACK EXPERT.”
– HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

About Cameron Conaway

- Full-time business school professor
- Former leader at Cisco
- Feedback expertise featured in:
  - Harvard Business Review
  - Harvard ManageMentor
  - Harvard Inspiring Minds

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

How to use this feedback guide



Refresh
Sift through the feedback types to re-learn what makes feedback such a vital force for personal and professional growth.

Promote
Use this guide as inspiration to promote feedback literacy across teams, departments, and throughout your entire organization.

Remind
Coming back to the feedback definition and feedback examples can help you center the art and science of feedback – at work and beyond.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Table of Contents

1. Feedback Definition
A definition helps ensure you and your team are on the same page. I provide a starter, but I recommend co-creating one that works for your team.

-> Go there

2. Primary Feedback Types
An exploration of the three common types (or categories) of feedback, as well as examples to bring them to life.

-> Go there

3. Other Feedback Types & Terms
A feedback glossary that includes various feedback types that are accompanied by a few feedback examples to get you thinking.

-> Go there

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback Term Finder

Click each term below to jump to the corresponding slide.

1. Evaluative feedback
2. Appreciative feedback
3. Coaching feedback
4. Feedback literacy
5. Planned feedback
6. Informal feedback
7. Unplanned feedback
8. Real-time feedback
9. Self-feedback
10. Peer-to-peer feedback
11. Customer feedback
12. Employee feedback
13. 360-degree feedback
14. Upward feedback
15. Downward feedback
16. Positive feedback
17. Negative feedback
18. Constructive feedback
19. Feedforward
20. Positive feedforward
21. Negative feedforward
22. Destructive feedback
23. Oral feedback
24. Written feedback
25. Visual feedback
26. Automated feedback
27. Encouragement
28. Formative feedback
29. Summative feedback
30. Criticism
31. Feedback-seeking behavior
32. Feedback orientation

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

1.

Definition

Let’s define feedback so we have a base to work from.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

“Feedback is a response to a person’s activity with the purpose of helping them adjust to become more effective. Feedback comes in various forms, including evaluative (how you did and where you are), appreciative (how you are valued and recognized), and coaching (how you can improve).”

-Cameron Conaway

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

About the definition

Researchers Boud & Dawson write, “For feedback to operate well, all parties involved need to understand the common enterprise in which they are engaged and appreciate the ultimate purpose of the activity.”

Few books and articles about workplace feedback provide a feedback definition, so it can be a great introductory exercise to co-create a unique definition for your team.

Let’s now briefly unpack three parts to how we've defined feedback.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback definition – Part 1

“is a response to a person’s activity”

This part centers that there was a stimulus and a corresponding response, and that it had to do with a person’s activity. *Response* is intentionally vague here because it can range a gamut that includes everything from an audience’s standing ovation to an in-depth conversation with a colleague.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback definition – Part 2

“with the purpose of helping them adjust”

The purpose of feedback is to be helpful. As you’ve likely learned through experience, having the best intentions doesn’t necessarily mean things will go smoothly. You can have great intentions and still either deliver terrible feedback or deliver feedback terribly. Also of note here is that the feedback is about helping the other person adjust. *Adjust* is also a bit vague because this adjustment could range from feedback intended to adjust a teammate’s interpersonal behavior to feedback meant to adjust the hip rotation on someone’s golf swing.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback definition – Part 3

“various forms”

Part of the challenge in defining feedback involves addressing all it can be. Is it the compliment you received in the morning from your yoga instructor, the not-so-great performance feedback score (the one tied to your bonus) that you received from your manager in the afternoon, or your daughter’s glee when you read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* before bed? Yes, all of those can be considered feedback. “Various forms” leaves space for the many other forms, while naming three of the most common types of feedback (evaluative, appreciative, and coaching) makes the definition feel real and relatable.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

2.

Types

Let’s explore three common feedback categories.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback type: Evaluative

Evaluative feedback helps you see how you did and where you are. It is *evaluative* because it compares how you did to how you could have done it.

On the next slide, you'll find five examples of evaluative feedback.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Evaluative feedback examples

- At the end of the quarter, you drove 10% fewer marketing leads than you forecasted.
- A direct report tells you: “You are the best leader I’ve ever worked with.”
- You did not meet the qualifying standards to participate in the Boston Marathon.
- You moved to #5 on a Duolingo leaderboard.
- Your formal bid in response to a Request for Proposal (RFP) was selected.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Evaluative feedback examples

Further exploration #1

Notice the variation of these examples. We have a positive but rather vague comment from a colleague next to the more specific example of missing your quarterly numbers. These are still evaluative because they directly or indirectly contain a comparative data point.

You may be asking, “Wait just a second, isn’t that comment from the direct report also the appreciative type of feedback?” Indeed, you are correct! The types of feedback can blur into each other; at times, it can feel like the feedback types exist on a spectrum. Let’s zoom out a bit to add context to this example.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Evaluative feedback examples

Further exploration #2

2. A direct report tells you: “You are the best leader I’ve ever worked with.”

Let’s say this comment was made during a quarterly performance review, and it was in direct response to when you asked for feedback about your leadership since joining the team six months ago. This comment now shifts more toward evaluative – with the subtle comparative data point being “other leaders they’ve worked with.” It can move further into the evaluative camp if specific details are provided about how you stack up next to leaders they’ve had in the past.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback type: Appreciative

Appreciative feedback helps you know you are valued and recognized. Here are five feedback examples that fall into the appreciative type:

- Your basketball team's center points to you in gratitude after that great pass.
- Your grandparent says, "I am so grateful for all you've done for us."
- Your teacher praises you in class for always asking great questions.
- Upon returning from a dangerous military mission, one sergeant hugs another.
- A patron at the restaurant where you work leaves you a great tip.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Appreciative feedback examples

Further exploration #1

You'll notice that appreciation can be spoken in words (as in examples 2 and 3) or go unspoken (examples 1, 4, and 5). Unlike Evaluative and Coaching, which can touch on negative areas, appreciation is positive. It motivates us. Keep in mind, however, that everybody wants different types of appreciation. Some, though they may not admit it and might blush as it happens, love to be appreciated in front of peers. For others, renewing their contract for another quarter may be all the appreciation they want or need.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Appreciative feedback examples

Further exploration #2

As a leader, it's critical to understand how those around you want to be appreciated. A great leader, for example, would not frequently embarrass a colleague by praising them publicly when that is the last thing they would want.

Appreciative feedback is vital. While some erroneously view it as the fluffy form of feedback that nobody needs (indeed, 37% of the managers surveyed in this study don't provide any praise at all), studies suggest that providing specific appreciation (including in the form of positive feedback) can improve employee satisfaction and development more than negative feedback.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback type: Coaching

The coaching feedback type helps point the way to how you can improve.

On the next slide, you'll find five examples of coaching feedback.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Coaching feedback examples

- Your manager tells you they loved the PowerPoint visuals you created, but to please make sure to use the company's proprietary font. After a conversation, you both decide it will be great for you to take a course titled "Omnichannel Branding."
- "Here's what worked for me when I was in a similar position," a colleague begins.
- An experienced ballet teacher offers advice on how to improve your grand plié.
- Through active listening and asking questions, one teammate helps another see that what they thought was the primary cause of failure was actually something else.
- A teammate says: "I'm not a great public speaker, but I noticed each time you looked down at your notes, it took away some of the great energy that kept your audience engaged. Are you open to working together so we can both improve?"

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Coaching feedback examples

Further exploration

Like our other feedback types, there's variety. Coaching can be as direct as "here's how to point your toes for the grand plié" or, as in the active listening example, more like a torch that helps light the way for another person to discover the answer for themselves. Coaching can be but isn't necessarily dependent on titles or org chart position. We can all be coaches for each other.

The coaching feedback type perhaps most obviously corresponds to the "with the purpose of helping them adjust" part of our definition of feedback. But the other types do as well. Consider how specific positive feedback can help a beginning writer see their strengths for the first time or how knowing how you did on a project at work can help you improve on the next one.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

3.

Other Feedback Types & Terms

A glossary with additional feedback examples.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

The primary term to describe generalized feedback capacities

Feedback literacy is a term I use to refer to an individual's understanding of and capacity to effectively give, seek, receive, process, and use feedback. The term has research roots in the world of education, where it is primarily used to describe students' ability to receive feedback. I've expanded its use, pulling it into the business world so we have a broad term to describe the overall feedback capacities.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on formality and timing
1 of 5

Planned feedback refers to any feedback session that is scheduled in advance. Often referred to as formal feedback, this type of feedback may occur at regular intervals, such as during quarterly or annual performance reviews or even within a day's notice. The benefit of a formal feedback session is that the primary feedback giver(s) and receiver(s) have a chance to prepare.

Example: A customer experience (CX) team leader schedules a 90-minute quarterly performance review with each of their direct reports. The meeting invite includes an agenda detailing the topics to be covered. One of the topics reads: "Growth Opportunities – areas where you can grow + your thoughts on how I can grow." This could be considered a formal feedback session.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on formality and timing

2 of 5

Informal feedback is often considered the most common form of workplace feedback because it can occur anytime and come from anywhere in the organization. Although informal feedback is often thought of as differing from formal feedback in that it is not scheduled, it can include scheduling and planning elements (see Example #1 on the next slide). The benefit of good informal feedback is its timeliness. Sometimes, this type of feedback can be incorporated in minutes, leading to improved outcomes.

See two examples on the next slide.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on formality and timing

3 of 5

Example #1: Employee A types up a long email to relay feedback to Employee B about their performance on a project. Employee A plans to send the email after Employee B is back from an international business trip.

Example #2: a junior designer conducted a stakeholder meeting and was tasked with creating a first draft of the company's new brochure. Upon seeing the design on a shared digital whiteboard, the design lead quickly called the junior designer to share how excited they were about the direction. "Your use of white space is spectacular and ensures the viewer's eyes are drawn to our calls-to-action. Great work. Might you be able to incorporate a similar design aesthetic in the footer? Otherwise, it feels like two different brands are colliding."

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on formality and timing

Slide 4 of 5

Unplanned feedback is not scheduled in advance and occurs in real-time. Although it's often referred to as informal feedback, unplanned feedback differs in that it is truly spontaneous and in-the-moment. Therefore, Employee A's conscious email in the previous slide would not be considered unplanned.

Example: On a team call with many junior colleagues, Colleague A, also relatively junior, senses the conversation is going too "in the weeds" rather than focusing on getting alignment on "the big rock" which was the purpose of the call. "Team," they say, "I like that we're digging into the details, but I'm wondering if we should first get alignment on the overall direction?" The manager agrees. "Great point. Thank you for having the awareness to bring us back, Colleague A."

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on formality and timing
5 of 5

Real-time feedback can be planned (as in a collaborative working session) or unplanned (as in feedback received from the audience during a presentation).

Example: the design lead mentioned earlier schedules a 30-minute call with the junior designer so they can work in real-time to improve the brochure.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on source

1 of 5

Self-feedback. Although informal feedback is often referred to as the most common, in all likelihood, self-feedback takes the crown. Self-feedback refers to the feedback in our minds as we critique, praise, and compare our performance. We may compare the speech we just gave next to an excellent TED Talk or the app functionality we're building next to how our competitor did it.

Self-feedback can happen consciously (such as an employee who was just asked to rate their quarterly performance, also known as a self-appraisal) or unconsciously (such as an unhelpful and hypercritical thought process that may be related to traumatic events in childhood). Space for self-reflection is a key part of developing conscious self-feedback and helping to bring subconscious self-feedback to the surface so it can be worked with rather than reacted to.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on source

2 of 5

Peer-to-peer feedback. In the workplace, peer-to-peer feedback typically refers to feedback given and received by peers at an equal seniority level. Effective peer-to-peer feedback is built on several key pillars, including psychological safety (where each colleague feels respected and safe when sharing their thoughts) and a shared understanding of the feedback basics, including alignment on a feedback definition and a general baseline of feedback literacy.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on source

3 of 5

Customer feedback is feedback given by customers. It can occur in various forms, including customer satisfaction surveys, public customer reviews, and beta testing whereby a product or service is rolled out to a select group to provide feedback before a general release.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on source

4 of 5

Employee feedback is a broad term that you may hear used in multiple ways. It commonly refers to feedback given by a manager to a direct report, but it can also refer to any feedback given and received between colleagues regardless of where they sit on the org chart. Additionally, an organization's leaders may request "employee feedback" about, for example, how a new procurement process is working.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on source

5 of 5

360-degree feedback (often written as 360° degree and also referred to as multi-source feedback or multi-source peer appraisal) is a process for employees to give and receive feedback in an anonymous way from various colleagues. As the name suggests, the purpose is to improve employee performance by helping them receive feedback from 360 degrees – that is, from as many angles as possible (including self-feedback). Though the potential downsides are many, the proposed benefit and the reason this method became so popular is, at least in theory, it allows employees to get a broader range of feedback perspectives rather than, for example, getting feedback exclusively from their manager who may only see one side of their work. The collected feedback is then used to inform an employee development plan.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on positionality

1 of 1

Upward feedback is feedback given by a direct report to their manager. It can also refer to any feedback given by a more junior employee to a more senior employee (this includes skip-level feedback, which would be between a junior employee and their direct supervisor's manager).

Downward feedback is feedback given by a manager to their direct report. It can also refer to any feedback given by a more senior employee to a junior employee.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on reception & perception

1 of 7

Positive feedback is how we know we are doing well. This can come in various forms, ranging from a colleague's praise to an automated dashboard that turns the numbers green when you've met or exceeded your goal.

For decades, feedback research has proven the benefits of positive feedback. Effective positive feedback is specific (it goes beyond "great job") and can also give employees a glimpse into a strength they may not know about.

Example: "I'm not sure if you know this, but you are a riveting public speaker. Your slides are clear and engaging, and your passion for the topic shines through. I especially appreciate how you engage your audience with questions."

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on reception & perception

2 of 7

Negative feedback is how we see our gaps, those areas where we can improve. In this sense, negative feedback can be beneficial. However, for various reasons, folks often fear giving and receiving it. Working through this fear can be challenging, but there can be tremendous growth when you do.

Example: “Upon review of the copy, I think we missed the mark in addressing the primary pain point of our targeted audience. Can you try again, this time working to empathize with their current struggle to do X and positioning our product as the solution?”

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on reception & perception

3 of 7

Constructive feedback. This term seems to exist due to confusion or misconceptions around what the “negative” in negative feedback refers to. “Constructive” here implies helpfulness or usefulness, which based on our primary definition is the general purpose of feedback. So I struggle with the term constructive feedback because it reads to me like “feedback feedback.” Still, if we keep in mind that we all have different levels of feedback literacy, it’s easy to see how this term can be helpful. In the following example, imagine if the word “constructive” was replaced by “negative.” Would the sentence change in meaning or feel more jarring for you?

“The call went well because the engineering team provided constructive feedback that I will include in our next release.”

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on reception & perception

4 of 7

Feedforward. The term feedforward arose to ensure feedback takes a future-oriented approach. Effective feedback, however, does precisely that. It points to a past performance with the intention of improving future performance. In this sense, I believe it's problematic to position feedforward as "the reverse" of feedback. Still, like "constructive feedback," feedforward has its place depending on the audience. Reframing / rebranding feedback in this way can also help pull employees back into the feedback process if they've had terrible or even harmful experiences with it in the past.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on reception & perception

5 of 7

Positive feedforward is positive feedback with a phrase that attaches it to the future.

Example: In your report last week, you did an excellent job of steering our focus to the highlights of your research. Great work. You might want to try that in your client presentation next week.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on reception & perception

6 of 7

Negative feedforward is negative feedback with a phrase that attaches it to the future.

Example: Next time, I think it will be helpful to spend more time researching your audience. As long-time customers, they clearly didn't need those first few overview slides. Before you present next week, let's spend some time discussing the backgrounds of who will be in attendance so we can really nail the opening.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on reception & perception

7 of 7

Destructive feedback goes against our primary definition of feedback in that it is ultimately either not helpful and/or not given with the intent to be helpful. While this type of feedback may include valuable parts, it comes in the form of harsh critique that may include ridiculing that breaks a person's confidence and thereby makes feedback adoption nearly impossible. There are long-term negative consequences to destructive feedback.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on delivery method

1 of 3

Oral feedback, often called verbal feedback, is delivered via synchronous or asynchronous talking. One potential benefit to oral feedback, particularly of the synchronous variety, is that participants can pick up on verbal and non-verbal gestures, which can help ensure ideas are conveyed clearly.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on delivery method
2 of 3

Written feedback is delivered in writing and can serve as a way to document feedback. Unlike oral feedback, where verbal and nonverbal gestures can be experienced, these elements are missing in written feedback. As Sarah Gershman and Casey Mank wrote in *Harvard Business Review*:

“Therefore, when you deliver written feedback, make sure to include clear and unmissable signposts of warmth, encouragement, or gratitude. Writing is not the place for off the cuff feedback on someone’s performance that could have outsized impact or come across as harsher than you intended.”

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Feedback based on delivery method

3 of 3

Visual feedback. In a corporate work context, visual feedback can refer to various types of visual indicators – such as numbers turning green to represent an achieved goal or a designer's visual changes to a web design mockup.

Automated feedback. Grammatical issues caught by Grammarly. A financial dashboard that adjusts based on parameters met. An online exam that provides insight as to why an answer is wrong. Even the feeling of pain when we touch a hot stove. These represent just a few of the many automatic/automated types of feedback that we experience throughout any given day.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Additional feedback types
1 of 3

Encouragement is a type of motivational feedback that can help the receiver move into a stronger place of empowerment.

Example phrasing: “I spent a lot of time thinking about this feedback about your performance because I see you as a shining star in this organization. You didn’t land this particular deal, but with your skillset and passion you have so much potential and I see you landing far bigger and better deals in the future.”

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Additional feedback types

2 of 3

Formative feedback is typically given in a low-stakes environment where the feedback receiver has a chance to redo or re-submit their work. In this sense, formative feedback refers to the type of feedback given over time to assess how a learner or worker is developing. Formative feedback differs from summative feedback in that summative comes near the end and typically addresses how much the learner learned or the worker developed.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Additional feedback types
3 of 3

Summative feedback is how we know how we did on an exam or a project – something that has reached an end. In the classroom, for example, a summative assessment typically attempts to measure all course material. This type of feedback is critical to help learners and workers understand how they did on a final or otherwise completed project.

Criticism can be considered a type of feedback that points only to the areas to be improved. It addresses and “critiques” a past performance without providing guidance or a future-oriented lens.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Other feedback terms you may come across

1 of 1

Feedback-seeking behavior (FSB) refers to how individuals seek feedback either by reading the actions of others to infer what it means or by explicitly asking others for feedback. Since 1983, Dr. Susan Ashford and others have been researching feedback-seeking behavior. In organizations, feedback-seeking behavior generally leads to positive improvements in performance and the conversational feedback process.

Feedback orientation. A classic concept from academic HR literature, feedback orientation "...refers to an individual's overall receptivity to feedback, including comfort with feedback, tendency to seek feedback and process it mindfully, and the likelihood of acting on the feedback to guide behavior change and performance improvement."

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com

Got feedback?

I’d love to hear it! Please connect with me via the contact form on my website.

© Cameron Conaway | cameronconaway.com