



University of
South Australia

Providing Quality Feedback

A GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE FOR MANAGERS



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Introduction

It has long been recognised that feedback can be a powerful motivator - encouraging goal accomplishment, influencing behaviour, and helping to continually improve work performance.

Opening our minds to observations made by others can also assist us in self-reflection, altering our perspective of a situation, and thereby enhancing our capacity to change, grow and develop.

Thus, giving and receiving feedback is an integral part of developing productive workplace relations and providing continuous learning for both managers and staff.

Furthermore, being able to provide both positive and developmental feedback that will be accepted is an integral part of good day to day management practice, and of effective workplace learning; essential skills for any manager.

This guide outlines some important principles and provides tips on techniques for maximising positive outcomes in giving and receiving feedback, as well as making links to other relevant resources and information that you may find useful.

It provides a valuable addendum to another Manager Essential guide on *Development Conversations*.

Please use this guide as you require it and we welcome any feedback you may have on the usefulness of this resource.

What is Quality Feedback?

Extensive research has clearly indicated that significant opportunities for feedback and opportunities to use that feedback, enhances performance and achievement. (Educational Leadership – Feedback for Learning).

For managers, it's an important enabler for fostering learning and shaping behaviour that will drive better performance. For their direct reports, it's an opportunity for development and career growth.

Feedback is information about how we are doing in our efforts to reach a goal. We can either gain feedback by self-observation of the impact of our efforts, or we can gain feedback from others.

For example, in the first instance, if you hit a tennis ball with the goal of keeping it in the court, you can carefully observe where it lands and then modify your effort to move towards your goal.

In the second, a coach may tell you “Each time you swung and missed, you raised your head as you swung, so you didn't really have your eye on the ball. On the one you hit hard, you had your head down and saw the ball”.

Notice that the information provided by the coach in the example above was not advice or recommendations on how to improve, nor was the performance evaluated (there was no judging of the performance in how good or bad the performance was in their view.) The information provided was careful observation in light of the desired goal.

Very often, when we provide feedback in a work setting, we move into advice mode, or we place judgement on the performance without providing detailed observations to assist the person in learning. This makes the giving of feedback an often-difficult management task, where the outcome is not learning, but defensiveness and/or conflict, leading to an avoidance of an important opportunity to build individual and team performance.

Helpful feedback is goal-referenced, tangible, actionable, specific, personalised, timely, ongoing and consistent. Let's look at these key aspects of providing quality feedback and how we can hone our observation skills and communication skills to help individuals learn and apply the feedback to their work. As leaders, we also need to hone our awareness to develop a greater capacity to notice when we fall into advice-giving and judgement, and the impact of this on our ability to give quality feedback.

Key Feedback Principles

- **Ensure feedback is goal referenced.** Information becomes feedback if the individual is trying to achieve something and the information tells them if they are on track or need to change course. Goals are often implicit and we feel they are fairly obvious, but if a person is unclear about a specific goal or task, it is crucial to remind them of the goal and the criteria by which they should self-assess how they are doing, or by which we provide observations on progress to set the context for quality feedback.
- **Ensure feedback is tangible and actionable.** Quality feedback is concrete, specific and it provides actionable information. “Good job!” or “Rework this” is not feedback. The performer needs to know what specifically they should do more or less of next time, based on the information provided. The information should be neutral, goal-related facts. Observe the behaviour or action and comment on what you observed. Then question the staff member to help them think about how to apply the observations to get closer to their goal.
- **Don’t judge the person.** This is likely to cause a defensive or angry reaction and your feedback will not be heard. Keep in mind you may not have all the causal information, focus on the behaviour and not the person and try to understand what has contributed to the outcomes, positive and negative.
- **Make feedback timely and in the right location.** By giving feedback as soon as possible after an event or during project milestones, it will have greater impact. You will also find it easier to be specific as you will more readily recall the event and will be able to provide accurate observations. Make sure the setting is appropriate for giving feedback. Avoid a few rushed moments in the corridor. Take the time it deserves to give feedback without interruption and in a setting that is private. This way you and the staff member can discuss and learn from the feedback.
- **Make feedback regular.** Adjusting our performance depends on not only receiving regular feedback but also having opportunities to use it. If I receive regular and timely feedback, then I can reshape my performance to better achieve the goal. Providing quality feedback is not a once a year event. It needs to be frequent, ongoing, and cover both good performance and areas of performance to improve.
- **Build your awareness of your feedback approach.** When we are all busy, it is easy to overlook good work or extra effort, or to take it for granted. Look for opportunities to give positive feedback regularly. This promotes good performance and a positive workplace. Equally, some managers find it difficult to give feedback when performance is not on track. Make it a habit to give developmental feedback as soon as it’s needed. Don’t keep the staff member ‘in the dark’. We all operate with blind spots, those aspects of our performance or behaviour we cannot see, yet others experience. You cannot expect people to know that they need to change or improve their performance unless given constructive feedback potentially bringing blind spots into view.

Self-Reflection and Self Preparation

- What are your strengths in giving and receiving feedback?
- Are there areas you could improve?

These are useful questions to ask yourself in thinking about how, overall, you might be performing in the area of giving and receiving feedback, so that you are facilitating improved productivity and good workplace relations in your area of responsibility.

Consider the following questions.

- Reflect on the questions to which you answer 'No' and identify areas you may need to work on.

Areas for me to work on are:

- Do you help people to identify clear goals and reinforce how your observations link to these goals when giving feedback?
- Do you actively listen and stay present in the conversation?
- Do you ask questions to facilitate people to find their own creative solutions to their work problems?
- Do you acknowledge what other people are trying to say to you with paraphrasing or summarising? Do you seek to understand?
- Do you tell people when they are doing a good job?
- Do you give credit to people for their ideas?
- Do you praise achievement of outcomes and expected behaviours?
- Do you positively acknowledge creativity and improvement ideas?
- Do you compliment people on their strengths?
- Do you explain clearly and non-judgementally where a person's performance is not helping them achieve their goal?
- Do you do this in a timely manner?
- Do you encourage your staff to give you feedback, so you can continually learn and grow as a manager? Do you react to challenging feedback?
- Does every person in your business unit know how they are performing? At the end of every month?

Types of Feedback

Positive Feedback

In our busy working life, we often overlook the opportunity to give positive feedback. When the person has performed well, it is important to give timely, positive feedback. This is not just a “well done” but should highlight why or how the job was done well, how it linked to expected outcomes or behaviours. For example “You did a great job on that report. The executive summary was succinct and captured the key points in the report and the recommendations were very clear, showing that you had done some excellent background research. The report will assist us in moving the project forward as we had hoped. Well done!”

Positive feedback greatly reinforces good performance.

Developmental Feedback

Developmental or constructive feedback is aimed at helping an individual see where their performance is not in line with the expectations or goals that you established together for the task. You use this feedback session to ask questions to help the individual see where and why their performance did not meet the expectations or goals set, and to help them explore how they might do it better next time. Use it as a positive way of improving future performance.

Building Positive Relationships

Feedback and coaching will be most effective where there is a good working relationship between you and your staff. Hence, the importance of building relationships with your staff based on collaboration, trust and mutual respect.

Role modelling and everyday practice to embed the behaviours that build relationships based on these principles is core to being a manager, so remember to:

- Have regular 1-1 meetings with staff so you get to know your staff as individuals. Find out, ‘What makes them tick?’ ‘What do they find motivating?’ ‘How do they like to be recognised?’ How do they like to receive feedback?
- Be reliable – do what you say you will do.

- Be consistent in what you say and what you actually do. Actions speak louder than words.
- Allow your staff to 'speak up' without fear. Listen, acknowledge, and explore differing points of view, this will contribute to a culture of psychological safety in the workplace.
- Communicate clearly, often and in different ways your vision, the direction for the work area and the performance expectations.

Preparing Yourself for a Developmental Feedback Session

Preparing for a Performance Conversation

1. What are the points for discussion?
 - Try writing them down to gain clarity. In one or two sentences, get to the heart of the performance gap. Is it a concern, challenge, opportunity, or recurring problem that is becoming more troublesome?
 - Gather relevant background information
 - Summarise how, when, why and where did the issue start? Who are the key players?
2. Describe some of the behaviours you may see in this person.
 - Focus your feedback on behaviour rather than on the person
 - Focus feedback on observations rather than on assumptions
 - Focus feedback on what is said rather than on why it is said
3. How might the individual concerned be feeling? How might the rest of the team be feeling? How are you feeling?
 - Approach the session with empathy, try putting yourself in their shoes
 - Have you considered your perceptions and bias?
 - Have you made a subjective or an objective assessment?
4. What are the costs and benefits of this person's approach?
 - What is at stake? How does this affect people, programs, services, stakeholders, timing, and overall workplace outcomes
 - What is the future impact if the issue is not resolved?
 - What are the real impacts on individuals, stakeholders, and the whole team?

5. What have **you** done up to this point? What have you contributed so far?
 - Have you let things go on too long?
 - Have you been discussing this already? Are they aware?
 - Have you been following through and displaying consistency?
 - What have you done so far?
6. What is your ideal outcome?
 - What behaviours would you like to see? Why?
 - What goals could be set to improve behaviour or address the performance gap?
 - What specific results would you like to see? Is there a time frame?
7. What development could take place to improve behaviour?
8. Do you need help dealing with this?
 - Do you need to talk through alternative solutions, explore the consequences more, find more information, and review your approach? Who do I need help from? PTC, Manager, trusted colleague?

Based on Susan Scott – Fierce Conversations

Process for Giving Feedback

Positive Feedback

Your focus: To lead the process by giving detailed feedback on performance and how it has met the goal or expectation and asking a range of open ended questions to gain input from the staff member.

Your purpose: to encourage the staff member to talk about their good work and for you to reinforce it, in order to build upon the good performance going into the future.

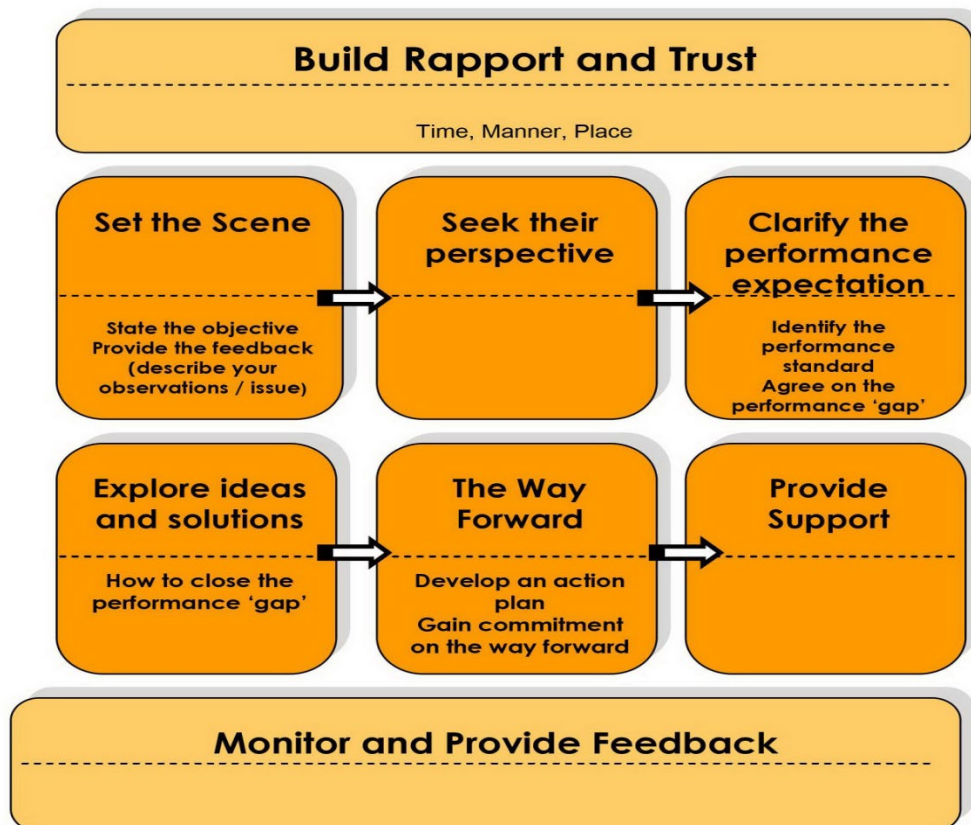
The process:

- State and describe in specific terms what the staff member did well. Describe the actual behaviour and actions and how it aligned to the goals and expectations.
- Indicate the positive impact of their behaviour/actions.
- Ask the staff member for their input e.g.
 - > what do you believe contributed to the excellent performance?
 - > what do you believe you did particularly well?
 - > what did you learn that could be applied to other work or projects in future?
 - > how can you share your experience/ learning with others in the team?

Explore and reinforce their suggestions. Look for ways to reinforce the behaviours and standards going forward.

Developmental Feedback

(Example conversations can be found in [Appendix 1](#))



Your focus: to describe, be clear, and be specific about what you have observed or the facts available (not to judge, blame or accuse). Be careful if you are receiving information second-hand. Make sure you enter the conversation with an open mind so you can ascertain both sides of the story as you do not have direct observable data. Ask questions to allow the person to identify what they can do to address the gap between performance and goals. Lead the process as a positive, coaching experience where you show interest in benefiting the individual to see how they can better achieve their goal, as well as the broader team/organisation.

Your purpose: to raise the person's awareness and understanding of the gap between their performance and their goal to help them take responsibility for finding a solution and improving. You want to enable them to commit to a change in behaviour or commit to taking action to move closer to their goal.

The process:

- Ensure you choose an appropriate time and location. Prepare yourself as per the information above. Clarify the goal/task that the person wants to achieve.
- State and describe the concern in specific and objective terms. Focus on the expectations and the actual behaviours / actions / observations, not the person.
- Ask for the staff member's view. Listen carefully as they share with you their thinking on why the gap exists between their goal and their performance. Ask questions to clarify your understanding.
- Ask solution-focused questions to help the person identify ways to improve the performance to meet the goal. Ask for, and listen, to their ideas.
- If required, describe what you would like to see happening instead. Coach them to help them establish new behaviours or actions to achieve the goals.
- Set a time to review the achievement of goals and acknowledge improvements.

Useful Techniques

Reframing

Reframing is about:

- Helping the staff member to view an issue or situation in a new way
- Raising the staff member's awareness of different perspectives
- Facilitating 'insight' and changing perceptions
- Enabling the staff member to take responsibility for finding and implementing solutions
- Trying to gain commitment to a change in behaviour and/or outlook
- Not 'buying into' defensive behaviour or resistance.

Reframing entails:

- Reflecting back / empathising (to show you have heard what the staff member has said)
- Asking open ended questions based on How? or What? (to move the staff member towards a solution).

Examples of Reframing

Staff member: "We've tried that already and it didn't work"

Manager: "I'm glad to hear you've had previous experience of this (reflects back). What did you learn from last time, and what would we need to do to make it work this time?"

Staff member: "It sounds great – but it will be very expensive..."

- Manager:** “Yes, it is a great idea (reflects back). How do you think we can make it more affordable?”
- Staff Member:** “It’s a fantastic idea, but I reckon Executive will not agree to it...”
- Manager:** “Yes, it is a fantastic idea (reflects back). How do you think we can get Executive to see it that way?”
- Staff Member:** “I don’t want to / can’t do that”
- Manager:** “I hear what you are saying (reflects back). What would have to happen for you to feel you can do this?”

Facilitative Questioning

Facilitative questioning is about:

- Helping the staff member reflect on what they have done and/or learned
- Exploring underlying beliefs, assumptions and values
- Inviting interaction
- Encouraging exploring together
- Keeping the conversation going
- Not closing down the conversation by confronting directly
- Not ‘buying into’ defensive behaviour or resistance.

Examples of Facilitative Questioning

- Tell me some more about
- Help me to understand by giving me an example of that
- How did / do you feel about this?
- What is another way you could interpret that?
- What assumptions do you think you are making here?
- How important is this to you?
- Can you please describe for me
- What would happen if you were to make this change?
- How do you think this might look for you?
- How about we brainstorm together the pros and cons of this?

Dealing with Resistance to Change

A useful model for working through resistance with staff is to apply the Prochaska and DiClemente's Stages of Change Model. The model plots categories along a continuum of motivational readiness to change a behaviour. There are 6 stages from Pre-Contemplation to Maintenance. Each stage is listed below with suggested strategies for working through each one.

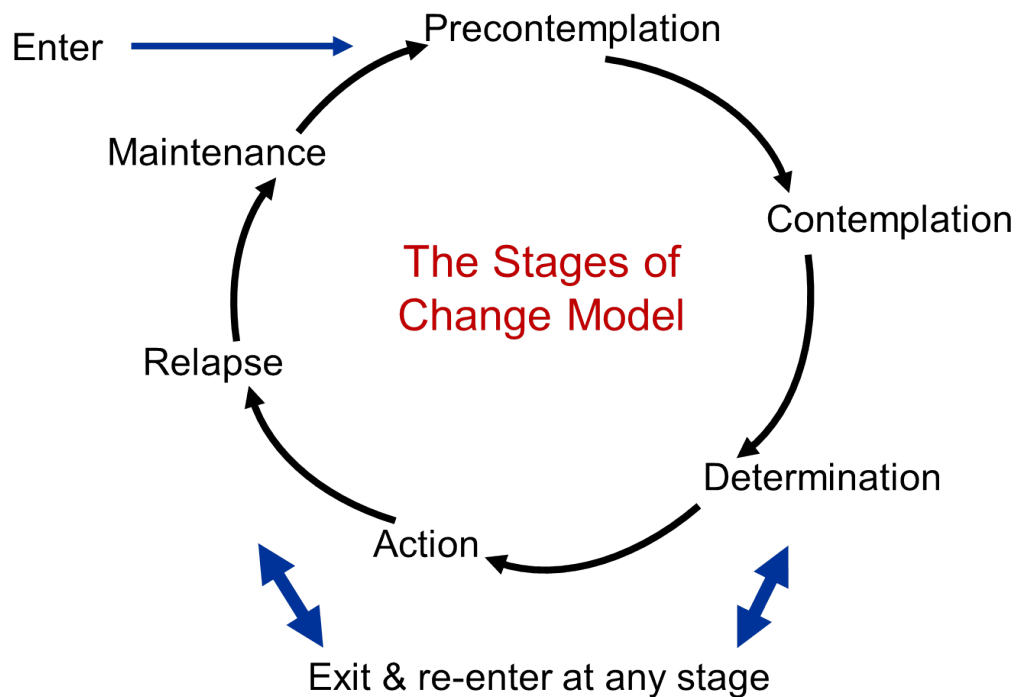


Image source: [Boston University](#)

STAGE	STRATEGIES
<p>Pre-Contemplation</p> <p>At the pre-contemplation stage of change - a person is unaware that there is a need to change.</p> <p>Often, they are oblivious that there is an issue with their performance and are not conscious of the need to improve. This could be for a number of reasons including: nobody has told them that they need to improve, or they have no interest in improving.</p>	<p>General Principle: Raise awareness.</p> <p>Ask:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “In what way would this change make things better for you...?” • “What would happen if you were to make this change?” • “How do you see the impact of your behaviour on the team that you have said you like being part of?”

STAGE	STRATEGIES
<p>Contemplation</p> <p>At the contemplation stage a person is thinking about changing, but they have not yet acted upon these thoughts. The primary characteristics of these people are ambivalence and uncertainty.</p> <p>At this stage, it can be easy to become impatient and try to force the person in to change. However, pushing the person too hard now is likely to increase their resistance to change.</p>	<p>General Principle: Help them to take responsibility.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not confront resistance rather reflect back. You may hear hesitant confirmation, “Yes but...”, “I don’t know”, “I’m not sure”, shoulder shrugging, silence. • Simply reflect the person’s feelings, perceptions or disagreements. “You feel unsure? Let’s talk about that” • Use exaggerated reflection; “So what you’re saying is that you’ll never...” • Use double-sided reflection: Reflect back both sides of their ambivalence – “So, on one hand you feel..., but at the same time you feel...”
<p>Preparation</p> <p>At the preparation stage a person is making the first small steps towards a change. At this stage they are still likely to be unsure and unskilled as to how to achieve the necessary change.</p>	<p>General Principle: Develop commitment and take small steps towards getting them to take responsibility.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get agreement and statement of commitment to action from the person. “So, what will you do?”, “What do you see as the next steps to take?” • Develop a range of options of achieving the goal. “What are the options?” • Explore the skills or information required to reach the goal. “What support do you need?”, “Who can support you to achieve your goals?” • Develop and agree on an action plan. “How can we keep track of your progress?”
<p>Action</p> <p>At the action stage a person is starting to take regular action to change their behaviour.</p> <p>They are growing in confidence and are able to see the concrete benefits of change.</p>	<p>General Principle: Regular actions, monitor progress to embed change.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure regular actions to embed the new skills in the person’s every day work practices. “Why don’t you do XXXX, then you can try out your new knowledge / skills on this project?” • When a person is at the action stage keep in touch with them and guide them towards setting more stretching goals. “How are things going?”, “What goal are you now focusing on?”

STAGE	STRATEGIES
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Maintenance

At the maintenance stage a person is getting results and is feeling good about the changes they've made.

They've taken ownership of the change and are moving forward.

For most people it takes about 3-6 months to reach this stage depending on the context of change.

General Principle: Try to ensure no relapse once you see some success

- Set new stretching goals to keep the person invigorated and engaged in the process of change.
- Celebrate successes "You've made huge progress on (be specific)". "What stretch goals do you now need?"

Relapse

Unfortunately, most attempts at change don't work straight away. Most people relapse a few times before being able to fully transform their behaviour.

On average most people take about 6 attempts before they actualise long-term changes.

General Principle: Normalise and move back into action.

- 'Reframe' relapse as a normal part of the change process. "I feel like I'm going backwards" > "It can seem like that sometimes. What 'wins' have you had so far?"
- Look for past successes and build on / reinforce those.

Receiving Feedback

As a manager, you are also likely to be receiving feedback from your manager and, if you have positive working relationships, from others, including your staff.

The key to responding in an open and constructive way is to acknowledge that you could learn from the feedback, be it positive or developmental feedback.

Remember to:

- Check for understanding by summarising and reflecting back if needed.
- If you are unclear, ask for specific details. It is important you understand what is being said. Be mindful of the tone taken when asking for examples to ensure this is done with an open mindset, not a defensive standpoint.
- Deal with any reaction you may be having or feelings you are experiencing in your own mind or openly with the other person if you can. “I’m not sure about what you’re saying...”
- Explore what you are hearing with an open mind – look for the lesson. Sometimes there is a small grain of truth in the feedback even if you may not initially agree with it.
- Consider the feedback as another perspective that could be worth considering in making some changes to future practice or behaviour.
- Consider the value of taking some time to reflect on the feedback before you respond, particularly if you are struggling with seeing its usefulness. “I’d like some time to think over what you’ve said...”
- Discuss the feedback with someone you trust and respect, maybe a colleague or a coach – they may be able to help you put the feedback in perspective and help you manage it constructively.

Further resources

Visit [UniSA's Manager's toolkit](#)

Appendix 1: Giving Developmental Feedback - *Ineffectively*

This is a debriefing session between a manager and a staff member following completion of a project that went fairly well, but the manager feels there are some areas where things could have been handled more effectively.

Manager: So, how do you think it went?

Staff Member: I thought it went quite well

Manager: It wasn't too bad

Staff Member: What do you mean?

Manager: Well, I don't want to upset you, but in fact there are some issues we need to talk about..."

Staff Member: Issues? What sort of issues? I did a good job. What do you mean upset me?

Manager: Well, OK, we do need to talk about this, but you may not like what you hear

Staff Member: Hang on, you didn't talk to me about any issues before

Manager: Well, I didn't want to distract you at the time

Staff Member: But you should have told me earlier if you had problems with me

Manager: No, I didn't say I had problems with you

Staff Member: What then?

What is happening here?

What are the reasons for the conversation escalating into a confrontational meeting where the feedback is not heard and taken on board?

Appendix 2: Giving the same Developmental Feedback - *Effectively*

Manager: So, how do you think it went?

Staff Member: I thought it went quite well

Manager: I agree, overall it did go well.

Staff Member: What do you mean?

Manager: I liked the way you handled the planning, and you engaged the project team very effectively, they were right on board and knew what they had to do when. That's often tough to achieve. I think if you had engaged the union earlier on, that would have been helpful and saved us the delay later on. I'm wondering how you think their engagement could have best been done?

Staff Member: I think I could have suggested talking earlier about the project in more detail at the staff/union consultative meetings. I probably didn't develop a clear enough communication strategy from the outset to identify the needs of not only the union, but a number of other stakeholders. I seemed to work that bit out as I went along.

Manager: That's a good point and I could have asked about the communication strategy earlier too. How do you think we can best learn from this project experience?

Staff Member: I was going to convene a debriefing with the project team, so we could all look back and think about what we might do differently next time.

Manager: That's a great idea. Brainstorming with the project team is a great way to share some learnings. Is there anything you need from me in that debriefing process?

Staff Member: Actually, if you have time, it would be good if you could come along to the meeting.

What is happening here? What are the reasons for this conversation turning into a collaborative discussion where the staff member engages and takes on the feedback?