# Effective Use of Appreciation, Coaching, and Evaluation

In this chapter of *Thanks for the Feedback*, Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen say there are three kinds of feedback in the workplace:

• *Appreciation* – When a boss tells you how grateful he or she is to have you on the team, that’s appreciation. It’s about acceptance and a human connection – the boss is saying, *I see you. I know how hard you’ve been working. You matter to me and the organization*. We never outgrow the need to hear someone say, “Wow, look at you! You matter,” say Stone and Heen. “Appreciation motivates us – it gives us a bounce in our step and the energy to redouble our efforts. When people complain that they don’t get enough feedback at work, they often mean that they wonder whether anyone notices or cares how hard they’re working. They don’t want advice. They want appreciation.”

• *Coaching* – This is feedback to help us learn, grow, or change in a specific way – to sharpen a skill, master a new idea, expand knowledge, or improve a particular capability. Coaching could come from a tennis instructor, the woman at the Apple Genius Bar, or a friend giving advice on a relationship.

• *Evaluation* – This lets us know where we stand – a “meets expectations” performance evaluation, a middle-school report card, your time in a 5K race, the blue ribbon that your cherry pie was awarded, the acceptance of a proposal of marriage. “Evaluations are always in some respect comparisons, implicitly or explicitly, against others or against a particular set of standards,” say Stone and Heen. “Evaluations align expectations, clarify consequences, and inform decision-making.”

Each of the three forms of feedback satisfies a different set of needs, they continue: “We need evaluation to know where we stand, to set expectations, to feel reassured or secure. We need coaching to accelerate learning, to focus our time and energy where it really matters, and to keep our relationships healthy and functioning. And we need appreciation if all the sweat and tears we put into our jobs and our relationships are going to feel worthwhile.” Research has shown a high correlation between effective evaluation, coaching, and appreciation and employee satisfaction, retention, and productivity. In the area of appreciation, one study found that “Yes” answers to these questions were particularly significant:

* In the last seven days, have I received recognition or praise for doing good work?
* Does my supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person?
* Is there someone at work who encourages my development?

When employees answer “No” to these questions, it doesn’t necessarily mean bosses don’t care or aren’t saying “Thanks.” But they may not be doing so in a way that’s heard. Appreciation needs to have three elements to have an impact:

* It has to be specific. “Good work” is not enough. Some boss-employee relationships can degenerate into MADD – Mutual Appreciation Deficit Disorder.
* Appreciation has to come in a form that the receiver values and hears. This is tricky, because for some people, all the “attaboy” they need is their monthly paycheck, while for others public recognition is important, while others crave a title or promotion, and others want to know they’re a trusted advisor or indispensable player.
* Appreciation has to be authentic. “Appreciation inflation” can set in – *Thanks for coming to work today* – and the currency loses all value.

When appreciation is specific, fine-tuned, and authentic, it’s an essential workplace element.

Coaching also requires skill and finesse – and there’s always an element of evaluation in advice-giving. “The coaching message ‘here’s how to improve’ also implicitly conveys the evaluative message that ‘so far you aren’t doing it as well as you might,’” say Stone and Heen. “All too often, feedback that is offered as coaching is heard as evaluation. (‘You’re telling me how to improve, but really, you’re saying you’re not sure I’m cut out for this.’) And efforts to elicit coaching from mentors yield feedback that is laced with evaluation, producing defensiveness and frustration rather than learning.” When coaching is handled badly, it’s stressful, confusing, and ineffective, wastes time, and leads to conflict and poor morale. “Coaching shortfalls mean that learning, productivity, morale, and relationships all suffer,” say Stone and Heen. “And that’s particularly tragic when people on both sides of the relationship are well-meaning and trying hard.”

The key is giving the right kind of feedback to the right person at the right time. Here’s how Donald, the lead partner in a law firm, went 0 for 3 giving feedback to three subordinates:

• April meets with Donald hoping for some appreciation for working tirelessly for eight years and effectively anticipating her boss’s needs. Instead, Donald gives her a number of concrete suggestions on how she could manage her time better, straighten up her workspace, and be more assertive about saying no. April leaves the meeting feeling devastated and considers quitting.

• Cody submitted a research memo to Donald a few days earlier and is hoping for some specific suggestions on how to approach such assignments more efficiently in the future. Instead, Donald gives him a general evaluative comment about being on a successful track for a first-year lawyer. Like April, Cody leaves the meeting deeply frustrated: “How is that going to help me figure out what I’m doing?” he wonders.

• Evelyn goes into her meeting with Donald really wanting to know where she stands in terms of making partner in the firm. Donald says, “Evelyn, I know I’m not good with a compliment, but I can tell you that it means a lot to me when I see you staying late and here on weekends. I notice that. I’m sorry if I haven’t always said so over the years.” Evelyn is frustrated not to get the specific evaluative information she sought, and now she’s more anxious than ever – were Donald’s comments code for “Thank you and goodbye”?

“In this farcical round-robin,” say Stone and Sheen, “April wants appreciation but gets coaching, Cody wants coaching but gets evaluation, and Evelyn wants evaluation but gets appreciation. All the while Donald is so pleased with his newfound feedback-giving abilities that he wonders whether he might be just the guy to lead an in-house training for other partners on how to give feedback well.”

Stone and Sheen close with two pieces of advice on effectively handling appreciation, coaching, and evaluation:

• *Be explicit about the purpose of the conversation*. There needs to be an upfront discussion of the goal, addressing questions like these:

* What’s my purpose in giving/receiving this feedback?
* Is it the right purpose from my point of view?
* Is it the right purpose from the other person’s point of view?

“Are you trying to improve, to assess, or to say thanks and be supportive?” ask Stone and Heen. “You won’t always be able to fit the messiness of real life into these clean categories, but it’s worth trying.” It’s also important to check in several times during the conversation. It’s possible that the person receiving feedback may take the bull by the horns: “You’re offering coaching, but it would help to get a quick evaluation: Am I doing all right overall? If so, then I can relax and am eager for your coaching.”

• *Separate evaluation from coaching and appreciation*. “The bugle blast of evaluation can drown out the quieter melodies of coaching and appreciation,” say Stone and Heen. “Even if I walk into my performance review determined to learn how to improve, evaluation can get in the way… We can’t focus on how to improve until we know where we stand.” Being upset with a less-than-stellar rating can prevent people from hearing the feedback that will get them to a higher rating next time. That’s why it’s wise to separate the formal evaluation process from coaching and appreciation, and make sure that coaching and appreciation take place *throughout the year*.

*Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well* by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen (Penguin, 2015)