PETRA WILLE

STRONG
PRODUCT PEOPLE

A Complete Guide to Developing Great Product Managers

STRONG Product People

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Publisher: Petra Wille, Ritterstr. 8, 22089 Hamburg, Germany

Author & Illustrations: Petra Wille

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CHAPTER 8

MONITORING PERFORMANCE AND GIVING FEEDBACK

- Creating a healthy performance culture
- How to deal with poor performance
- Giving and receiving feedback

Good employee performance is critical to the success of an organization and the products it builds, and feedback is one of the most important factors in employee performance. For good reason. As management professor Christine Porath points out in *Harvard Business Review:* “High-performing teams share nearly six times more positive feedback than average teams.”[49]

Even so, it’s hard to talk about performance in many companies—there always seems to be one of two possible extremes. In some companies, performance is all that matters, and employees who don’t constantly give 110 percent of themselves are viewed with suspicion or derision. This is superexhausting for everybody. In other companies, measuring, assessing, and quantifying the performance of employees is done rarely, if ever. “We are a family and we are here enjoying our time, hanging out together, and sometimes doing some work.” The concept of performance doesn’t fit into the “We are a family” ideology of these companies.

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[49] Christine Porath (October 16, 2016). Give Your Team More-Effective Positive Feedback. Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2016/10/give-your-team-more-effective-positive-feedback

In reality, both of these extremes lead to a work environment that is unsatisfactory, and ultimately demotivating for employees. In the first case, employees are worked to the point of exhaustion and burnout, and performance suffers. These burned-out employees underperform or simply leave. In the second case, motivation suffers because mastery, autonomy, and purpose are not being served.[50] Employees become disoriented, unfocused in their efforts, and just muddle their way through the workday.

Sure, the first kind of company may be successful for some time, but this success is fleeting. Products built by these companies usually lack soul because no one has time to work with users and find innovative solutions on their behalf. Stress and employee turnover are high, leading to bad products and stagnating or declining revenues as a second-order effect. On the other hand, the second kind of company never becomes successful in the first place. In an organization where performance doesn’t count, nothing significant gets delivered and good, ambitious employees quickly look for—and find—more challenging (and more satisfying) organizations to work for.

The solution? Create a healthy performance culture.

Creating a Healthy Performance Culture

Creating a healthy performance culture means finding a beneficial balance when it comes to employee performance. You want to set up your system in the right way, as illustrated in Figure 8-1—a balanced approach that prevents overwork and burnout while demanding and acknowledging good performance. Ultimately, this is more about fixing the *system* than about fixing the *employee*.

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[50] Daniel Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Riverhead Books (2009)

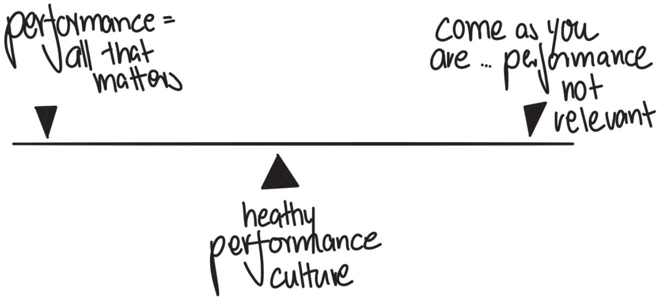
performance = all that matters
come as you are ... performance not relevant
healthy performance culture

Figure 8-1: A balanced, healthy performance culture

I have found that it usually helps to explain to everyone exactly what a company is all about. A company is a group of people who have committed themselves to, and are aligned with, a shared goal. And the shared goal is solving customer problems so well that they will pay you enough money in return so your employees can earn a living and you can invest in the future of the company.

What a company is *not* is a family. Yes, we may be friendly with one another, may meet after work for drinks or dinner, and the CEO may sometimes act like a proud parent of her employees. But families don't typically have a common goal—especially not an economic one. A company cannot function without common goals, and these goals in many cases ultimately lead to economic outcomes. Companies are all about creating value together, and every employee who receives a salary must make a real contribution to this effort.

So, if your performance culture is out of balance, my advice is to fix the system first, then work with employees to improve *their* performance. Companies that have a healthy performance culture are set up in a way that:

- Value creation is a shared goal and the expected growth rate for things like revenue is appropriate/not crazy (e.g., not driven by greedy shareholders). Everyone knows what the company is up for and why.

- The resulting performance obligations must be distributed as evenly as possible over a reasonable number of shoulders.
- Roles must be clearly defined, communicated, and understood.
- Expectations for the individual contributions of each employee must be clearly communicated.
- Managers (and the company) must support employees in meeting expectations.
- Employees who do not live up to expectations must be supported to improve. The motto is: “It’s hard to get better if you don’t know what better looks like.” The manager himself needs to have a clear picture of what better means and must support employees on this journey as a tour guide.

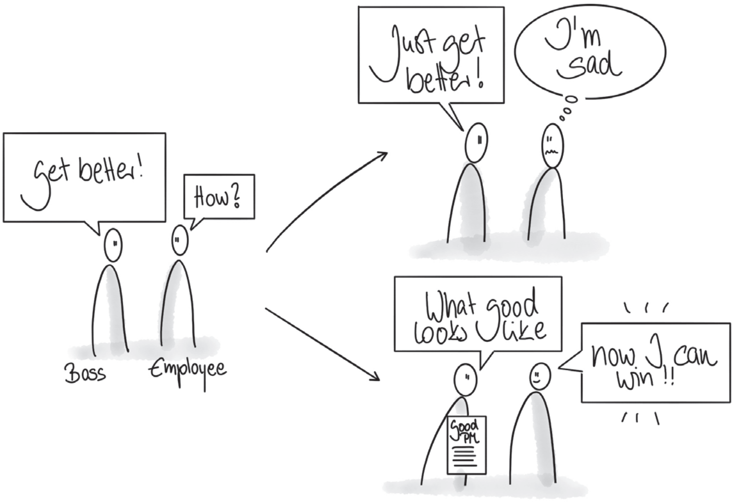

Figure 8-2: It’s hard to get better if you don’t know what better looks like[51]

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[51] Based on a comic by Joshua Howard: https://www.slideshare.net/MrJoshuaHoward/career-development-in-a-boxgdc-2011

This brings us back to the idea of *defining your good*.[52] Heads of product need to have a clear definition of what a competent PM looks like, and they must share this definition with their product teams—working with their product teams and individual PMs to improve.[53]

One more important aspect essential to a healthy performance culture is *feedback*—both giving and receiving it. Only when feedback is mutual and possible in all directions (upward to management, sideways to colleagues and stakeholders, and inward to the team) can everyone in a company learn, grow, and improve together. We'll talk more about feedback later in this chapter.

How to Deal with Poor Performance

If your people aren't performing up to standard, you've got to do something about it—*now*. In addition, some employees will for whatever reason fail to align with your company culture, values, and goals. This also must be dealt with. Allowing poor performance or misalignment to continue unchallenged is a sure way to demotivate your high performers (encouraging them to move on to other organizations) while delivering lackluster products that don't solve customer problems.

You have put your heart and soul into every employee on your team, helping them along their career paths and sharing their struggles and sorrows, their ups and their downs. Sometimes, our employees become our friends, which makes it even more difficult to engage in difficult conversations over performance. Unfortunately, many leaders try to ignore the issue of poor performance and hope it will go away.

But there is something else you can do that is in between ignoring and ultimately firing somebody: You can actually really try to help them. This might be by helping them find a new position outside your team that plays to their strengths, or by helping them understand what they need to improve. I personally believe that you should try to help them for a variety of good reasons, not the least of which is economic. It has, in fact, been estimated that replacing an employee—including sourcing a replacement, interviewing prospective candidates, onboarding the new hire, and the loss in productivity as you bring the new hire up to speed—can cost an organization more than $65,000.[54]

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[52] As addressed in Chapter 4: Define Your Good

[53] See Chapter 7: The Power of Coaching for ideas on how to best accomplish this.

Needless to say, it makes more sense to keep your people motivated and happy in their jobs than to continuously replace them. Invest a significant amount of your time providing your people with feedback and coaching them, and invest some money for training that will improve their skills and further develop their careers.

Remember: A high work standard starts with the example *you* set for others to follow. Any difference in the expectations you set for your team compared with the expectations you set for yourself will be duly noted and seen as hypocritical.

And if none of this helps to improve employee performance, you will have a reason and examples to share and discuss with HR or your boss. If you are providing your people with regular feedback (which you should be doing), then discussing your performance concerns with them won't be a surprise. The key is continuous feedback, which just happens to be the topic we'll explore next.

Feedback: The Breakfast of Champions

Every one of us needs continuous feedback—delivered direct and unvarnished—to perform at our very best. It's no wonder that feedback has been called by some "the breakfast of champions." But how do you create a good feedback culture, what kinds of feedback are there, and how can you give and accept feedback that may be perceived as negative?

Again, continuous feedback is key—it really does make a difference in the performance of your people. It's not possible to have a good feedback culture, however, if people don't feel safe. You need to create an environment of trust so that they are comfortable enough to show their vulnerability, admit and accept their errors, and say, "I'm sorry." There needs to be psychological safety.[55]

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[54] Jason Evanish (May 5, 2015). The Hidden Costs of Replacing an Employee that Total Over $65,500. Retrieved from https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/hidden-costs-replacing-employee-total-over-65500-jason-evanish/

And if you are having a hard time giving feedback that could be considered negative, focus on what your people need—not just in their current role, but also in their future careers. The bigger picture helps, even if you find it superintimidating to give them the feedback. If you don't, then they won't have the information they need to change for the better. To get in the right frame of mind for delivering performance-related feedback, be sure to read Kim Scott's book, *Radical Candor.* As she points out, you have to care personally and challenge directly.

Be sure to give feedback, both praise and criticism, as close to the triggering event as possible. Be liberal with praise—catch your people doing things right and let them know you appreciate it. But avoid delivering what is known as a "compliment sandwich," where you first praise an employee, then offer some criticism (the actual reason for your feedback), and then close the conversation by again praising the employee. This approach tends to be seen as fake by those who receive it.

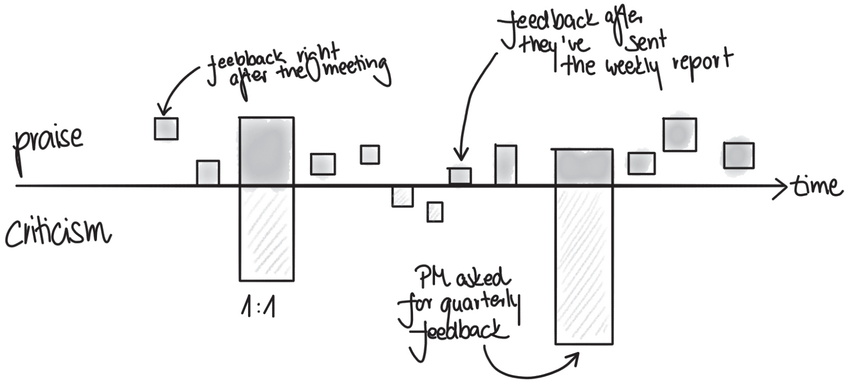

Figure 8-3: Delivering praise and criticism—constantly

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[55] To learn more about psychological safety, go to this chapter's Further Reading.

When you deliver feedback, Julie Zhuo—former VP, Product Design at Facebook—suggests that this feedback will generally fall into one of two categories, either task-related feedback or behavioral feedback.[56]

Here are a couple examples of task-related feedback:

- "I liked the management summary you added to the last email you sent. That helped me quickly understand the main points and saved me a lot of time!"
- "The report you sent to us yesterday had some mistakes in it. The problem is that, if people are making their decisions based on the report, those decisions will most likely be wrong. In the long run, this will harm the company. I think this happened because you started to compile the report just one hour before you had to send it. Is that correct? What could you do to avoid that in the future?"

And here's an example of behavioral feedback:

- "When you gave your presentation in yesterday morning's team meeting, you were uncertain about two of the slides and jumped back and forth. I noticed how the meeting attendees began to question everything you said from that point on. I'm worried that this may negatively affect your reputation here because many senior execs attended the meeting. I would love to support you. What do you think would help you best avoid this the next time you give a presentation?"

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[56] Julie Zhuo, *The Making of a Manager: What to Do When Everyone Looks to You*, Portfolio (2019)

5 Steps to a New Feedback Culture

If your feedback culture needs some work (and this is the case in many companies), there are some definite things you can do right now to improve it. Here are five steps to creating a solid feedback culture in your organization:

Step 1: Ask for feedback and learn how to receive it. As an HoP, your PMs look to your example to decide how they will behave. So, if you want your PMs to consistently ask for and receive feedback—and to do the same with their people—then *you* need to model the right way to ask for feedback and learn how to receive it.

First, find your question—the question that will trigger the kind of candid feedback you need to do a better job. It has to be authentic and something you can ask in every 1:1. I like to ask, "What could I do or stop doing that would make it easier to work with me?"

Then, you need to learn how to take the feedback, which may not always be positive. Embrace discomfort—remain calm and fight the natural instinct to become paranoid or defensive. Count to six before you respond. Listen to understand, not to just react, and reward your PM for her candor.

Here are some specific tips on how to receive feedback:

- **Listen.** Keep an open mind. Everyone makes mistakes, and we can all use improvement in some areas. Resist the temptation to argue or make excuses.
- **Consider the source.** Does the speaker have the authority, knowledge, and expertise to give you this feedback? Does he or she have an ulterior motive? (Be careful not to invent one, though, just to make yourself feel better.)
- **Ask for specific examples.** Don't accept generalities such as "poor," "disappointing," or "lousy." Politely ask the speaker to tell you exactly what is wrong. Questions like, "Exactly what was wrong with the presentation?" or a

request such as, "Help me to understand what you mean by 'poor'," should help you get some useful feedback.

- **Evaluate the criticism.** If the feedback is valid, accept it gracefully and with a positive attitude, and thank the person giving the feedback. Tell the speaker you appreciate his or her comments and be enthusiastic about your willingness and ability to use the suggestions to improve your performance.
- **Keep the useful information but let go of the negative feelings.** Don't dwell on the embarrassment of being criticized. Hold your head up high and move on.

Remember: Always assume that the feedback you get from your people is given to help, not hurt you. As Indra Nooyi, former chairman and CEO of PepsiCo, suggests, "Whatever anybody says or does, assume positive intent. You will be amazed at how your whole approach to a person or problem becomes very different."[57]

Step 2: Create a habit: collect and prepare. Creating a feedback culture requires that you and your people make it a habit—something you do continuously. As you create this habit, you'll want to focus your efforts in two areas: collecting your feedback and preparing to deliver it.

When collecting feedback, find the triggers that will make it a habit. For example, "Whenever I enter a room for a meeting where one or more of my PMs is attending, I'll get out a pen and paper to collect some feedback for them." In addition, track your collection efforts to reinforce the habit—making notes in a small journal is enough. You'll also need to plan how you will get back on track if your feedback collection habit starts to slacken: "When this happens I will…"

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[57] https://archive.fortune.com/galleries/2008/fortune/0804/gallery.bestadvice.fortune/7.html

Preparing positive feedback is easy: simply note the task or behavior you want to praise and how it made a positive contribution to the team, organization, or customers. Preparing negative feedback, however, takes a bit more work. Here are some specific things you should do to prepare for delivering negative feedback:

- Check to see if the expectations where clear—if not, change this first!
- Make a list of what's not working.
- Focus on the patterns—the recurring issues are the ones you'll want to focus on with your PMs. Fixing these recurring issues will yield the greatest improvement overall in the shortest amount of time.
- Map it to something they know: role description, PMwheel, and so on. The feedback will be taken less personally that way.
- Plan to discuss in your next 1:1
    - Think about how the feedback could be misinterpreted. As Kim Scott puts it, "Measure at the other person's ear."[58] Keep cultural and personal differences in mind.
    - I like to use the Situation-Behavior-Impact (SBI) feedback tool, developed by the Center for Creative Leadership to help managers deliver clear, specific feedback.[59] It requires you to describe the exact *situation* you want to talk about, the *behavior* the other person showed in this situation, and what negative/positive *impact* this might have on them, the team, or the company.

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[58] Kim Scott, *Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity,* St. Martin's Publishing Group (2017)

[59] https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/situation-behavior-impact-feedback.htm

    - Don't make it personal—instead of "you" ("You screwed this up!") use "this" ("This requires a different approach.")

Step 3: Ask if they want it. Did your PM ask for feedback? Yes? Great, then give it! No? Then ask if they want feedback. This may require asking some specific questions that elicit feedback about work performance:

- "Would you like more or less feedback on your work? Why/why not?"
- "Would you like more or less direction from me? Why/why not?"
- "On what aspect of your job would you like more help or coaching?"
- "What's a recent situation you wish you handled differently? What would you change?"

Step 4: Give feedback (praise *and* criticism). Start your new feedback habit by giving praise. Not only is it easier to give, but positive feedback encourages people to change their negative behaviors while keeping the positive ones. Remember: You get what you reward! Once you've given some praise, then work your way into giving critiques as well. As shown in Figure 8-4, it's important to say the right things (content) clearly with the right attitude in an appropriate setting and in a timely manner.

But please don't be the party pooper. For example, if the team is celebrating a big product launch, that is not the time to single out people to deliver negative feedback about how they could have done better. Please save that for your 1:1 improvement discussions.

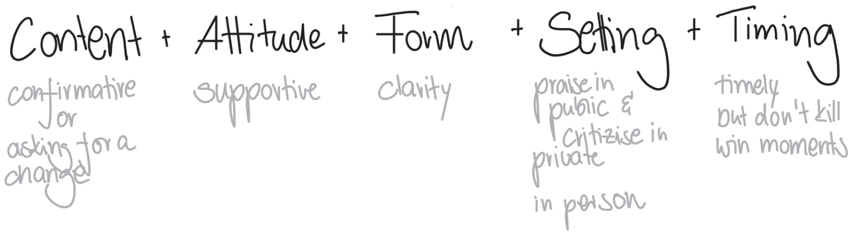
Content + Attitude + Form + Setting + Timing
confirmative or asking for a change
supportive
clarity
praise in public & critizise in private
in person
timely but don't kill win moments

Figure 8-4: Content, attitude, form, setting, and timing

Here's a step-by-step approach to giving feedback to your PMs:

1. **In the meeting, get context first.** Someone's poor performance could be due to problems at home or work, being overwhelmed, not enjoying the work they are doing, changes in their goals and interests, burnout, or any number of other reasons. You want to find out the source of the poor performance before you jump into your feedback.
2. **Then say it right away.** You are prepared, so there's absolutely no reason to beat about the bush. Don't make room for assumptions—explain exactly where you are coming from. Ask and say the obvious, for example, "I think X is the reason why, is that correct?" Reference back to either the PM's role description, the definition of your good, or the PMwheel.
3. **Transition to coaching.** Talking about a problem is not enough. Make sure it's clear what needs to be different going forward, and that your PM understands why his work was below standard. Your specific examples and explaining how the issues affected others can paint a more vivid picture that helps him understand your coaching more clearly. Tell people what success regarding the feedback topic looks like. (For junior employees, it might be necessary to say something like, "This is the issue in my view—here's a suggestion on how to fix it. What do you think about that?")

4. **Offer help.** You need to support your employee who may feel overwhelmed for a variety of different reasons.
5. **Agree on next steps.** Ask your PM to email you the agreement. (In their words, did your feedback resonate with them?)
6. **Follow up.** Did the feedback you provided lead to the change you would like to see? (If not, ask yourself: Am I giving feedback often enough? Am I highlighting positive things often enough?)

And remember the words of Kim Scott, author of *Radical Candor:* "Don't focus on what you fear, focus on what they need."

Step 5: Make sure you're not the only source of feedback. Your PMs will take your feedback more seriously if they also hear it from others, so don't be the only source of it. Encourage peer feedback and make sure everyone knows how to give—and receive—it.

Ultimately, it's up to you as head of product to create a culture in your organization where feedback is valued and happening on a continuous basis. Model the behavior yourself and provide the resources and support your people need to do it themselves without your constant prodding or intervention. Giving feedback should be as easy and invigorating as taking a breath of fresh air.

Further Reading

- Situation-Behavior-Impact (SBI) feedback tool: https://www.strongproductpeople.com/further-readings#chapter-8_1
- Joshua Howard has written a lot about engineering role expectations—his "There Is No Them" blog contains many tips on how to make sure employees know what the expectations are: https://www.strongproductpeople.com/further-readings#chapter-8_2

- If you have to discipline or let an employee go, this article presents many alternative approaches: https://www.strongproductpeople.com/further-readings#chapter-8_3
- Jeff Gothelf wrote this excellent article on psychological safety: Without Psychological Safety There Is No Learning and There Is No Agility: https://www.strongproductpeople.com/further-readings#chapter-8_4
- This article on psychological safety by Laura Delizonna has good advice on how to create it: High-Performing Teams Need Psychological Safety. Here's How to Create It: https://www.strongproductpeople.com/further-readings#chapter-8_5
- Books:
    - *Radical Candor* by Kim Scott (or watch her video: https://youtu.be/f-Tcr0T9Tyw)
    - *The Making of a Manager* by Julie Zhuo
    - *The Team That Managed Itself* by Christina Wodtke

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Petra Wille is an independent product leadership coach who's been helping product teams boost their skillset and up their game since 2013. Alongside her freelance work, Petra co-organizes and curates Mind the Product Engage Hamburg, Germany.