

## NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

# PULL, DON'T PUSH: DESIGNING EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK SYSTEMS

**Nano Tools for Leaders®** are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes—with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

**Contributor:** Katherine Klein, Edward H. Bowman Professor of Management, Vice Dean, Wharton Social Impact Initiative, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania.



### THE GOAL:

Create feedback systems that improve, rather than diminish, performance.

### NANO TOOL:

It's a commonly held belief, one that gets played out daily in organizations around the world: Employees who receive performance feedback are much more likely to improve their performance than those who don't get feedback. But research tells us that it's simply not true. Typically, performance after feedback improves only modestly—and over one third of the time, it actually gets worse. People who receive positive feedback often see no need for change, and those who receive negative feedback often react with skepticism, discouragement, and anger, dismissing the evaluation as inaccurate, unhelpful, or unfair.

But if feedback doesn't always and easily improve performance, what should managers do? Research suggests that "pulling" is a better idea than "pushing." Pulling entails teaching, coaching, and developing employees rather than pushing—or correcting—they. Pulling says, "Here's how to get ahead in this company; we'll provide you with guidelines and coaching to help you master these skills and behaviors." Pushing says "You're not doing very well." In employees' eyes, it's likely to be the difference between a motivating challenge and a demoralizing reprimand.

To get favorable results from performance evaluations, evaluators must set positive expectations, showing that they believe improvements can be made, and that the feedback itself—even negative feedback—is an opportunity to learn rather than a punitive final word. They should also be willing to assist with concrete steps toward the suggested improvements, including coaching and goal-setting. Done correctly, performance feedback can lead to improvements—but don't forget to "pull" for those improvements by making the desired skills and behaviors clear and helping people acquire them.

### HOW COMPANIES USE IT:

- Ernst & Young's "pull" culture is evident from the moment a new hire joins the firm. Formal mentors provide an immediate avenue for guidance, coaching, and career advice. Peer advisers provide support and quicker network building opportunities. Formal counselors serve as an individual's career advocate, manager, mentor, and coach. Feedback, coaching, and people development are one of the core pillars of performance that every EY employee is measured by. In addition to formal role assignments, the firm's culture incentivizes and creates the environment

for regular constructive feedback from all levels and across all reaches of the organization. This instills a “pull” not “push” model of performance management that is the foundation of EY’s differentiating people culture.

- Deloitte’s performance appraisal system incorporates coaching, defining and recording job performance, training, self-assessment, multi-point feedback, behaviorally based appraisal, two-way communication, and goal setting. Each practitioner has a counselor who is responsible for evaluation and coaching. Two expectations are outlined: performance at a client site, and organization citizenship behaviors (OCB), which involve internal initiatives to increase firm value. Counselors are trained to record performance “in the moment” to aid in providing meaningful examples. Additionally, they are trained to acknowledge that recent feedback is more relevant than historic performance.
- The U.S. Army’s Officer Corps experiences “pulling” at every level, as well as a feedback system that is direct, reinforcing, and indicative of clear ways for improvement. An “officer professional development” system and formal mentoring program help to develop necessary leadership skills, whether technical or tactical. In addition, annual feedback and ratings are supplemented with After Action Reviews (AARs) that critique every mission, indicate needed improvements, and fix any problems before the next mission to mitigate risk.

## **ACTION STEPS:**

To “pull” for great performance:

1. **Clarify and specify** the behaviors, skills, and accomplishments that employees at each level need to exhibit to do their jobs well and to progress to the next level: What are these factors and why are they important?
2. **Use multiple approaches to teach** employees what these factors are and how they link to the company’s strategy, values, and performance. Publicize them in training sessions, emails, or websites. Ask higher-level employees to meet with lower-level colleagues for a Q&A session on getting ahead. Offer mentoring, coaching, formal classes, and/or opportunities to shadow employees working in different units, roles, or higher-level positions.
3. **Create an organizational climate** that’s safe for asking questions, getting feedback, and learning new things. Let employees know that whenever they have questions they can and should reach out to their supervisors and others in higher-level positions.
4. **Coach supervisors** in how to give performance feedback to their direct reports that includes:
  - delivering an honest message in a way that employees are likely to find both fair and constructive
  - inviting employees to ask questions, provide input, and reflect on their own performance
  - keeping the focus on the task and behavior, not the self and personal traits
  - providing coaching to support employees in acquiring new and more effective skills, behaviors, and accomplishments
  - setting goals for performance improvement
  - 6. emphasizing the learning opportunity and the fact that change is possible.
5. **Be prepared** when receiving feedback to ask the kinds of questions that will check defensiveness and enhance learning, such as: What do you think I’m already doing well? What are areas for improvement? Are there specific things I have done that I should definitely keep doing? What specific things have I done that have concerned you

and why? Then paraphrase what you have heard (“So key areas for me to work on are...”), ask what resources exist for you to make improvements in these areas, and set a date to meet again to discuss your progress.

## **SHARE YOUR BEST PRACTICES:**

Do you have an effective “pull” strategy? If so, please share it on our blog at Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management. <http://whartonleadership.wordpress.com/>

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

- “Conduct Performance Appraisals to Improve Individual and Firm Performance,” Maria Rotundo, in *Handbook of Principles of Organizational Behavior*, Edwin Locke, ed. (Wiley, 2009). Outlines basic principles that can be followed to improve the effectiveness of performance appraisals, especially as it relates to improving future performance. Offers principles to follow when communicating the appraisal to the employee, as well as when gathering information about the employees’ performance.
- “Multisource Feedback: Lessons Learned and Implications for Practice,” Leanne E. Atwater, Joan F. Brett, and Atira Cherise Charles, *Human Resource Management*, Summer 2007, Vol. 46, No. 2, 285–307. Highlights issues for managers to consider both before starting a multisource feedback process and after the feedback is given. Potential outcomes of the process are also reviewed.
- “Does Performance Improve Following Multi-source Feedback? A Theoretical Model, Meta-Analysis, and Review of Empirical Findings,” James W. Smither, Manuel London, and Richard R. Reilly, *Personnel Psychology*, 2005, Vol. 58, 33-66. Indicates the circumstances and feedback techniques that most likely result in improved employee performance.

## **ABOUT NANO TOOLS:**

Nano Tools for Leaders® was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, Director of Innovative Learning Solutions at Wharton Executive Education. It is jointly sponsored by Wharton Executive Education and Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management, Wharton Professor of Management Michael Useem, Director. Nano Tools Academic Director, Professor Adam Grant.