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Water Cooler Talk: ‘Harry Potter’ Reveals Magic of Feedback

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This article is part of a [monthly column](#) that connects popular culture to hot-button labor and employment law issues. In this installment, we focus on various methods of feedback used by “Harry Potter” characters and how effective feedback can transform workplaces in magical ways.

The magical universe of “Harry Potter” needs little introduction. J.K. Rowling’s series follows Harry Potter and his young wizard friends through their years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, navigating both the academic and existential.

The franchise is full of life lessons, including relevant insights into the art — and pitfalls — of delivering feedback, which is a crucial skill in every industry.

Mishandled feedback can lead to serious workplace issues, from employee dissatisfaction to legal claims.

For example, vague or inconsistent feedback in performance reviews has been cited as evidence, in some instances, in disputes over wrongful termination or discrimination. Performance reviews themselves can also evidence a pattern of discrimination.

On the other hand, failing to accurately document feedback, recording overly or inaccurately positive feedback, or providing inconsistent feedback can create headaches for employers when it comes time to address or hold employees accountable for poor performance.

Thus, clarity and consistency in feedback are not just management best practices — they are vital for the health and longevity of a team and the organization itself.

Recent tabloid headlines have also shown how mishandled feedback can backfire, even in the public eye. Longtime Kiss frontman Gene Simmons, who was known for his bold stage persona in the band, recently stirred controversy during his appearance on “Dancing with the Stars.”

His harsh and, at times, inappropriate critiques drew backlash for their tone and content,^[1] and stirred debate about the importance of delivering constructive and respectful feedback, even in high-pressure environments.

Simmons' actions show how poorly delivered feedback — whether in the workplace or on a televised stage — can harm reputations, create discomfort and ultimately undermine the intended message.

To discuss employer best practices on giving and receiving feedback, taking lessons from “Harry Potter,” we chatted with Tara Weintritt, a partner of [Wicker Park Group](#), which aims to help build client loyalty for law firms and other professional service firms through a variety of client feedback services.

The Snape Method

Professor Severus Snape, with his sharp and cutting remarks, exemplifies exactly how not to give feedback. While he often points out real issues, Snape's approach to manage through fear keeps Harry and his classmates constantly on the defensive, which undermines the purpose of feedback.

Once someone feels attacked, they stop listening to constructive criticism. This dynamic makes meaningful growth nearly impossible, and highlights the importance of a more balanced and thoughtful approach to feedback.

To give constructive feedback, it is important to keep personality out of it. Effective feedback should focus on behaviors, not the person, and should offer clear steps for improvement.

Managers should avoid vague criticisms, like saying someone is “not a good fit.” Instead, they should provide concrete examples tied to measurable outcomes.

Specificity not only helps employees understand expectations, but also protects organizations from potential claims of unfair treatment by supporting evaluations with objective evidence.

Data-driven feedback offers another valuable tool for clarity and alignment. Organizations that leverage trend analysis, such as tracking changes in priorities or skills over time, can tailor feedback to better meet individual and organizational goals.

This approach allows leaders to clarify expectations and align efforts with broader objectives. Feedback should always aim to build trust, encourage a growth mindset and foster a culture of improvement.

Ultimately, feedback must balance critique with positivity. Starting with examples of what is working well sets a collaborative tone and builds receptiveness. Comparisons to others should be limited, but where necessary, they should highlight positive examples rather than diminish the recipient.

Encouraging a culture of feedback — where specific, actionable and constructive insights are regularly shared — helps employees grow and strengthens organizational relationships.

Whether in the context of a law firm, workplace or even a Hogwarts classroom, well-done feedback is a gift that benefits all parties involved.

The Dumbledore Method

Professor Albus Dumbledore, a truly beloved character of the “Harry Potter” franchise, is often regarded as the epitome of wisdom and guidance. How could we possibly find anything to critique about his method of providing feedback? Yet, on closer examination, Dumbledore’s feedback to Harry, while inspirational and morale boosting, often lacks the specificity needed for measurable improvement.

Dumbledore’s words motivate and reassure, but they fail to provide clear steps or tangible goals for Harry to work toward.

While aspirational feedback has its place, especially in fostering confidence and maintaining morale, it should be paired with actionable advice to ensure progress.

When is it appropriate to focus on aspirational feedback versus addressing smaller, day-to-day behaviors that could be improved? A culture of feedback involves striking this balance.

There is a time and place for formal feedback, such as annual reviews and strategic planning sessions, where broader goals and areas for improvement can be addressed. These moments allow for reflection on what is working, what has changed and what needs to improve.

However, ongoing informal feedback is equally critical. Regular check-ins — whether sharing advice from a real-world experience or reviewing a project — help ensure alignment and provide opportunities to course-correct on day-to-day performance in real time.

This cadence of feedback builds trust and opens the door for continuous improvement. Asking questions, like “Is this going the way you wanted?” or “Did we meet the client’s expectations?” allows for constructive dialogue and helps both parties feel heard. Ultimately, the key is to create an environment where feedback flows freely.

The Hermione Method

Hermione Granger’s feedback style is a classic example of good intentions being undermined by poor delivery.

In one memorable scene, she corrects Ron Weasley’s pronunciation of a spell, “wingardium leviosa.” Here, Hermione offers accurate and specific feedback, but delivers it in a tone that alienates rather than encourages, even though Ron is one of her best friends! Her critique — while technically correct — comes across as bossy and condescending, leaving Ron annoyed, defensive and unmotivated to improve.

Hermione also shows us that feedback does not have to come from the top. Peers can be great sources of feedback to each other, and managers can learn from those who report to them. Even interns may have valuable feedback to share with company leadership. Their unique perspective and experiences can help identify areas for improvement or highlight successes that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Conclusion

Effective feedback is not just a management tool; it is a cornerstone of workplace culture that embraces collaboration, diversity and constant improvement. Leaders who prioritize clear, actionable and empathetic

feedback can improve overall team satisfaction and success.

As Dumbledore wisely said, "Words are, in my not so humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic, capable of both inflicting injury and remedying it."

Whether managing teams, mentoring colleagues or navigating client relationships, encouraging and constructive feedback has the potential to transform the workplace into a thriving and collaborative environment, when it is given with care and received with openness.

Just don't forget: It's leviOsa, not leviosA.

[1] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/monicamercuri/2024/10/09/gene-simmons-slammed-by-dancing-with-the-stars-fans-for-creepy-comments-and-harsh-scores/>.

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