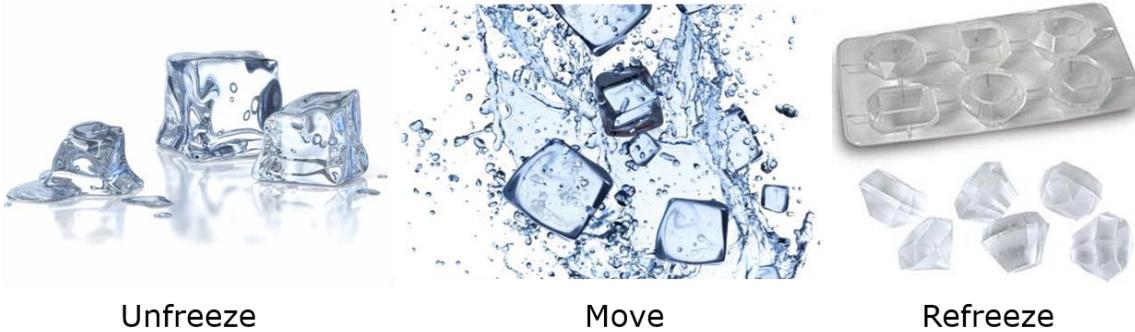


The ice cube theory of managing change



Three tips to give effective performance improvement feedback

How not to do it

Let's start by busting a commonly held myth. Here is how NOT to give effective performance feedback:

1. Butter them up – find some platitudes or feedback on what is going well
2. Give the 'difficult' message
3. Say "But..." and then reinforce the positives.

Let me be clear... this method of 'sandwiching' developmental feedback between two pieces of good news DOES NOT WORK!

In a study at the University of Chicago, behavioural science professor Ayelet Fishbach [conducted a simulation](#) in which one half of a class gave negative feedback to the other half. The half receiving feedback thought they were doing great.

Why did they walk away with a positive impression of their performance when the students giving feedback set out to let them know that their performance was unsatisfactory?

"Negative feedback is often buried and not very specific," according to Fishbach.

Applying robust theories of change to managing performance

Kurt Lewin undertook seminal research in the 1940s and suggested effecting change is somewhat like an ice cube: you unfreeze it, change its shape, then re-freeze it to lock in the change. Change guru Ed Schein suggests there are three critical components to the unfreezing process:

1. Disconfirm worldview
2. Create a level of guilt or anxiety
3. Provide a psychological safety net.

I suggest this can be used as a framework for having difficult performance management conversations.

A framework that really works for giving difficult performance feedback

Here's an example based on my own personal experience. It really does work.

One of your team members fails to deliver a report on time and even when you follow this up with her, it's subsequently not written to the required quality. What can you do? You look her in the eye and explain clearly and succinctly what the likely outcomes will be and reinforce it's her responsibility to ensure those outcomes are positive (step 1). After a little resistance and further discussion, you see in her eyes that she understands and feels responsible, and is for sure a little guilty at having let you (and herself) down (Step 2). You close by offering her your support by way of a review of the report before it is finalised (Step 3).

Tips

So, when it comes to giving difficult performance management messages, remember Ed Schein's advice. Here's some tips from me:

1. Disconfirm worldview
 - △ Do you have the authority and leverage to be able to tell people their current performance is below par, that it is not meeting its objectives and that change is needed?
 - △ Have you instilled a clear view of the outcome (i.e. changed behaviour) that is sought, and over what timeframes?
2. Create a level of guilt or anxiety
 - △ In disconfirming the worldview, are you able to pierce through the person's current perception of themselves that has created a defence against criticism and locked them into their current behaviour?
 - △ Doing this demonstrates there is guilt and anxiety through the feedback you have given, and crucially that this anxiety is located around the specific area of behaviour that is problematic.
3. Provide psychological safety net
 - △ How can you offer support to the other person so that they feel safe in working on changing their behaviour?
 - △ What do they need from you to be able to work on it?
 - △ Be explicit about how you will both work on this together and check progress together within the agreed overall timeframe for change.