

Listening to Learners: Systematic Feedback Creates a Cascade of Positive Effects

by Garry DeRose, PhD, and Lora L. Snow

In the traditional classroom, all information flows from the instructor to the learner. However, if you shift focus from the teacher to the student, interesting and valuable things begin to happen. Gathering feedback from learners can set in motion a cascade of positive events from ongoing upgrades in the curriculum to better learner motivation and morale and, ultimately, more effective performance.

Acquiring feedback should be done systematically throughout each training cycle. Even before classes begin, find out how prepared each individual is to understand and use the information he or she will receive. That will guide your presentation of the material, indicating where extra emphasis, coaching, or an e-module may be needed.

Second, draw out learners about real conditions where they work, including obstacles they may encounter. This feedback can help the training address real-world issues and reduce or eliminate barriers.

Next, as the learning proceeds, use exercises to measure progress in gaining skills. This can show you where curriculum changes or additions may get the information across more effectively.

These are among the steps we have taken in a successful corporate intervention that has turned out more than 800 skilled project managers in little more than five years.

As a result of feedback, project management learners now bring current projects right into the classroom and move the work ahead while they are acquiring skills. We also urge collaboration with classroom peers from other units and disciplines, and this cross-feedback can become a key element in the learning process.

The learners are also encouraged to develop individual growth plans and take additional courses as needed. The feedback process even

extends into the post-course period in follow-up consultations with the instructor.

Feedback about the organization has also been important, including information about supports such as internal subject matter experts and specialized software. In addition, we have identified organization obstacles such as inadequate planning time and mid-project personnel changes.

Results of our five-year program have been highly positive. For example, corporate objectives were altered to clarify project priorities, a new course segment on Managing Without Authority was added, and more emphasis was given to post-course coaching and e-learning.

Feedback has led to steady incremental improvement in the curriculum, enhancing its effectiveness and contributing to its unusual popularity. The program has also added clarity and prestige to the project management career ladder, raised morale among project managers, and built enthusiasm for such assignments by demonstrating that leadership pays attention to issues raised by learners.

Focusing on learners brings yet another important benefit. As learners take a more proactive role in the training, they tend to become more involved in achieving unit and corporate goals and often return to their units motivated to identify needed improvements and bring them to leadership.

This case history has involved only project management training, but it seems quite likely that the principles it demonstrates may also be applicable to those learning other skills.

Garry J. DeRose is director and CEO of the Corning Center For Learning (CCFL). He holds a BA from Montclair (NJ) State College, an MBA from Syracuse University, and an MA and PhD from University of Wisconsin. **Lora L. Snow** is director of development at CCFL. She provided essential research and other assistance in the preparation of this article.