

# **Performance Feedback Lessons from the Wii Fit**

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**Silvercloud Consulting**

*Helping business maximize the power of teams.*

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### Introduction

Performance feedback is vitally important in business. According to an article in the November 3, 2009 edition of *Workplacemagazine.com*, two-thirds of employees say they don't get enough positive feedback and 51% say they don't get enough negative feedback. Over half of those surveyed said the feedback they do receive is not detailed enough to help them improve.

During a recent Wii Fit work out, I received some performance advice I didn't find particularly helpful. It made me think about how people provide performance assessments, both positive and negative. This article uses examples of feedback presented by the Wii Fit system to highlight good and bad ways to help employees and teammates improve.

If you are unfamiliar with the Wii Fit, it is a package for the Nintendo Wii system that includes a balance board. The balance board is essentially a scale that is smart enough to recognize how the player's weight is distributed and how it is shifting. The Wii Fit uses this information to monitor balance and movement.

### Lesson 1 - Be Careful Pointing Out the Obvious

As I stood on one leg, trying to hold a yoga pose and desperately hoping I wouldn't fall over, I could see the Wii Fit's on-screen balance indicator moving all over the place. Suddenly my virtual trainer commented "You're a little shaky." "Gee thanks," I thought sarcastically, "I hardly noticed." I was doing everything I could to keep my balance and I knew it wasn't my best performance. What good did it do to tell me I was shaky? Did the designers of the software think I wouldn't notice I was struggling? This is a great example of unhelpful negative feedback.

If you really feel an employee or teammate doesn't see an obvious problem, you need to point it out to him. Otherwise, try working with him to resolve the issue instead of just reminding him there's a problem.

### Lesson 2 - Make Your Suggestions Meaningful

So there I am again, standing on one leg. The virtual trainer just told me I'm wobbly and I'm wondering how I got Captain Obvious as a trainer. The next thing I hear is "Try extending your back and arms." Unfortunately my back and arms had nothing to do with my instability. I was wrapping up a long work out and I was tired. My leg was shaky from the lunges I completed a few minutes earlier.

It's easy to excuse this type of feedback from an on-screen trainer, after all it's just a video game console, but when real people swoop in and give bad advice most of us do not appreciate it. Before giving performance improvement suggestions, make sure you



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understand what's actually causing the problem.

### **Lesson 3 - Don't Pit Employees Against Each Other**

The Wii Fit does a great job tracking each player's performance. Every time you complete an exercise it ranks your score against past performances. The problem is, it compares your results to the previous achievements of all the other members of your household. This bothers me. If one person in the house is much better than everybody else the others may never be capable of obtaining a top 10 score. In that scenario they will eventually get discouraged and may stop trying. If players saw their score compared against their own past performances then everybody, regardless of skill level, would be encouraged to keep improving.

Think twice before comparing an employee's performance against that of the team's top performers. Doing so will likely breed resentment of the top performers. Instead, compare her performance against her own personal goals and benchmarks. That will motivate her to steadily improve.

### **Lesson 4 - Provide Timely Feedback**

One of the positives about the Wii Fit is its ability to give real time feedback. During many of the exercises the Wii Fit provides small, timely suggestions. Those few words of well timed feedback help the player adjust his performance when it matters. Wouldn't it be ridiculous if it waited until the exercise was done and then told the player all of the things he had done wrong? Imagine doing ten push-ups and after you finish hearing "You're hips were too low after the second push-up." You would probably think "If I knew that after the second push-up, maybe I would have done better on the last eight."

When we see an employee make a mistake or do something really well we need to let them know as soon as possible. Doing so affords him the chance to learn and improve his performance immediately. If you defer the feedback until the employee's annual review, he will wonder why you waited to tell him. If the assessment is negative he may think you were saving it as a way to punish him at the end of the year. If the feedback is positive he will likely wish you had told him sooner so he could have perpetuated the good performance.

### **Lesson 5 - Provide Positive Reinforcement**

The real time feedback provided by the Wii Fit is not always criticism. Often times it complements the player on what she is doing well. Even when you know you're doing well, it is encouraging to hear it. That's just human nature. No matter how well a person is at what she does, she always enjoys hearing it from somebody else.

Take time to recognize what your people are doing well. They will feel appreciated. A



## Performance Feedback Lessons from the Wii Fit

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simple, sincere compliment can go a long way in motivating people, boosting morale, and encouraging continued strong performance.

### Conclusion

It's one thing to receive performance feedback from a computer animated trainer. It is quite another to hear it from a live human being, especially if the critic may be responsible for our career development or advancement. We need to think carefully about providing helpful, meaningful feedback to our employees and team members. Feedback done right will not only be appreciated by the recipient, it will also improve results.

### Key Points

1. Before calling attention to obvious shortcomings, make sure the person is not already aware of them. Instead of pointing out the obvious, consider ways you can help the person improve performance.
2. Make sure your suggestions are meaningful and relevant. Before you suggest a fix, make sure you understand the problem.
3. Don't compare employees to impossible standards or unachievable goals.
4. Provide timely feedback, so the recipient can improve his performance immediately. Don't wait until an annual review to tell an employee he did something wrong months ago.
5. Most people thrive on positive reinforcement. Recognize the things people are doing well as often as you can.

### About Silvercloud Consulting

Silvercloud Consulting is a management and technology consulting company based in Richmond, Virginia, USA. Silvercloud Consulting specializes in helping businesses improve the focus and effectiveness of their teams.

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