

From Hire to High Performer: Closing the Feedback Gap

Using feedback to translate potential into performance.

A Comprehensive White Paper

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Executive Summary

Organizations have never invested more into finding exceptional talent. Recruitment strategies have become increasingly sophisticated, hiring decisions are more data-informed, and competition for high-performing employees has become more intense than ever before. Yet, once the offer letter is signed, many organizations unintentionally shift from deliberate investment to passive expectation, assuming talented employees will naturally become high performers.

Performance, however, rarely develops on its own. The transition from new hire to high performer depends on far more than technical ability or organizational fit. Employees require clarity around expectations, insight into their performance, recognition of their successes, and guidance on where to improve. Collectively, these conversations form one of the most influential, yet consistently underleveraged, drivers of development and performance: feedback.

Despite widespread understanding and agreement that feedback matters, many organizations continue to equate feedback with the performance review itself. Formal performance reviews serve an important purpose, but they represent only a fraction of the conversations employees need to perform, adapt, and develop in today's workplace.

This is not simply a management challenge; it is a talent strategy challenge. Every hiring decision represents a significant investment of time, money, and effort. Maximizing the return on that investment requires more than identifying exceptional people. It requires creating an environment where those individuals receive the direction, support and developmental feedback necessary to perform at their highest potential.

The goal of this paper isn't to make the case that feedback is valuable as it is already understood to be, or to prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach to performance management. This paper argues that organizational feedback practices are the critical link between hiring strong candidates and realizing their full potential. It examines the ways in which prioritizing consistent, high-quality feedback practices can drive talent development, ensuring employees have opportunity to thrive.

There is significant value to be realized here. Organizations that consistently outperform their competitors understand that hiring, while very important, is only the beginning. Competitive advantage is gained by investing in feedback to translate potential into performance.

The Hidden Gap Between Hiring and High Performance

Great hiring creates great opportunity. Behind every successful hire are hundreds of hours of careful planning, sourcing, interviewing, evaluating and decision-making. Significant time, money and expertise are invested to identify individuals capable of creating lasting value (Dobson, 2024). As recruitment practices have become increasingly sophisticated and evidence-based, employers are better equipped than ever to make confident hiring decisions.

By the time a candidate accepts an offer, that investment has already generated something incredibly valuable: opportunity. The right person has been identified; the right decision has been made. Yet, this is precisely where an equally important phase of the talent journey begins, because exceptional hiring deserves exceptional follow-through.

The qualities that make someone an outstanding candidate can provide the foundation for future success, but they do not guarantee it. Like anything worthwhile, talent must be nurtured if it is to deliver its greatest return. Employees still require clear expectations, ongoing coaching, and meaningful recognition, just to name a few (Budworth & Chummar, 2018). Without those experiences, even the strongest hiring decisions can fail to reach their full potential.

This creates what can be thought of as the *feedback gap*: the space between successfully identifying potential and translating that potential into performance (Gnepp et al., 2020). The gap is rarely the result of poor intentions, and it often emerges because the intentionality devoted to hiring is not matched by the same intentionality after an employee joins the organization.

The consequences are often subtle rather than dramatic, and can be described by a series of inefficiencies. Development progresses more slowly than it could. Expectations gradually become less clear. Employees perform capably but never quite reach the level of contribution they were hired to achieve (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). In these situations, the hiring decision itself is not the problem, but potential slowly erodes through the accumulation of seemingly minor missed opportunities.

Closing the gap is not merely a matter of improving management practices, although management undoubtedly plays an important role. It is a strategic extension of great hiring.

Recruitment and employee development are not separate initiatives; they are consecutive phases of the same investment. The first identifies potential, and the second creates the conditions for that potential to translate into performance.

Feedback: The Engine of Employee Development

If hiring creates opportunity, feedback is what determines how much of that opportunity is ultimately realized. This is what makes feedback so unique. Unlike hiring, onboarding, or formal training programs, feedback is not confined to a single stage of the employee lifecycle. It has the potential to shape performance every day. Whether through a scheduled one-on-one, a conversation following a client meeting, or a quick recognition, feedback provides employees with valuable information they can use to adapt, improve, and grow (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Perhaps because of its familiarity, feedback is often underestimated. It is commonly viewed as a communication skill or a management responsibility rather than a strategic capability. Yet, decades of organizational behaviour research have consistently demonstrated that feedback is one of the primary drivers of employee learning and performance (McLean & Nelson, 2025). This should come as little surprise. People rarely improve simply because time passes. They improve because they receive information that informs future behaviour.

Creating Clarity

One of feedback's most important functions is creating clarity. Every employee, regardless of experience or tenure, is constantly trying to answer a simple question: "Am I doing what success looks like here?" Job descriptions, onboarding programs, and training sessions provide an important starting point, but they cannot account for every situation employees will encounter as priorities evolve and new challenges emerge.

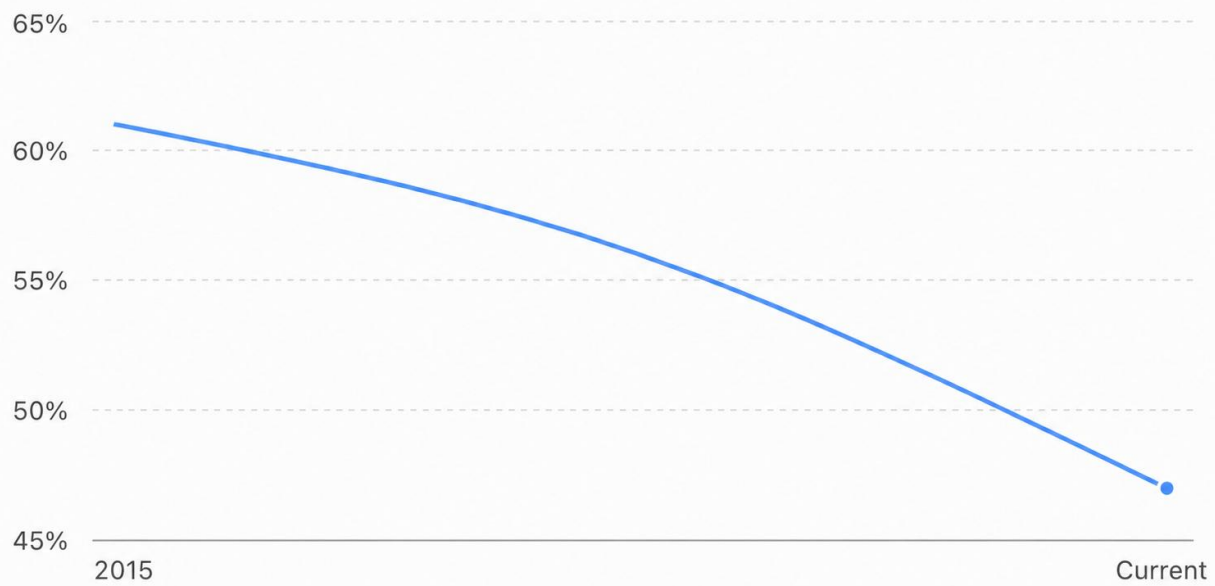
Feedback helps employees continuously recalibrate their understanding of those expectations. Managers explain why a decision worked, clarify where an approach could be strengthened, and reinforce the behaviours that best align with organizational goals. Over time, employees develop a clearer picture of what they should be doing, but how they can do it well.

Without this clarity, employees are forced to rely on assumptions. Sometimes those assumptions are correct. Often, they are not. Small misunderstandings can quietly accumulate, leading employees to invest time and energy in activities that may not produce outcomes their manager intended. Feedback reduces that ambiguity by replacing assumptions with alignment.

Gallup’s findings reinforce this point. They surveyed over 18,000 workers to assess the current state of performance management, and found that only 47% of employees strongly agree that they know what is expected of them at work (Wigert & Barrett, 2026).

Employee Clarity Has Declined Over Time

Percentage of employees who strongly agree they know what is expected of them at work.



Source: Gallup (2025), nationally representative survey of 18,665 U.S. employees.

Down 14% over the last decade, the implications of this trend are difficult to ignore. Knowing what success looks like is one of the most fundamental requirements for effective performance, as employees cannot consistently meet expectations they do not fully understand.

Accelerating Learning

Performance is not static. Even experienced employees spend much of their careers learning and evolving. While experience undoubtedly contributes to development, it alone is an imperfect teacher, and this is where feedback steps in and shortens the learning curve.

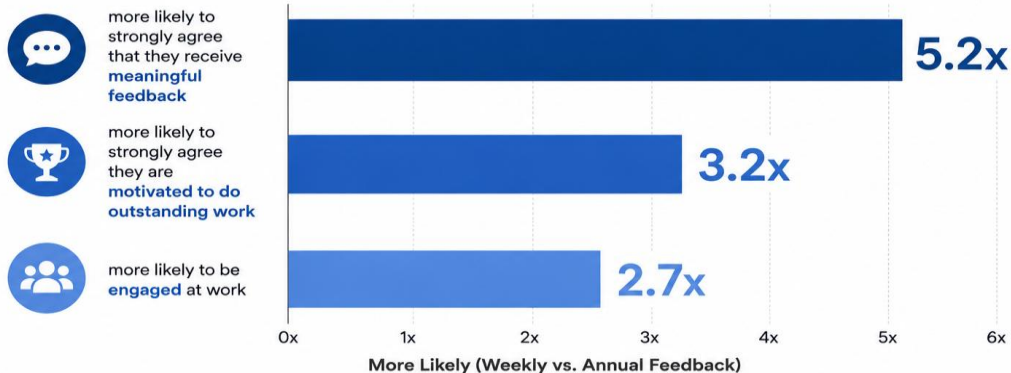
Rather than waiting months to discover whether an approach was effective, employees receive timely information while the experience is still fresh. They are able to reflect on what worked, what could be improved, and what learnings should be applied to the next opportunity. Over time, these relatively small and isolated learning moments compound into significant improvements in knowledge, judgement and performance.

This is one of the reasons that organizations that prioritize ongoing feedback often develop talent more effectively than those relying primarily on formal review processes. Indeed, management research has consistently shown that employees who receive frequent, high-quality feedback demonstrate higher levels of performance, engagement and motivation than those who receive feedback infrequently or only during formal review cycles. Researchers found that employees who receive weekly feedback (vs. annual feedback) were 3.2x more likely to be motivated to do high-quality work, 2.7x more likely to rate themselves as actively engaged at work, and 5.2x more likely to claim they receive meaningful feedback (Sutton & Wigert, 2025).

The Power of Frequent Feedback

If performance feedback only occurs a few times a year, it's unlikely to be meaningful. But when managers provide **frequent, honest feedback**, it drives real results.

When managers provide **weekly** (vs. annual) feedback, team members are:



Formal progress reviews are most powerful when they are consistent with feedback employees have heard throughout the year—making them affirming, motivating, and far less awkward.

Source: Gallup, The State of Performance Management, 2024

Building Momentum

Feedback also plays a role that is frequently overlooked: it builds momentum. When many people hear the word *feedback*, they immediately think of constructive criticism. While helping employees improve remains an important function of feedback, focusing exclusively on correction overlooks one of its greatest strengths.

Employees need to know when they are succeeding. Recognizing effective performance reinforces the behaviours organizations hope to see repeated. It helps employees understand not only that they performed well, but why. This distinction matters. Specific recognition enables employees to repeat successful behaviours with greater confidence rather than wondering whether positive outcomes occurred simply by chance.

Momentum itself builds gradually. A manager who recognizes improvement, acknowledges good decision-making, or celebrates progress sends an important, audible message: *keep going*. Those conversations increase confidence, encourage initiative and reinforce psychological safety for employees to continue stretching their capabilities. In contrast, workplaces where feedback is only delivered when something goes wrong often unintentionally signal to employees that silence simply means “don’t ask” (Bregman, 2010).

Over time, these momentum-building moments accumulate as employees become more willing to take ownership and pursue increasingly challenging work. This is because, through feedback, they gain regular insight into what success looks like and how to model behaviour.

More Than a Management Skill

Taken individually, each of these outcomes may appear relatively modest. Together, they fundamentally shape how employees develop throughout their careers. Feedback creates clarity by reducing uncertainty and role ambiguity. Feedback accelerates learning by helping employees make sense of their experiences in the present moment. Feedback builds momentum by reinforcing progress and encouraging continued growth. These are not isolated benefits, but are cohesive drivers of performance and development.

Why Feedback Falls Through the Cracks

Despite overwhelming agreement that feedback matters, many organizations struggle to make it a consistent part of everyday work. This is rarely because leaders question its value or fail to recognize its importance. More often, feedback becomes another casualty of competing priorities. Managers are constantly juggling different demands, and this leads to developmental and coaching conversations being postponed. Not intentionally, but repeatedly. Eventually, “I’ll mention it later” becomes “I’ll wait until their next performance review.”

Ironically, the employees who stand to benefit most from regular feedback are often the very people who receive the least of it. High performers appear to be doing well, new employees seem to be settling in, teams continue delivering results. From the outside, everything seems to be working. Simultaneously, beneath the surface, opportunities to develop quietly pass by.

Formal performance reviews, while undeniably valuable, can unintentionally reinforce this negative cycle. When feedback becomes closely associated with scheduled reviews, those conversations begin carrying expectations they were never designed to meet. Managers attempt to summarize months of performance, coaching, recognition, and development into a single discussion. Employees, meanwhile, hear feedback that would have been far more useful while the work was still fresh, and grow in frustration (Verma & Mishra, 2024).

Closing the feedback gap therefore requires more than encouraging managers to “give more feedback.” It begins with recognizing that feedback should not be viewed as a separate management task competing for attention. It should be embedded within the work itself. The most effective feedback cultures are rarely built through grand initiatives or elaborate performance management systems. They are built through consistent, everyday conversations.

Closing the Feedback Gap

The good news is that closing the feedback gap does not require a fundamental rethinking of performance management. In many cases, the foundation already exists. Managers care about developing their people. The opportunity lies in making feedback a more consistent and intentional part of everyday work.

The most important shift is moving away from the idea that feedback is an event. Formal performance reviews remain valuable. However, they should not become the primary vehicle through which employees learn how they are performing. By the time a scheduled review takes place, many of the valuable coaching opportunities have already passed.

Instead, organizations should strive to build feedback into the natural rhythm of work. For example, a quick conversation after a client meeting or intentionally clarifying expectations before a project even begins are easy ways to create a culture where learning is continuous.

Perhaps more importantly, organizations should broaden how they think about feedback itself. Feedback is not synonymous with criticism. Some of the most influential conversations across an employee's career centre on reinforcing good habits, acknowledging progress, and helping unpack the "why" behind a successful task or project (McDonald, 2017).

Ultimately, maximizing the return on great hiring decisions requires viewing recruitment and employee development as consecutive phases of the same goal: finding and growing great talent.

Conclusion

Organizations have never invested more in finding exceptional talent. Hiring practices have become increasingly sophisticated, recruitment strategies more evidence-based, and competition for high-performing employees more intense than ever before. Yet the value of those efforts is not fully realized right away. It is realized over the weeks, months and years that follow.

Throughout this paper, feedback has been presented not simply as a management responsibility, but as the mechanism through which employees develop and perform at their highest potential. It creates clarity when expectations evolve, accelerates learning by shortening the feedback loop, and builds momentum by reinforcing the behaviours organizations hope to see repeated.

Individually, these conversations may appear insignificant, but collectively they determine whether potential is fully realized or quietly left untapped.

Great hiring identifies potential. Great feedback translates that potential into performance.

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