

# “I Get By With a Little Help From ... My Supervisor”

## The Art of Giving and Incorporating Classroom Feedback

**Errol Craig Sull and Kathy Embry**

“**L**ook for my feedback next week on your teaching efforts in the class!” Every online educator has heard or seen these words from a supervisor ... and they usually strike fear, trepidation, and anxiety into the online educator! But once one fully knows the purpose of feedback—and how to best incorporate it

into one’s teaching—the more it will be welcomed. And let’s not forget: the feedback must also be given in a manner that doesn’t scare, is motivating, is goal setting, and is easy to comprehend. To understand the art behind giving feedback I’ve again asked my faculty manager at American InterContinental University, Kathy Embry,



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to join me. Together, we hope to show you both sides of feedback so it can be appreciated for its full value, resulting in the end goal of its purpose: to up your game as being a more productive, enthusiastic, and successful online educator.

This column is divided into two sections: (1) How to Give Teaching Feedback; (2) How to Use Teaching Feedback. And a short note of explanation: feedback is, of course, given to educators who teach in face-to-face classrooms, as well as online. But because “writing is forever” and the online educator often has alleyways and pathways to maneuver in his or her classroom, a full discussion of all things feedback becomes especially important.

Read these comments and suggestions: the next time you receive feedback from a supervisor you’ll say, “Okay—here’s some help to make me even better in my profession!” And each of us always wants to improve :)

## **HOW TO GIVE TEACHING FEEDBACK**

Feedback, critique, coaching—what do these terms have in common? What do faculty want to hear from their manager? Much too often, a manager picks up the phone only when the faculty member needs to make a change or an adjustment to the classroom, has interpreted a policy incorrectly, or has not followed procedure—you get the picture. What happens when faculty are doing something really well? What does that type of feedback look like?

## **FEEDBACK, CRITIQUE, AND COACHING ARE OPPORTUNITIES TO COMMUNICATE WITH FACULTY**

Whether in person and/or via phone or e-mail, communication is imperative. As managers, we cannot allow classroom concerns to fester or go unresolved for any length of time, as the concerns may

become issues, which may then become detrimental to the students and potentially the institution. These points are crucial:

- Feedback is provided when the manager needs to do a quick touch base with the instructor to provide accolades or pointers on the classroom.
- Critiques (with feedback) will occur when the manager notes an area of the classroom that requires improvement or where the faculty member is not meeting expectations. An opportunity is taken to walk through the issues and recommend updates, and to discuss performance parameters, policy, and/or procedure.
- Coaching takes place after feedback escalates to critique and the faculty either has not made the necessary recommended adjustments or is what we like to call “consistently inconsistent”—where a change may be made in one area of the classroom, yet they begin to slip again or concerns are noted in other areas of the classroom.

## **FACULTY WANT TO HEAR THEY ARE DOING A GREAT JOB AT ALL TIMES**

That everything is exactly as it should be (meeting expectations) and even that they are doing more than required (exceeding expectations). Managers are very pleased when faculty meet expectations, when we can say “great job, I see no concerns in your classroom, everything looks great!” Yet there will be times when managers need to have the conversations that begin with “You’re meeting expectations, however ...” or “Nice job this week, but ...” or even “I like what I’m seeing in your Announcements, now let’s talk about...”

Approaching these tricky conversations takes research, empathy, finesse, a coaching mentality, and follow-up. Let’s break each of these down:

- **Research.** Once the concern or issue is uncovered, the manager needs to consider the details in the classroom—what occurred and what should have occurred per expectations, policy, and procedure. We call these “actionable items”—something the manager needs to have a detailed conversation about with the faculty member.
- **Empathy.** Since managers are also faculty, we can talk the talk and walk the walk. Managers not only understand fully how to navigate the classrooms, they are also well versed on institution policy and procedure, thus making it easier to step into the faculty members’ shoes. Empathy is also important to present the humane side of the conversation and to show a clear sense of understanding, as well as fairness. We also want to fully understand if something personal is occurring with the instructor so as to provide assistance in a way that is equitable to faculty member, the students, and the institution.
- **Finesse.** Delivering feedback, critique, and coaching requires a manager who can clearly and concisely articulate the facts (gleaned from research) and break the conversation down in manageable chunks, complete with visuals and documentation—both necessary to properly guide the instructor to improvement. In an online environment, the visual component can be presented in the form of screenshots or screen sharing in order to provide snapshots into the classroom or navigation as needed.
- **Coaching Mentality.** A manager must have a desire to develop his or her faculty, otherwise feedback and critique will escalate to “performance improvement” very quickly. One thing we always keep in mind is this—our faculty are teaching because we believe they can impart the necessary instruction needed to guide their students to success. Although we must hold faculty

accountable to stated performance parameters, we believe that coaching and developing trumps separation.

- **Follow-up.** Imperative to ensure faculty are getting back on track. If a manager provides feedback and/or critique, but does not revisit the concern, the faculty member may assume all is good and will continue on. Following up within the week is a best practice and continued follow-up through the end of the session and even into the next session is determined by the nature of the issue.

### **DON'T FORGET TO TELL FACULTY THEY ARE DOING A GREAT JOB!**

Phone calls, e-mails, accolades in all-faculty meetings (we call them “kudos”), and sharing best practices go a long way to letting instructors know they are appreciated. Don’t only reach out to your instructors to discuss classroom issues. Also, make outreach when you’ve noticed something exceptional, when you want an opinion/point of view, and when you just want to say “thank you.” These are some of the best phone calls a manager will make.

As stated in both parts of this column, the faculty-manager relationship begins and ends with communication. Without good, solid communication the relationship can fall apart, which can lead to disruption within the faculty, the program, and eventually the institution.

### **HOW TO USE TEACHING FEEDBACK**

#### **RULE #1: ALWAYS INCORPORATE FEEDBACK!**

Faculty supervisors give feedback for one important reason: so you can improve as an online educator. While it can be easy to think, “That person is not down here in the trenches, teaching with me; my supervisor just doesn’t understand what I’m doing”—you would nearly always be wrong. First, the person is in the role of

your supervisor as he or she has proven to be adept at guiding, motivating, enthusing faculty to be better at teaching. Second, nearly every institution requires supervisors to also teach—they have been or are “in the trenches” so they can experience what you do. Lastly, your supervisor is aware of school policies, expectations, and objectives that form the umbrella guidelines for your feedback. The bottom line: feedback you receive is important for your continued growth as a distance learning teacher, for the students’ success, and for the school’s reputation ... thus do use it.

### **BE SURE TO ASK FOR CLARIFICATION AND/OR EXPLANATION OF WHAT YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND**

“Huh—this can’t be right!” or “That’s wrong—I did that!” or “That’s just not fair!” are often reactions faculty have when first reading their feedback. But do look at the feedback: somewhere in that e-mail or in that attachment are words that pretty much say, “For further information please contact me.” No matter how precise, no matter how to-the-point online teaching feedback may be there can always be room for confusion as to what a comment means, how a certain score or comment was determined, or how a suggestion/goal can be met. This is where communication with your faculty supervisor becomes imperative, for without it you may misinterpret what is being offered, an honest error on the part of the supervisor may go uncorrected, and you may not have the full picture of why a comment or suggestion was made. Reach out—you’ll be glad you did!

### **LOOK AT LESS-THAN-STELLAR FEEDBACK AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO IMPROVE—NOT AS AN ARROW TO THE HEART!**

In my many years of online teaching I have yet to come across a faculty supervisor who was not genuinely interested in

helping me to improve my abilities as a distance educator. Sure, there have been times when I received feedback with which I was not happy, that I thought was not justified, or that just seemed discouraging. But those many years of online teaching have also taught me two important lessons about this: (1) Nearly always the feedback was, in fact, on target—and incorporating it did improve my teaching efforts; (2) The ill-will I at first felt toward the supervisor for this or that less than “You are brilliant!” comment melted—and I realized that Errol was not always right :)

### **MAKE CERTAIN YOU HAVE UP-TO-DATE PERFORMANCE GUIDELINES**

Schools usually update their faculty performance guidelines annually, sometimes more often (especially when sudden changes are made), and always make these available to faculty—via e-mail, in faculty webinars, and or in the latest faculty handbook. It can be easy to overlook these or skim them with so many teaching and other life responsibilities taking place. But knowing all performance guidelines is important, for your evaluations will be based on how well you measure against the guidelines. Three tips: (1) Have a file online labeled “Faculty Performance Guidelines,” and keep all material related to this in the file for easy—and regular—access; (2) Be sure to compare what you doing in the classroom against the guidelines—it can be easy to overlook or forget one or two; (3) Don’t hesitate to make adjustments to your teaching if necessary: change can be difficult ... but it can also be invigorating, and can result in a better teaching experience for you and a better learning experience for your students.

### **ALWAYS GO BEYOND PERFORMANCE GUIDELINES EXPECTATIONS**

This is what I call “T-shirt time”—never take a minimalist approach to the faculty

performance guidelines. It is quite easy to look at the various rating possibilities or categories for feedback, and decide that what you are doing does, indeed, fall within the acceptable range of guidelines. You are obviously doing what is expected of you—according to the guidelines—and that should suffice. But it won't. Beyond the simple fact that many are clamoring for the same online teaching position you now hold it's also important to demonstrate you were born, as it were, with a teaching gene, and thus you always strive to be at the top, to be the best, to make a difference as an online educator. And doing this is not at all dependent on faculty guidelines, but rather your desire to teach, your love for the profession, your sincere interest in helping students learn. Having this internal motivation will always have you teaching over the top ... faculty guidelines be damned!

**WHEN YOU NEED TO GO OUTSIDE  
OF PERFORMANCE GUIDELINES,  
FIRST EXPLAIN THE REASON  
TO YOUR SUPERVISOR**

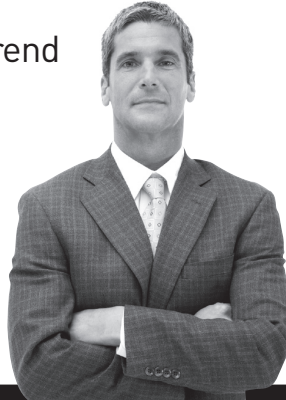
Ah, the brilliance of the online educator! This often results in new teaching strate-

gies, helpful handouts, more detailed assignment feedback, over-the-top class announcements—but do these fall within the acceptable faculty guidelines? Faculty managers appreciate—and, in fact, encourage—faculty creativity and dedication to being ultra-involved with students, yet this creativity and dedication can't simply be willy-nilly, with no thought to keeping them within the parameters of the faculty guidelines. So ... when you have such an approach, first try out the idea on your faculty manager for his or her blessing. If a “No—sorry, it just can't be done” comes back there will quickly be a reason to follow based on faculty guidelines and/or school policies. But there might also be a gray area under which your idea falls, and when this occurs have plenty of solid reasons as to why you should be allowed to do it—including why it would work.

*Remember:* All professional athletes started out with good abilities, but it was only because of stellar coaching they became great athletes.

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