

# Work Space

## Positive words still work the best

It's easy to make staff dispirited by giving negative assessments of their performance. People criticise themselves only too well, writes **Fiona Smith**.

**C**onstructive feedback can be one of the hardest things to deliver. It doesn't matter how many compliments surround one tiny criticism, you can be sure your listener will come away hearing only the bad news.

Like the fairytale of the princess who was so sensitive that she could not sleep on top of 20 mattresses because of the pea hidden beneath them, people will worry away at the one negative message — escalating it way above its real level of importance.

A visiting authority on positive organisational scholarship, professor Gretchen Spreitzer, says that when people are asked to remember emotional events, they will recall four negative ones for each happy memory.

Visiting the Australian School of Business from the Ross School of Management at Michigan University in the US, Spreitzer says we are hard-wired to be alert to things that might be a danger, such as threats to our job security, our career progression or our relationship with colleagues and managers.

"It is so ingrained in us to look at the negative, or where we need to

improve," she says. So giving people a fully rounded performance assessment may do more harm than good, as people walk away dispirited by what they have heard.

One way to tackle this is to concentrate on people's strengths, rather than their weaknesses.

By pointing out what people are good at, you boost their self-esteem and their engagement in their job — and also create the kind of energy that can also tackle problems such as low performers in an organisation.

"We all know a lot about our gaps, our weaknesses. There are a lot of ways we get that kind of feedback. What we don't get very often are the things we are truly great at, the things that we can do in a way that nobody else quite can, our unique talents and competencies," she says.

Rather than being a mere ego-stroking exercise, it can also help craft the jobs around the capabilities of the people.

But one of the weaknesses of identifying strengths is that testing is generally based on self-assessment. You rank yourself against a list of positive qualities to



Gretchen Spreitzer . . . 'concentrate on strengths'.

Photo: NIC WALKER

find out where you really shine.

You might wish to see yourself in a particular way — as creative, for instance — and you will weight your answers towards that bias. You may also miss some of the tendencies that come naturally to you, but stand out as strengths to others.

As a way of overcoming this problem, Spreitzer and her colleagues have developed a "tool" which instead asks others to relate three stories of times when they have seen you at your best.

You ask colleagues, managers,

direct reports, family, friends and others who know you well. Once you have up to 20 responses, you group them together in themes to see what stands out in other people's minds.

Called "reflected best self", this can be a powerful and emotional procedure to go through, says Spreitzer. "It is a wonderful exercise. This is so unlike the usual feedback that we get.

"It creates a lot of emotion in people because usually these are not the things that people say face to face. As you start looking across

those stories, people in all realms of life are saying very much the same things about you. People start seeing who they authentically are because they cut across all realms, in different times in your life.

"Then we create what we call a best self-portrait."

Spreitzer says that she and her colleagues have been using the technique for the past six or seven years, consulting to top leadership teams, cascading it down through levels of organisations — and sometimes using it to cut through the fog for people who are having difficulty in their jobs and careers.

Organisations that have been using it include Prudential Financial, the University of Michigan hospital system, the Royal Bank of Scotland, the 02 mobile telephone supplier in the UK, and some utilities and social service agencies.

"We have many, many more requests than we can take on from organisations. But, as a research organisation, we have made the decision to focus more in depth on a smaller number of organisations, rather than doing a more quick and dirty interaction with a larger number," she says.

Spreitzer is in Australia until June and will deliver a seminar on thriving at work and positive organisational scholarship on March 27 at the Australian School of Business, UNSW.