

Good Criticism: You Can Do It!

Criticism is a hot topic, so hot that some workplaces do not even use the word. Whether you use “criticism” or “feedback” or another word to describe it, this article is about what the dictionary calls the art of judging merit. Communicating judgment of another person is very difficult for some of us, even as difficult as our last topic, getting criticized. (*Common Ground # 24*)

Your aim in giving criticism is to help someone

- *keep doing what is effective, and*
- *change their behaviour when it is not effective.*

First of all, *avoid the temptation to avoid*. Two popular ways to avoid are simply never to give the criticism **or** to make it sound so much like a compliment so that the person does not hear the request for change. Never giving the criticism or ducking some of the issues means that the person will not have the benefit of your input. You will have to assess the consequences of that in each situation. While it is important to remember that criticism includes both positive and negative aspects of your judgment, disguising your message so that they do not hear the negative aspects also is not helpful.

Make your criticism timely, as soon as possible after your concerns arise. While both the giver’s and receiver’s needs should be taken into account, getting feedback is most effective while it is fresh in the minds of everyone involved. This is another reason to fight the temptation to avoid. The receiver may feel ambushed if you have waited for a long period before giving your criticism. Making sure the criticism is well timed also involves allowing both giver and receiver to cool down if there was a high level of emotional intensity at the time of the event. Another aspect of timing is to allow time to move to an appropriate location if at all possible. A feedback conversation should be private, not in a public setting.

Manage resistance: Even if you follow all the guidelines you may be faced with resistance by the person receiving your criticism. Managing resistance effectively means not pushing back and not ejecting yourself from the situation. Their resistance may be an expression of fear. Stay focused on your purpose and do not be thrown off course. Here are some specific suggestions to help manage resistance:

- Clarify for them your intentions in giving the feedback.
- Maintain a positive and supportive mindset.
- Keep using your active listening skills: acknowledge, paraphrase, summarize and notice the feelings that they are expressing.
- Try to avoid a lot of questions in the early part of your feedback conversation, because this could be perceived as an attack.

The “You Can Do It” Good Criticism Guideline

1. *Tell them your reasons for giving the criticism. Ask their permission.* Before you give feedback be clear with yourself about your intention. Sometimes our expression of criticism is an expression of our own feelings of hurt or being “put down”. When criticism is motivated by our genuine desire to help the other person, it is much less likely that the criticism will cause a defensive kickback. If you have thought about this in advance it is easier when talking to them to clarify exactly what your intention is.

Ask yourself:

- What is it I really want them to hear?
- Why do I care?
- What is important here?

Ask their permission to give the information. In some circumstances such as a performance review meeting in a

workplace, permission may be implied by the context. Even there asking permission would be helpful so that they can decide if they are ready to hear the information. If they say “no” listen to their reasons.

2. *Offer information* without ramming them. Give them the opportunity to decide for themselves about whether they will change. Even if you are the supervisor, you cannot control them. You can only control what you do.
3. *Encourage involvement*. Sometimes it helps to imagine that you are in the receiver’s shoes. Check that the person has understood your feedback and whether they agree or disagree with you. Use your good listening skills such as asking open questions, paraphrasing, and summarizing in order to fully understand their point of view. Yes, ask them for *their* opinion, *their* suggestions for improvement - and listen to the answer.
4. *Describe the behaviour neutrally*. Just the facts, please. Use descriptive rather than evaluative or judgmental language. Describe what you observed rather than drawing an inference from the behaviour about the other person’s motives or attitude. Make the description objective and not a judgment. Say: “When we both talk at the same time....” ; Not: “When you make a point of ignoring me...”; Not: “When you treat me like hell...”.
5. *Tell them what they did effectively, their strengths*. Use the same neutral descriptive language to talk about their strengths. If you want them to be able to keep doing what is effective, tell them what that is. It also may help to put into perspective the behaviour you have identified as needing change. Caution: See “avoid the temptation to avoid” above.

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6. *Be direct and specific.* Make sure you are talking about the **real** issue and not skating around it. When describing behaviour be as brief as possible so that you do not lose their attention. Keep the information in small, easily digestible chunks. Stay away from generalizations, exaggerations or swearing. A common trap to avoid: sentences with "you always..." or "you never...".
7. *Be willing to ask for and receive criticism yourself.* If some of the problem is your fault, accept responsibility. Your own honesty inspires other to trust you and may encourage them also to be willing to accept responsibility.
8. *Solve the problem.* Similar to when you are receiving criticism, commit to working out an action plan by mutual agreement. If time is not available now, schedule a later time when this can be done. Check that both of you have the same understanding about what has been agreed.

Criticism Don'ts

- ✗ Avoid providing criticism in a public setting.
- ✗ Avoid judging.
- ✗ Avoid accusing or blaming.
- ✗ Avoid attacking. Provide coaching.
- ✗ Avoid threatening or giving an ultimatum.

Munn-thly Memo

Q. I work as a team leader in an office. One employee comes to me frequently to complain about other people in the office. When he does this I encourage him to speak directly to the people. As far as I can tell he usually does not speak to them directly. I am feeling uncomfortable with the situation. I would like to address this situation with the complaining employee.

A. Giving criticism whether in a workplace or other context is very difficult for some people. Thinking in advance about how to handle the situation gives you a better opportunity to be successful.

First be clear about your intent in providing feedback to this employee. Make sure that your motivation is a genuine desire to coach this employee to be more effective in expressing his concerns to fellow employees. This is not the time to express your own frustration in listening to repeated complaints.

The next time the employee approaches you about the complaints, ask permission to give him some feedback. Then describe the employee's behaviour neutrally: "I noticed that you dropped by my office 3 times in the last 3 days to complain about other employees. When we discussed these complaints last week about these same employees, I suggested that you speak directly with the employees and you just told me that you have not done this."

Next express your perspective. Here's an example: "I'm concerned that you are not feeling comfortable in working with the team and I'm concerned about having time to get my other work done. I would like to work with you to find a way that you can resolve your concerns with the team members and we can both be satisfied."

Invite the employee to express his concerns about dealing directly with the other team members. Ask his opinion about how to solve the problem and work together on developing a solution that satisfies you both. Make sure that your good work does not dissolve by summarizing exactly what you have agreed and even writing it down so that you both can remember.

Since this employee is struggling with providing feedback, the way you handle this situation in providing your feedback will serve as a model for him in dealing with his fellow team members. When you do this effectively it will be an excellent way to coach him.

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Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them become what they are capable of being.

-Goethe

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