

Managers Letter

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Criticism: It's a Tool, Not a Weapon

by Sharon Marks

Criticism is all too often misunderstood, applied incorrectly and associated with negative experiences. To benefit from criticism and make it a tool that teaches rather than torments, we need to understand it and develop realistic guidelines for its use.

Criticism is a tool for constructive change — the kind that is focused on specific issues and directed toward a particular outcome. Like a gardening tool used to unearth rocks, aerate the soil or mix in nutrients, constructive criticism can result in employee growth. When criticism is used constructively, it informs, educates, develops people and provides a necessary step toward improvement. When used unwisely, it damages. Think of CRITICISM as an acronym for Communicating Real Information That Influences Change In a Satisfying Manner.

The best kind of criticism focuses on the issue, not the individual.

Some people use criticism to jump-start solutions by bringing immediate attention to a problem. Others use it to shock associates into realizing the error of their ways. Both approaches may precipitate change, but which will lead to desired results?

Four Forms of Criticism

Humorous Criticism

Humor can lighten a tense situation or soften harsh news, but when used with sensitive topics, it can lead to misunderstandings. Humor can also send mixed signals about the importance of a discussion. Many people use humor as a way to lessen their own discomfort in giving or receiving criticism. Often they are so focused on protecting feelings, they avoid dealing with the real issue under discussion.

Dealing with humorous criticism:

- ▶ Remember that humor reflects society and may be misunderstood by people of different cultures. Never use humor as a form of criticism when you do not know the other person well. Never use humor when the recipient has previously received constructive criticism about the same issue or a similar one.
- ▶ If you are receiving criticism and humor is clouding the message, use a neutral tone of voice and ask questions to help determine if the other person thinks the issue is serious. If so, explain that the humor in the message makes it difficult to assess what kind of change is really desired.

Cruel Criticism

Cruel criticism removes the focus from the issue, inappropriately places blame on the actor and is unethical. It rarely produces a positive outcome. People who resort to cruel criticism — such as saying for example, “Any idiot knows this idea of yours will not work” — do so in an attempt to demonstrate their own power. This approach usually diminishes the likelihood of obtaining the support or cooperation desired.

Dealing with cruel criticism:

- ▶ If you receive criticism that is cruel, calmly ask the other person to focus on the issue under discussion.
- ▶ If inappropriate behavior and cruel criticism continue, suggest another time for the discussion, explaining that the personal comments distract from the real issue.

Evasive Criticism

Evasive criticism can defeat its own purpose. People who have difficulty coming to the point about an issue may fall back on evasion because it reduces their own discomfort. But evasive criticism, such as “Later, we should talk about the report; nothing really major is wrong, but it was not quite what we expected,” is not specific and makes it difficult for the recipient to clearly understand the type of change desired. Evasive criticism increases the likelihood that the problem will continue.

Please route to :

- CEO
- President
- HR Manager
- Training Department
- Dept. Manager_____
- Department Staff
- Other_____

Dealing with evasive criticism:

- ▶ If you want a particular issue to be handled in a specific way, do not be evasive.
- ▶ If you are on the receiving end of evasively delivered criticism, ask for specific examples focusing on the what, when, why and how of the issue.

Candid Criticism

Candid criticism can be very effective when used to provide objective information. Criticism delivered with candor is most constructive and objective when delivered in a neutral tone. The change called for should focus on the issue. Any focus on the individual is likely to be heard subjectively and interfere with the way the receiver processes the message.

Dealing with candid criticism:

- ▶ Use candor when the discussion is technical or time-sensitive, requires absolute clarity or has been previously discussed.
- ▶ If you are uncomfortable when receiving candid criticism, focus on the problem being discussed, not your own feelings.
- ▶ Listen carefully without arguing or defending yourself and, most importantly, ask questions to get specific information so you can suggest realistic actions that address the issue.

Discovery — A Positive Approach

Is there a right way to criticize? One approach is to help people discover information for themselves. This allows them to thoughtfully consider varied aspects of a situation and assess how they might have influenced the outcome in another way. Discovery lets people take an active role in problem resolution and avoids the frustration and passivity that often result from other methods of delivering criticism.

Criticism needs to target what happened, not who did it.

The discovery approach is based on asking, rather than telling. Instead of saying “Jake, you were abrupt and you kept interrupting,” try asking “Jake, what impression do you think you made in that conversation?” Such an approach would allow Jake to learn about himself and his communication style and lessen the likelihood of embarrassment or confusion.

Giving people a chance to discover how their behavior is experienced by others is constructive and provides an opportunity to view a problem in another way. If you help people discover their own errors, you provide them with a better chance to learn from them.

Giving specific, objective and quantifiable information establishes expectations and allows everyone involved to quickly determine how well the criticism worked. It also provides a framework for future action.

Criticism used correctly lets people make important personal discoveries and can make change happen in a satisfying way. The next time you must offer criticism, be as specific as possible about the issue and desired outcome. Use discovery questioning to help others see the nature, extent and timing of any necessary change. When the listener has the right information, it is more likely that the desired result will occur. Remember, criticism is a tool, not a weapon.

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