

Taking the Sting out of Criticism

by John Tschohl

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How many times have you heard that your bank brand is ultimately defined by the way your employees interact with your customers? Few companies can afford to maintain a staff of angry, demoralized, disaffected employees. Eventually, the negativity always seeps down to the customer. Banks in particular, with their commoditized offerings, can't thrive for long without successful employees and a culture that promotes a common sense of purpose and respect.

That's why a manager's ability to give constructive criticism is essential.

Of course, giving positive feedback is easy. But what about those times when an employee is not performing and you need to give negative feedback? That can be a different story, especially for those who do not like confrontation. Fortunately, there are ways to provide negative feedback without creating a negative environment. Here are four tips:

1. Don't be mean-spirited when offering criticism.

If you consistently give only negative feedback, people will distrust the criticism and it will become useless. Don't make employees feel like burdens and don't condemn them for their shortcomings. Business isn't just about business; it is people working with people. We need to be sensitive to the feelings of others and know that how we treat them will bounce back and hit us—or at least it should—and affect our feelings as well.

Employees respond well to compliments and are far more likely to be open to and listen to criticism if their positives are also acknowledged. That way they are less likely to feel victimized and inadequate for their jobs. Acknowledge any positives the employee may have achieved first.

2. Be tough, but not hostile.

People naturally help those who support them.

Feedback is crucial. It improves performance, develops talent, aligns expectations, solves problems, guides promotion and pay, and boosts the bottom line.

Every employee should be given a chance to improve and deliver on expectations. Focus on the situation or expectations only and avoid bringing up other issues. A clear compliment or a brief critique goes a lot farther in the moment than a rehash of old incidents. Be compassionate and courteous about human failures. Try to dish out negative feedback in small doses. It can be overwhelming for an employee to be bombarded with a whole lot of things that they are not doing right, as the chances are it will all come as a surprise. If there is just too much for them to get their minds around, it may just overwhelm them. They will feel they are not able to do anything right and quickly shut off.

3. Be positive.

Give at least as much positive feedback as you do negative. Positivity stimulates the reward centers in the brain, leaving the recipient open to taking new direction. Negative criticism turns on the threat response and defensiveness sets in. You don't need to avoid the negative or corrective—just make sure you present a positive solution or outcome. Your feedback won't be productive if it's focused on making the other person feel bad or make them look inadequate or unable to correct their actions.

Balance your constructive feedback by first stating something they're doing well. This will give them an example of what you're expectations are and boost their confidence. Make it clear you are available to talk with them and want to help them continue performing and developing these types of skills.

Recent studies have shown that most employees really do want to know what they can be doing to perform their job better. As a matter of fact, those who favored constructive feedback also rated their managers highest for being honest and straightforward. What can be taken away from these statistics is the fact that they want to know what they can be doing to improve their performance.

4. Find a solution together.

Give your employees a chance to respond to your comments so you can see it from their perspective and properly address the situation. Remember your job is to give them perspective on their actions. Give suggestions of ways they could adjust their performance and ask what steps they think they could take.

And finally, ask for advice on how you can help them to achieve this goal. Remember, people have a habit of becoming what you encourage them to be, not what you nag them to be.

The message they should be getting from you is this:

You are the most important factor in your own development. If you're determined to learn from whatever feedback you get, no one can stop you.



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