

Giving & Receiving Constructive Criticism

Being able to both constructively provide AND receive criticism is an essential life and business skill. And to be fair, developing these skills may not always be easy. However with practice, you can learn to master them.

Here are some key points for consideration to set the framework:

Benefits of Constructive Criticism

- Allow individuals to highlight what they're really feeling.
- May lead to ongoing personal and professional development.
- Provides feedback on important issues.
- May enhance performance results in the workplace and other environments.
- Helps improve interpersonal relationships.
- Potentially reduces stress and creates psychological security.
- Plays a part in developing the ideal organisational climate.

Rules for Giving Constructive Criticism

- Be clear about your motives for providing the feedback. What do you have to gain? Are you focused more on the needs of the organisation or the other person more than on your own personal or professional needs? What's the right balance for the situation?
- Conduct the conversation in private wherever possible.
- Choose the right time to provide the feedback. As soon as possible after the event may be more productive and effective.
- Check your tone. Make sure you don't sound or act threatening. Check your body language as well and ensure the content, tone and body posture all match in a positive and supportive way.
- Keep the criticism balanced. Start with strengths or something positive, work the critical comments into the middle and ensure you wrap up with strings and positive comments at the end.

- Focus on the problem or issue and not on the person's personality. Be clear in your conversation that this isn't a personal attack, but a solution focused conversation related to the issue.
- Have your evidence ready to support the criticism. Check it for objectivity and accuracy. It may not be helpful to slam a folder of evidence in front of the person. Instead, consider providing the best examples from the evidence that would strongly and positively define the issue for discussion.
- Check your language to ensure you're accurately describing the situation. Avoid words like "always" and "never" as well as qualitative judgements like "worst" in your description of the issue. Watch for assumptions and generalisations.
- Check to ensure you're not comparing the individual with others. Keep the conversation focused on the topic at hand and both the individual and your role in it. Watch for language from the individual if they start comparing themselves to others as well as this may not be fair and productive.
- Limit the scope of the conversation to only a few critical points. It can be overwhelming to someone to suddenly receive a long list of criticisms, to the point that they may actually feel attacked and incapable of meeting your expectations.
- Set the tone up front in the conversation. Remind the individual this isn't personal and that the focus is on finding a solution to the issue at hand, and that you're committed to working together to co-create that solution.
- Leave history of resolved issues out of the conversation, unless you can draw on examples from the past as proposed solutions for the current situation.
- Ask the individual lots of questions, particularly solution focused questions such as, "What would you like to do about this?" or "What ideas do you have we could discuss?" However, avoid questions that begin with the word, "why" as these can easily put the other person on the defensive. Find the right balance between asking questions and making statements.
- Ask the individual to make a commitment to the agreed change. Likewise, be willing to make a commitment yourself so that this is a collaborative effort and no one person carries all of the responsibility.
- Keep the conversation on track. If there are secondary issues that come up, you can take note of those and request that those are saved for a separate and more relevant conversation. Be sure that you do follow-up on that.
- Be willing to answer questions about the validity or reasons for the feedback. Support the individual to understand where the feedback is coming from and why it's important. Also, link the importance of the feedback to future needs, objectives, strategies and/or relationships. Try to be both present and future focused versus simply past focused.
- Create a "coaching for performance" versus a "performance management" conversation. If this isn't a verbal or written warning situation, make sure that is clear up front.

- If the individual isn't taking the criticism well, check in on how the person is "feeling" by asking questions such as, "How does this feedback make you feel?" This can be an important step as it honours the individual's personal feelings. Once this is done and the person is allowed the opportunity to express their feelings, it is more likely that the conversation can then be re-directed back to an objective framework for a solution-focused discussion.
- If the individual refutes the feedback and claims it's invalid, it may be helpful to remind the person that feedback provided as a result of the perceptions of others means that there is always at least the potential for truth. This means that the perceptions of others need to be addressed as well as the feedback of the issue itself. Consider asking what behaviours could be performed that might positively turn the perceptions of others around?
- And if the individual continues to refuse to believe the feedback, despite the evidence provided, it may be useful to offer the person some time to review the evidence, situation and their feelings on their own for a day. The benefit of this strategy is that the person may be feeling attacked and unable to objectively respond to the feedback immediately. Given some personal time, they may check in with their own feelings, review the evidence and come back with a different attitude and approach. Be sure in this scenario to schedule the next conversation.
- Get creative. You don't have to control the situation yourself, as this is a collaborative conversation although you may be the primary facilitator of it. Consider asking the individual, "How would you like us to discuss this feedback?" or "What do you think would be the best approach to discuss this?"
- Sometimes the only person someone is willing to accept feedback from is themselves. Therefore, you may want to consider strategies where you ask the other person to identify what the improvement opportunity is. For example, if the individual has made a number of errors in a business report, you could ask them to take the report away, analyse it and come back the next day with their own ideas of how it could be improved and the solutions to those issues. This makes the individual primarily responsible for identifying and solving the issue. You can always provide them further feedback after you've given them the opportunity to provide their own.
- Look at yourself. How do you respond to criticism? What can you take from what works well for you, or doesn't. Do you need to improve on something as well, particularly if that development area is related to what you're providing criticism to someone else on? Are you willing to offer your own areas of development as part of the conversation and solution so that there's more equality in the discussion?
- Finally, end the conversation with encouragement. It's important that the last words heard are positive and may inspire the person. You may certainly feel better for having done so as well.

Rules for Receiving Constructive Criticism

- Criticism is simply feedback. Feedback is simply information. Choose your attitude that best supports the acceptance of information and allows you to objectively process it.
- Listen to the feedback. The person providing it has taken the time to share what they or others feel, and this may be important to them to share. Honour the relationship and also accept that this may be quite difficult for the other person. When you listen effectively, you are potentially making it easier for the other person, and you're more likely to really hear the positive intention of the message.
- Check your body language to ensure that it is "open" and that you make eye contact with the person. Is the content of your language, the tone it is delivered in and your body language all matching in a positive way?
- Restate the critical feedback to ensure you understand it correctly. This includes paraphrasing any emotional comments the other person makes, such as, "I can see that it has upset you when this situation happened."
- View the criticism as an attempt to solve a problem or turn a particular situation around. It's not a personal attack. For example, it may be about customer feedback where the perception of the customer is based on their experience. If the customer perceives it to be true, then there is at least the potential of truth in the feedback. This applies to many situations, therefore be willing to accept that there is always the potential for truth in any feedback, even if that truth is uncomfortable and contradicts what you feel the truth really is.
- Thank the person giving you the feedback, regardless of whether or not the feedback itself is uncomfortable to hear.
- Focus on the potential solutions to the situation. By not doing so, you are potentially motivating the conversation to become even more uncomfortable and have greater negative consequences. If you would like to avoid further discomfort, work with the individual to keep a positive framework to the conversation. Offer solutions if you have them, or ask the individual what solutions they would like to propose if you can't think of any yourself at the moment.
- Ask for time to consider the feedback if at the moment you are feeling that it's too difficult to be objective. In your request, let the other person know that you would like to take some time to consider the feedback and come back with a positive response and/or solutions. If you don't provide some assurance to the individual providing the feedback, they may be left feeling negative and that they weren't effective or supportive. This outcome doesn't support a long-term positive relationship or solution strategy.

- Don't talk about the feedback with others unless it is really appropriate to do so. Check your motivations before discussing with others. A common error here is to consult with other individuals to gain a consensus as to whether or not the feedback is valid and fair. Most likely, the situation doesn't warrant such consultation. The feedback has been presented with evidence and/or someone else's personal emotional comments. The feedback is between you and the person who provided it to you. Honour that relationship and keep it between yourselves.

If you feel you would like more information about giving and/or receiving feedback, please consider speaking with your coach about more strategies or how to implement the ones discussed here.

Acknowledgement

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This document uses Oxford English.

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