Productivity Update

Is Criticism Dead?

If it isn't dead, let's hope it's mortally wounded. No one likes being criticized, but each of us sometimes needs help in learning from mistakes. The purpose of this article is to explore *how* to give corrective feedback to co-workers about mistakes.

Criticism: Pointing the Finger of Blame Is Bad

When something goes wrong, it appears to be human nature to want to fix the blame. Most of us have that fleeting thought, "Who's responsible for this mess?" even if we never give voice to the thought. Think for a moment, though, about what that thought implies: that someone deliberately "broke" it, that the mess created by the mistake was intentional. How likely is that?

Let me share a personal story: about two weeks into my first job with a management consulting firm, fresh out of graduate school, I made a mistake in some numbers I was putting together for one of the senior consultants. As a result, I spent a painful hour in his office while he dug deeper and deeper into my personality: "Are you just too lazy to check your work?" "Are you just too dumb for this work?" "Are you capable of working independently?"

If his goal was to motivate me to do better work, he at least succeeded in compelling me to check, double-check, and triple-check anything I gave him in the future. If his goal was to help me learn from my mistake, however, all he really taught me was to avoid working with him ever again.

Getting stuck in the finger-pointing blame game doesn't help anyone: it doesn't encourage cooperation, it destroys morale, and it delays (and corrupts) the process of finding a solution or a fix.

Constructive Criticism: Good

Positive feedback focuses on what went wrong and how to fix it *without blaming or shaming.* And, as with so many other things in life, the presence of shame and blame is in the eye of the beholder (the person being criticized.)

Focus on Solutions

Rather than focusing on "fixing the blame," focus on fixing the problem. Include the person whose mistake you are trying to fix in finding solutions to the problem, which will reveal to both of you if there is a gap in the person's knowledge or experience may have led to the problem.

Another benefit of including the other person, without blame, in finding solutions is that you reinforce your credibility as that person's ally in his or her effective performance.

Two Ways to Give Constructive Feedback

There are times when there's no urgent problem that needs to be solved, but it is nevertheless important to give a co-worker feedback in order to help him or her improve performance. In this case, it's important to keep that feedback constructive and not personal.

Out of my experience of giving and receiving criticism, let me recommend that you practice using a couple of different approaches. Which one you will use will depend on the circumstances, as we will see as we talk about these two techniques.

"**Oreo Cookie"**

This is a useful technique to use, for example, when you want to correct a work habit that seems to interfere with a person's effectiveness. It's called an "oreo cookie" because it sandwiches the constructive feedback between sincere and justified compliments.

Two cautions about using this technique: first, the compliments must be sincere. Second, don't over-use this technique, or you will find that every time you try to compliment a co-worker, he or she visibly stiffens, waiting for the "other shoe" to drop.

"Cookie with No Icing"

When you have to deliver bad news (for example, a demotion, an official reprimand, or a layoff), be prepared, be straightforward, and be brief.

By being prepared, I mean that you should have all relevant facts at hand and you should think through what the person's questions may be so that you are ready to answer them. Again, do this without blame or shame; if the news you must deliver is a direct result of the person's previous actions, say so without making it personal.

By being straightforward and brief, I mean that you should:
- present the information
- explain your reasons for the action
- give the person an opportunity to ask questions. Answer his or her questions, and bring the conversation to a close.

Good Intentions Are Not As Important As Good Presentation

Criticism is often *intended* as positive feedback, but make sure that the way it is expressed doesn't get in the way of the content. We all know that when someone says, "I don't mean to be

critical, but…." it means "But I am going to go ahead and be critical." Better to say, "Let's look at how you could do better next time."

When you must talk to a person about a mistake or poor performance, take the time to make sure that the *way you talk about it* matches your good intentions (that is, how you want to be heard.) It will pay off in better outcomes for both of you.

Let's Lay Destructive Criticism to Rest

The need to provide constructive feedback to others isn't dead; in fact, it's usually a necessary part of most jobs. The purpose of the feedback (are you trying to help or are you trying to blame?) and the way you express it is what makes the difference between destructive criticism and constructive feedback.