

Giving and Receiving Criticism

Done properly, offering employees constructive criticism not only gets your point across, but helps establish a solid working relationship for the future.

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Ruth Decker supervises a staff of eight in the county government's personnel office. Robert Hodges is the youngest and newest addition to Ruth's staff. One week, Ruth is scheduled to attend a management training program in the western part of the state and needs Robert to finish a report for the county manager by the time she returns at the end of the week. Over the telephone, Ruth carefully outlines for Robert what he needs to do and how he can reach her if he runs into problems.

Two days later, on Wednesday, Ruth has not received a call from Robert and assumes that he is encountering little difficulty in undertaking the assignment. By mid-afternoon Thursday, Ruth returns and is pleased to see Robert's typed, finished report on her desk ready for review and, hopefully, ready for submission on Friday. After only a few minutes Ruth realizes that Robert has missed the mark on some of the points made on the report, has completely left out one small section and has prepared a poor conclusion. Given that she must deliver the report the following day, Ruth is rather upset.

Her immediate reaction is to take the report over to Robert's office and, in strong language, ask why he hadn't sought help and why the report has various shortcomings. Report in hand, she marches in the direction of Robert's office and stops a few paces from the door. Robert is discussing a new task with another of Ruth's staff people. Ruth looks at her watch and notices it is about 3:30 p.m., so she heads back to her own office. Coolly and calmly thinking through the situation, she decides that the report is indeed salvageable and that, in about an hour, she can probably shore up its weak points, resubmit it to the production staff and still have it available Friday morning. An hour later, she is finished and the report is ready to be retyped. She makes an extra copy, which reflects the changes she added so that her subsequent discussion with Robert would involve mild criticism, mixed with supervisory assistance.

In this article we'll review both giving and receiving criticism and provide answers to the following:

- * What is the best time of the day and week to criticize employees?
- * When should you never criticize?
- * Where should the criticism be offered?
- * What are some effective ways to handle criticism levied at you?
- * How can you handle the chronic complainer?

Criticizing Without Crushing

Ruth meets with Robert on Friday morning to review his report, paragraph by paragraph. Ruth points out the strong points and the weak points and leaves Robert with a copy. She emphasizes that, although it was not desirable to issue the assignment by a long-distance telephone call and to follow up using the same, it's what the situation called for. She explains to Robert that calling for assistance while the report is in progress saves everyone time. Robert agrees that what she said makes sense and that he will follow her directions more closely in the future. By handling the situation in this manner, Ruth is able to provide constructive criticism to Robert that conveys her present concerns and offers assistance as well as establishes a solid working relationship for the future.

Let 'em Have It Early

Numerous management analysts agree that the best time to dispense employee criticism is early in the day and early in the week. This affords the opportunity to speak to the employee again some time during the day in a more casual, lighthearted way to assure the employee that everything is all right, that you criticized the performance or behavior but not the person, and that you have confidence in the employee's ability to continue to handle or assume responsibilities.

Criticizing late in the day poses several problems. First, you may end up sending an employee home who's worried or anxious about his or her job—unnecessarily so. Also, you and your staff are often tired at the end of the day, and any criticism or strongly worded message can be taken out of context or inflated because of the fatigue. The same holds true just before a weekend, vacation or holiday.

Cool Down

There's an old Chinese proverb that says, "Never write a letter when you're angry." The same holds true for criticism—never do it when you're mad or upset. Use whatever delaying process you can to put time between when you initially feel the need to criticize an employee and when you actually do it. You'll be more objective, your criticism will be more constructive and your overall employee communications will be vastly improved.

Conversely, don't wait too long to dispense the criticism after the poor performance has been identified. As with our

(Continued on Page 11)

Criticism--

(Continued from Page 9)

system of justice, criticism is best dispensed quickly.

Criticize In Private

The reason Ruth stops on her way into Robert's office is that someone else is in Robert's office. Ruth instinctively knows that it is inappropriate to criticize Robert in front of another staff member and without the benefit of a quiet, extensive, closed-door session in which he can air his viewpoint. Ruth also knows that discussing one employee's shortcomings with another is a disguised, malevolent form of criticism. Conversely, she is quick to praise, particularly in the earshot of others and, thus, is perceived as a supervisor who communicates with style.

Receiving Criticism

You're not the only one who feels the need to criticize. On occasion, your staff does too. Their criticism may be muted, concealed or disguised in the form of a suggestion. Whether you call these criticisms, complaints, grievances or suggestions, it is helpful to follow this four-point system:

* **Be courteous.** Treating employees with courtesy while they are offering feedback greatly affects their attitude. One way to convey your concern is to take notes of what they say and then repeat the essential elements so the employee is assured that you have full comprehension. You may even wish to thank the employee for bringing this item to your attention and let him or her know that you'll give it fair consideration.

* **Gather information.** Review the complaining employee's record, if only to determine that the employee is not a "chronic complainer." Is he or she frequently absent, non-productive, uncooperative or a poor performer? Realistically, this will color your perception of and reaction to the problem addressed.

* **Take appropriate action.** If the criticism or suggestion is justified, tell the employee what you intend to do to improve the situation. If the complaint is unjustified, be firm and calm in telling the employee so. Another possibility exists. The suggestion or criticism may involve something that you cannot change. This may take some explaining, but take the time to do so.

* **Follow up.** When the employee's grievance or suggestion is valid and helps you to better execute your responsibilities or helps the department or organization in some way, let him or her know it in a week or two. Often, employees' suggestions can improve overall efficiency.

James O. MacDonald, in *Management Without Tears*, offers some suggestions on handling chronic complainers. MacDonald

advocates a put-up-or-shut-up approach. This involves asking the complainer to prepare a written analysis of the problems and to propose solutions. If the complainer doesn't follow through, you can then convey the message that next time you will request a written analysis again. If the complainer does submit a written analysis, you can evaluate it on its own merits. MacDonald views this as a no-lose situation.

The hallmark of a successful supervisor is being able to effectively give and receive criticism. It has been said, "You're as big as what irritates you." If you let the small grievances and complaints of your staff get to you and every staff has them then you'll overreact and needlessly spend energy on brush fires while missing forest fires. If you establish a supportive, cooperative framework in which criticism can be both dispensed and received, then your employees will perceive you as an effective communicator and a highly effective supervisor.

Keys to Constructive Criticism

- * Criticize early in the day and early in the week.
- * Offer a few casual remarks to an employee who's been criticized earlier in the day.
- * Avoid criticizing when you're angry.
- * Listen to what the employee has to say.
- * Dispense criticism as swiftly as possible.
- * Criticize in private and let the employee have a chance to explain.
- * Be courteous when handling employee complaints.
- * Take notes as to what's being said and then repeat essential elements to assure full comprehension.
- * Gather information to determine if the employee is a chronic complainer.
- * Take appropriate action, i.e., change and explain, explain if the complaint is unjustified or explain if nothing can be done and why.
- * Follow up on the employee complaint a few weeks later by thanking them if operations have been improved.
- * Handle the chronic complainer with a put-up-or-shut-up approach.
- * Establish an environment in which both giving and receiving criticism can occur without being disruptive.



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