Delivering Constructive Criticism Effectively

It’s never easy giving employees bad news about their performance. But as a manager, it’s a crucial part of your job.

That’s why being able to deliver good constructive criticism is so essential.

Constructive criticism, where a manager sits down with an employee to discuss a performance weakness and suggest ways he or she can improve, is one of the most effective techniques to get struggling workers back on track. It’s meant to improve an area of someone’s work, striking a balance between positive and negative.

The difficult part involves pointing out a person’s weaknesses. That’s fraught with peril. On the upside, well-delivered constructive criticism gives people the tools they need to address their own shortcomings and become better employees.

There are right ways and wrong ways to provide feedback.

Done poorly, negative feedback can harm a worker’s performance and morale, as well as your ongoing relationship with that person.

There’s a fine line between constructive criticism and negative criticism.

The two biggest mistakes managers make are injecting their own feelings into a critique and phrasing their criticism in a manner that makes the employee defensive.

Remember: A person’s self-esteem can crumble under criticism, especially if he or she thinks criticism of any kind is negative.

Managers who’ve had bad experiences delivering criticism sometimes shy away from trying it again. But that’s counterproductive since employees won’t know what their strengths and weaknesses are.

So how can you deliver clear, effective and understandable critiques your staffers will actually want to use to better themselves?

It all comes down to proving to employees that you really do want to help them do a better job. The best kind of constructive criticism points out exactly what staffers need to do next, gives them clear guidance, and shows them how you can help them achieve those goals.

Try this five-step process the next time you sit down with an employee to discuss performance issues, and you’ll find the entire conversation will run much more smoothly.

Step No. 1 – Plan the discussion

In the same way you’d prep for an important meeting or performance review, think through the arc of the conversation you want to have.
Ask yourself, “Why am I having this discussion with this employee? What do I want him or her to change?”

Be specific.

You’ll also want to plan a path through the conversation. The key is to construct an outline for the talk while leaving room for questions and dialogue.

To help you focus the exchange, identify what the employee’s done that concerns you, as well as the consequences and how he or she could improve.

**Step No. 2 – Deal with the behavior, not the personality**

Right off the bat, try to highlight the good work he or she has done recently.

The goal is to make sure the worker knows he or she is a valued member of the organization. This gets the discussion off on a positive note while emphasizing this is about workplace performance, and not a personal attack.

After you’ve done that, lay out what the staffer isn’t doing well.

The best constructive criticism states clearly what behavior the employee is or isn’t doing. Specificity is key.

For example, consider the case of an employee who regularly leaves some of his work for others to finish. Explain to the person that it is his responsibility to complete the tasks, and describe the impact it has on other employees. Give the person examples of when this has happened, and discuss how it occurs. Also be sure to make clear this isn’t appropriate for the future.

Remember not to sugarcoat. Steer clear of “buts,” such as: “You’re doing a great job, but …” That’s only going to confuse the person. It always pays to be tactful, but make sure you are clear about what he or she is doing that needs improvement.

**Step No. 3 – Explain the consequences of not changing**

After you’ve explained what needs to change, show them the consequences of their actions.

To continue with the previous example, if a staffer is leaving his work for others to complete, explain how that requires others to put in additional time to finish his responsibilities and how those other people might resent that. Along with being unfair, it’s a morale-killer.

You want employees to get an idea of how their actions affect the big picture. They may not understand just how many people are affected by what they’re doing until you explain it to them in terms they can understand.

Again, stay focused. Answer the employee’s questions, but avoid going off on tangents and muddying the water.

**Step No. 4 – Show the way to improvement**

Once you’ve laid out the problem and its consequences, it’s time to let the employee know how he or she can improve.

Let’s continue with the example of the staff member who leaves his work for others to finish. To address that
problem, you might first learn why it is the employee isn’t completing his work. Maybe someone else is affecting his ability to get done on time. Maybe deliveries are late. Or perhaps he is not scheduling his time well, or is spending too much time on low-end priority tasks.

After suggesting improvements, consider getting the staffer’s input. Possible questions to ask include “What do you think of my assessment?” or “Can you think of any other ideas about what you can do to improve your performance?”

When you can give the employee a clear idea of what was wrong and what needs to be done, then you’ve successfully used constructive criticism.

Step No. 5 – Follow up and document

The constructive criticism discussion may be over, but your job of helping the staffer improve has only just begun.

Be sure people know you’re going to follow up. If employees don’t know they’re going to be reevaluated, they may feel like the criticism will follow them around forever. If the person’s met the goals you agreed on and improved, then checking in again can help rid the person of any emotional baggage that may be attached to the constructive criticism.

There’s no one right way to follow up. You could schedule another meeting, or you could hold an off-the-cuff session where you spontaneously review the progress the employee’s made. Either way, always find time to follow up. Otherwise, the staffer may fall back into his or her bad habits – and you’ll be right back where you started.

Any time you constructively criticize an employee, however informally, document it extensively. Include what you talked about, what goals were set, and when those goals must be met by. Not only is it a good managerial practice, but it can be evidence if the staffer ever files a lawsuit against the company.

Conclusion

Constructive criticism, meant to improve an area of someone’s work, is one of the best ways to give employees feedback on their performance. When done correctly, it is key to keeping your team members motivated and ensuring their performance stays on track. Using a five-step plan for your critiques will help improve the likelihood that your employees will come away with the tools they need for success.

What Not to Discuss

The key to constructive criticism is to keep the focus on improving. Avoid bringing up:

- **Unrelated past issues**: Dredging up old issues is only going to confuse staffers as to what you’re really concerned about. Bring up past problems only if they somehow relate to the current problem.

- **Small annoyances**: Remember to ask yourself, “What’s the most important thing I want to discuss – and how has it been affecting the employee’s work?” That’ll keep you from going off track with secondary matters.

- **Rumors and speculation**: You may have heard rumblings around the office about something an employee has done, but that doesn’t mean what you’ve heard is true.

- **Highly charged adjectives**: Remaining objective is the name of the game, so choose your words carefully. For example, you wouldn’t call a worker who’s not meeting deadlines “lazy.” You’d first give him the benefit of the doubt, allowing him to explain why he’s had trouble handling the workload.