

## How to Criticize...Gracefully

by Wolf Gugler

Bill talks to Cathy, one of his employees about something she could do better, e.g. her customer service skills...and leaves it at that. Cathy then thinks Bill's dissatisfied with everything else she does. Sound familiar? Do you then backtrack and make the employee believe that this area of concern really isn't *that* bad? What can we do to make it better, then?

It's easy to fall into this rut of miscommunication between employees and supervisors. Before your meeting, **relax and review your intentions**. If we're overly anxious about providing critical feedback, or feeling frustrated or resentful about their behavior or performance, heading into this type of meeting in a stressed state is a recipe for disaster. The better choice is, after reviewing how you intend the discussion to unfold, take a few minutes to relax and remember our positive intentions for the meeting and for sharing our feedback. Whether you pray that things go well, follow yoga or your favorite athlete's mantra for mindset management, making an effort to relax will inevitably add a positive tone to your meeting.

Watch out for these pitfalls:

***Don't assume you know what they're thinking.*** You'll never know exactly what the other person is thinking unless you give them the opportunity to verbalize it for themselves. If you don't answer their specific concern, they'll tune you out or you'll quickly see a minor situation blown out of proportion with accusations flying back and forth.

As mentioned, don't minimize the problem either. Be specific and let them know you're not totally dissatisfied with their efforts. It could be along the lines of "Let me put this in perspective. I don't want you to think I'm not satisfied with the quality of your work overall, or that your efforts are unappreciated. It could be better though if we find a way to improve your customer service skills."

You can reinforce this thought by saying "I want us to continue working together. I really do think you're doing a good job. But this area is important to the company, and I'd like you to work on this area. If we can work on this, your job performance will be even better than it currently is."

***Make sure they know what you're thinking, and why.*** An employee's performance appraisal rests on the foundation of the agreements made when the employment relationship was consummated regarding job duties and the employee's role and the employer's expectations. A colleague criticizing a co-worker can require a more delicate approach, because the chain of authority is not in place. Also, remember that one of the most important priorities is to maintain a positive and respectful relationship with the person once the discussion has ended.

**Review your assumptions.** Don't automatically assume that you're right and they're wrong, and your mission in life is to correct others! It can seem to the other side of the discussion more like unproductive, demotivating criticism. Before you start handing out criticism, review where you might be making assumptions about your relationship, expectations or how the person is approaching a project or situation. For example, if

you're about to criticize someone for poor listening skills, your assumptions might include your belief that you've been clear in your communication. Reviewing potential assumptions can help set the stage for a more positive discussion or feedback-sharing session.

**Share your intentions as to why you're having this meeting.** Before offering criticism, check your own intentions for wanting to let someone else know what they've done wrong or what could be improved in their behavior or performance. This provides good feedback for you as to whether the issue under critique is really their issue, or your own problem you're passing on to them. Preface your criticism by sharing your intentions. For example, you might say, "My intention for wanting to talk with you is that I want your work to stand out and be recognized by others."

**Make your expectations clear.** Assuming they understand your expectations can create problems at follow-up time, including constructive criticism, of someone else's behavior or performance. Share your perspective on how you understand any working agreements or your own expectations for the situational change that's necessary to improve their performance or behavior, e.g., "My understanding of the project is that you'll be providing the Department Heads with progress reports each Friday afternoon and forwarding a copy to me."

**Ask questions — and give them a fair shot at responding.** To help you identify unclear expectations or misperceptions, ask questions. If you want to fail, just do all of the talking (which assumes you're always correct in your perception of the situation!). Before providing constructive feedback, ask them questions to understand how the other person understood their role and duties, what they thought you or others expected of them, and how they felt their performance was. Often, as you listen to someone's responses to questions, you'll uncover at least one moment that corrects or enhances your understanding of the situation, which then allows you to provide much more constructive feedback.

**Speak respectfully.** This one is simple; do unto others as you would like to be treated yourself. Nothing seems worse than being scolded or yelled at. Everything said seems destructive if you feel that what's coming at you is biased, inaccurate or unfair, and no opportunity for rebuttal is presented...and felt like someone actually listened to what you have to say. In any discussion, and especially one where you'll be offering criticism, it's important to participate in an information-sharing dialogue—even though the tone of the conversation is critical—but both people get to speak and hear each other out.

**See the positive as well as the negative.** Surveys show that many people feel more criticized than appreciated at work, translating into employee turnover because of such interpersonal problems with supervisors or colleagues. Before your meeting, think of the things that you appreciate about the individual with whom you'll be sharing feedback. Have a number ready, and then once you've shared your intentions about the meeting, share the "what I really appreciate about you and your work" list before moving on to constructive criticism. You can also reinforce this at the wrap-up a recap of positive thoughts and expectations for change.

Bottom-line; effective communication is the key to running an effective business.

Without it, you'll be looking to Human Resources or your legal counsel to help do just that.

*Wolf is President, Wolf Gugler & Associates Limited, specializing in executive search and management appraisals for hardware and housewares Retailers and their Suppliers, with offices in Canada and the U.S. He can be reached at (416) 386-1719 or via email to [wolf@wolfgugler.com](mailto:wolf@wolfgugler.com). Web site: [www.wolfgugler.com](http://www.wolfgugler.com)*