Yeung At Heart –

The art of effective criticism

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Are all of your colleagues perfect? Does every single one of them perform not only professionally but enthusiastically at all times, never making a mistake and demonstrating flexibility and initiative during every moment of every working day? If not, why don't you say something to them?

This article is about the art of giving feedback, of constructively criticizing others. Of course few of the people around you will enjoy being criticized. However, that does not mean that they should not hear it occasionally. When others do their jobs poorly, they may harm the effectiveness of the team and bring down morale, affect clients, reduce profits or even put lives at risk.

Of course, there's a big difference between constructive criticism that enhances performance versus unhelpful criticism that creates conflict and destroys confidence.

Talking from a first-person perspective
In management circles, there is an old adage that you should praise publicly but punish privately. Of course, no one is saying that criticism should be used as a form of punishment. However, the implication is clear: we must try to avoid criticizing others in public – either during a meeting or perhaps when others may overhear, for example in an open plan office.

More importantly, effective criticism should always be phrased in the first rather than the second person. For example, using the second person to say "you were quite aggressive in that meeting" implies that we know what is going on in another person's head. It assumes that we can read minds and *know* the intention behind others' actions. Clearly, we cannot.

Instead, the only accurate statement we can ever make is from the first-person perspective, for example: "I thought you seemed quite aggressive in that meeting."

By saying "I thought..." or I feel that..." or something similar, the statement comes across as less accusatory and is more factually accurate. The person we're criticizing

could argue with us if we said "you were quite aggressive in that meeting," but our thoughts and feelings cannot be contested.

We can make that point even more strongly by prefacing how we think or feel by saying something like "From my limited point of view, I thought that..." or "It's purely my personal observation, but I felt that..."

Citing examples and discovering solutions

Of course we then have to be prepared to share specific examples to illustrate why we think or feel the way we do. We need to explain more about the point we're trying to make.

Suppose we feel that a colleague made a mistake or an error. It's up to us to prove it by citing examples of behaviour to back up what we're saying. There's no point raising an issue if you can't recall specific instances when the individual went wrong.

But do make clear that you're not trying to blame anyone. What's done is done. There's no point trying to point the finger of blame to say that it was anyone's fault. All we can do is move forwards and make sure that the situation doesn't happen again. So tell the person you're criticizing exactly that, by saying for example: "I'm not trying to blame anyone. All I'd like to do is make sure that we're all clear on how we can avoid the same mistake in the future."

However, giving examples of where someone has gone wrong should only be part of the discussion. We can't really expect to criticize others without giving them the chance to tell their side of the story too. So make sure you allow them to tell you about what they think happened and about any mitigating factors. We have to listen to these with an open-mind. We have to remember that *we don't* and *can't* ever know all of the facts.

Only once both we and the other person have told our sides of the story can we move on to a solution. Again, this isn't about blame. It's about making sure that everyone knows what's expected of them in the future.

Buoying up their confidence

While some people we criticize may resent it and be quite defensive, others may be very much more sensitive and anxious about it. So it can be useful to put the criticism in the context of their overall performance.

For example, when I'm giving feedback to clients, I often tell them how much of an issue it is on a scale of 1 to 10. A "7" or "8" score implies that this is really, really important or worrisome – possibly of disciplinary proportions if it happens again. On the other hand, telling someone that it's perhaps a "3" or a "4" can reassure them that this is a relatively minor tweak that we're expecting of them but that their overall performance is otherwise solid.

So the only question that remains is: *what* do you wish to criticize someone about – and *when* will you do it?