

Point of view

Managers can find more diplomatic ways to criticize

Question:

Overall, I do a good job, and oftentimes, even a great job, but my boss never acknowledges my successes. He is generous, however, with constructive criticism, which is eroding my self-confidence. How do I improve this situation?

Response:

To survive, managers often rely on patterned responses learned from childhood as their model for delivering feedback. In an Iowa-based study, graduate students followed a 2-year-old throughout the day. They observed that the child was told what not to do 432 times, whereas the child received only 32 positive acknowledgments. Additional research supports this ratio with the national average of parent-to-child criticisms rating 12 criticisms to one compliment. This pattern of focusing on what's wrong rather than what's needed is contributing to our stress-filled corporate cultures.

At my company, we have informally surveyed hundreds of managers representing many industries over the past 10 years, and less than 8 percent have participated in any formal training for giving and receiving feedback. And yet, feedback is essential for learning and growth.

Bruce Tulgan, author of *FAST Feedback*, says, "There's such a disconnect between a manager's impressions of the feedback they give, and their employees'

impressions of the feedback they get. Most managers need a reality check." By default, a manager's comments can be judgmental. This shuts the person down rather than creating a learning experience to expand the employee's idea about what is possible.

Consider the following statements as if you were on the receiving end:

- "You are always late."
- "Your report was inaccurate."
- "Your letter is shoddy."

Do you have the feeling you are being judged? Do you feel that your actions are being evaluated as wrong or bad? Do you feel incompetent and potentially incapable?

Managers often use the word "you" instead of "I." In Thomas Crum's book, *The Magic of Conflict*, he introduces the idea of conflict as a starting point for discovery. He suggests when giving feedback, replace the word "you" with "I." This will shift the focus from judgment to discovery, from criticism to creativity, from the feeling of being inept to having the capacity to learn and grow.

By utilizing his model of changing "you" to "I," the statement changes from, "you are always late," to, "when I don't have to wait, I feel my time is honored."

Beware of using words like always, never and all. They are generalizations which magnify a situation and ignite resistance.

Change, "your report was inaccurate," to, "when I receive a report that follows the outline, I can quickly forward the information to the appropriate parties so they can respond on a timely basis."

The first statement, "your report was inaccurate," posts blame, whereas the second statement identifies the desired outcome and provides a platform for the employee to offer a solution.

Change, "Your letter is shoddy," to, "I need your help writing a letter that informs the customer about the three available options and the relative consequences of each."

The first statement is degrading and critical, leaving no space for self-discovery. The second statement, on the other hand, engages the employee and focuses on the desired outcome to support learning and growth.

As the employee, your power is in your ability to ask questions. This creates the forum for discovery. To illustrate, the employee who is in conflict with a team member and walks into his boss's office demanding the other person be removed from the team is likely to get a very different response than the employee who initiates a discussion with his boss by asking for assistance in developing strategies to defuse an emotionally charged situation.

Thomas Crum says, "When a manager is centered, there is a feeling of rapport and connectedness, which creates the forum for discovery. The essence of a manager's communication has taken place even before the words are spoken."

Your attitude plays a big role in the message that is heard.

We've all had experiences when emotional issues degenerated into contests in which we spent time and mental power defending our position, or attacking the other person. Blame feels better than guilt. In the process, however, we exhaust our intellect in an effort to be right.

Roger Fisher and William Ury, in their book *Getting to Yes*, state, "It is not enough to know that others see things differently. If you want to influence them, you also need to understand empathetically the power of their point of view and to feel the emotional force with which they believe in it."

I read a story about students in a fifth-grade class who planned at 9:15 a.m. to simultaneously drop their books on the floor as their teacher wrote on the black board. They expected her to get angry, flustered or even panic. However, after hearing the bang, she simply turned around, looked at the books on the floor, picked her book up and dropped it on the floor saying, "Sorry I was late." In doing so, she moved to meet their point of view. Her willingness to change, joyfully transformed the attack into an experience everyone enjoyed.

If you want to move from opposition to understanding, shift your point of view to a viewing point. Your point of view is something you need to defend, whereas a viewing point is a place of increased perspective and greater possibility. In the viewing point position, you broaden your understanding by taking into account the other party's perspective. It is from this vantage point that you can communicate with true intent to understand.

When you're feeling ready, schedule a meeting with your boss. Ask questions so you understand his goals and why they are important to him. Focus on the bigger vision. In doing so, movement will take place allowing you to find common ground and shared perspective. This is your place of true power – the power to transform negativity into positive, focused, constructive creation.

Keep in mind that it's not uncommon for people to work in the same company and not share the same internal representation of words. For example, for one person, the word "run" conjures images of being healthy, jog-

ging or having fun. To someone else, the word invokes feelings of boredom, pain or defeat. For others still, a vision of politicians, handshaking and all-night parties comes to mind. If you are in law enforcement, the word "run" might invoke scenes of crooks fleeing from a crime scene.

As your boss explains his goals and strategies, you may need to clarify what he means. Questions including, "what specifically do you mean by. . .", and "describe what will be different when you achieve that goal?", "how will you know when the plan is working – what will you see, hear or feel that will indicate that things have changed?" are necessary bridges to ensure understanding.

Let your boss know that you are on his or her side and you want to be a part of the solution. Ask your boss if he or she is open to reviewing some ideas you have that might be helpful. This will build trust and confidence.

Finally, it will be important to you to recognize that his old patterns are entrenched and may not change overnight. Throughout this process, you will need to find ways to maintain your emotional balance. Take it day-by-day. And before too long, you can expect to see dramatic changes in how he interacts with you.



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