

Telling Them the Truth - The Keys to Sound Criticism

Memo to Associate Members
Research Institute of America Inc.
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Back in the days when the hairbrush was a favorite tool of discipline, Dad was wont to remark, somewhere on the way to the woodshed, "This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you." No self-respecting child ever believed that one - as a child. Discipline does hurt. And it may very well hurt the supervisor more than it does the subordinate. But it's a last-stand measure anyway, often avoidable, if the supervisor were willing to criticize at the appropriate time.

Criticizing is not easy - don't ever expect it to be. However, it is necessary, more than ever in the current profit squeeze, and it is a responsibility that no supervisor can hope to avoid. Consequently, the better part of wisdom would be to learn to do it with a minimum of pain and a maximum of effectiveness. The price of avoiding or mishandling criticism is a high one.

The Need for Criticism

Few things are more disrupting to the morale of your employees than uncertainty over where they stand. One thing that can be said in favor of the old-fashioned system is that the child on the way back from the woodshed knew just what the score was! You don't have to go to such lengths to provide your employees with the answer to the question, "Where do I stand?" But many supervisors, in swinging away from tough-fisted discipline, have assumed that criticism too must be outlawed.

Many people have misinterpreted the new emphasis on human relations in industry. They think the atmosphere must always be "friendly" and that disagreement must be avoided at all cost. This is a misconception. The sound human relations theory is based on the idea that you have to respect the uniqueness of each individual. But that's not the same as saying the employee is always right. Each person, in his own unique way, may often be wrong. And it's then your duty and responsibility as his supervisor to get the message across in a way that will prevent a repetition of the error in the future.

In theory, supervisors tend to accept the importance of "leveling" with their people. Yet, in practice, they find it easier to praise than to criticize. In fact, many supervisors think they must balance the two. As a result they so water down their criticism with praise that the employee is left in the dark as to their real feeling.

If supervisors find this the most unpleasant part of their job, it is because they are stymied by one or more of these facts:

- past attempts have backfired because of their own discomfort in the situation;
- over-concern with "being liked" makes them postpone criticizing until the situation assumes emergency proportions;
- lack of a well-thought-out set of standards makes it difficult to assess errors or to communicate correction;
- confusion over the difference between complaining and criticizing causes a holding back;
- misunderstanding of the purpose of criticism hides its real character- correction, not punishment.

Out in the dark

All of us feel discomfort in the unknown, and find reassurance in "knowing". Passengers in a plane that has developed engine trouble have been kept calm and reassured by honest reporting over the loudspeaker system. Even so simple a bulletin as, "We are now passing over the city of Chicago," gives a sense of security in "knowing where we are."

This need for bearings is equally important in less dramatic situations, such as the everyday work scene.

Experiments in the laboratory and in industry have dramatically demonstrated the importance of bearings with regard to performance.

In one instance, a control group was being trained to handle pursuit-rotor apparatus.

Ordinarily, a man knows pretty well when his stylus is on the target, because he can watch it going around. But, when an audible click was used to signal the fact that he had successfully remained on target for a while, the operator improved more rapidly.

And when errors were also signaled and specific details were given about the size and direction of the errors, improvement was speeded even more. Obviously, it's no favor to withhold any information about a poor performance if you want the person to improve.

Psychologists stress that immediate knowledge of results is one of the best aids in learning. In fact, sound teaching methods are based on the principle of reinforcing learning by providing quick knowledge of results.

Ambiguity of Silence

The supervisor can't afford to ignore the fact that silence itself may be misleading. The optimistic employee is inclined to believe that "no news is good news" and the pessimistic one is left free to believe the worst. The supervisor who thinks that so long as he says nothing he can't be wrong, more likely can't be right. His very silence can create ambiguity.

A mechanic expressed this feeling to us this way: "Whenever our foreman gets called down on the carpet to explain a department goof to the plant manager, he comes back on the floor in bad shape. It's like waiting for the other shoe to drop, just wondering when he'll have his say and get it over with."

Yet, another employee in the same department, less sensitive to his foreman's tensions, had an entirely different interpretation of things. According to him, "I always feel that if the foreman has any complaint about the job I'm doing, he'll just say so. If he leaves me alone, I guess I'm doing okay."

Setting the Boundaries

If you've ever been suddenly trapped in the dark, you've probably experienced a feeling of panic until you were able to reach out and touch a familiar object that gave you some clue again to your whereabouts. Driving through a dense fog, or making your way through a darkened hall, you feel secure so long as you can see the edge of the road or the wall of the room. These boundary lines establish "where you are."

A clearly articulated, consistent set of standards by which you judge performance gives the employee the same sort of boundaries. Psychologically, he knows where he's at if your standards of performance are clear-cut.

Both praise and criticism are means by which the employee can get to know, and understand your standards. But, of the two criticism is more often mishandled, and without it the employee is on his own to decide where to draw the line.

Pushing the Line

Obviously, there's a strong tendency toward laxity where criticism is absent.

If you don't indicate that it matters either way, the employee who conscientiously toes the mark may be considered a "sucker" by his co-workers. In fact, once you allow lapses of behavior or errors of work to pass without comment, employees often unconsciously assume that you have closed the door on criticism.

The plant superintendent in a luggage factory had been fuming silently for months about the flagrant disregard for lateness. When he finally took the bull by the horns and tried to insist on punctuality, the attitude of the

operators was, "What's wrong with him, all of a sudden?"

Because he had failed to insist on his own standards earlier, his criticism now was perceived as an unreasonable complaint.

Cost of Compromise

In discussing this subject with our Member companies, we were astonished by the number who mentioned the failure of their merit rating programs because supervisors shied away from being objective and critical. The vice-president of one company put it this way:

"One of our most difficult problems in developing our front-line supervision as well as the middle management group is to teach the ability to talk frankly with their people in merit-rating their work."

Further discussion indicated that the supervisors and executives have no difficulty discussing progress reports "so long as they are favorable and a pay increase for the individual is anticipated. But if the rating is mediocre or poor it means no increase, and explaining the reasons involves criticism. So rather than rate a person below average, they give an unw realistic merit rating. The result is that in some instances, because they're afraid to go through a session of criticism, they wind up by giving good ratings and then we have to grant raises to people for very bad performance."

Facing the Facts

The role of the critic is a difficult one. No one wants to be considered tough to work for. Many a supervisor is particularly sensitive to the possibility that no matter what he does he will be considered an S.O.B. by his employees.

But you only increase your burdens if you try to dodge your responsibility. You have to point out the need for improvement, wherever it exists.

When you have a tough job to do, the best course is to face it honestly, without minimizing the difficulties. Concentrating on it can help to make it less painful.

1. To improve the ease with which you criticize you have to face the facts in four separate areas:
2. The facts about yourself: your past mistakes, your personality, the kind of situations in which you find criticizing distasteful;
3. The facts about your people: how they react, their expectations and their individual attitudes;
4. The facts about your objectives: the real purpose you hope to accomplish by your criticism;
5. The facts about your standards: the norms by which you assess the performance of your subordinates.

Facts About Yourself

Only you can really uncover the specific factors that make criticism one of your more difficult responsibilities. These common errors that supervisors are inclined to make may help you examine your own attitude:

- Blowing up as soon as an error is revealed.
- Soft-pedaling or sweetening their criticism beyond recognition.
- Hoarding grievances until they become magnified beyond control.
- Passing judgment without investigation or "on the run."
- Focusing on the person instead of the act.
- Exaggerating the error - for example, "You always ..." or "You never ..."
- Generalizing, instead of being specific. ("The whole job is botched up" offers no clue to where the mistake was made or how to correct it.)

As this list indicates, it's just as possible to show your distaste for criticism by overdoing it as by avoiding it. It depends on your own personality.

It's usually possible to criticize effectively in more ways than one. One supervisor may be soft-spoken, and courteous whenever he criticizes. His people are intensely loyal to him.

Another is hardboiled. He shoots his criticism straight from the shoulder. And his people love it! This is not a paradox. The fact is that effective, well-received criticism is not a matter of toughness or politeness, not a matter of following someone else's formula.

What really counts is that your behavior must be consistent with your own personality and your people must believe that the purpose of your criticism is constructive.

Facts About Your Employees

If your people know that your criticism is intended to help them, they will accept it in almost any form. From the employee's point of view, the important thing is the feeling that you are for him and not against him.

It's perfectly human to dislike criticism. Anyone can say, "I want to know how I'm doing; I know I'm not perfect." But it takes courage to listen patiently to harsh or unfeeling criticism.

You can't expect your employees to be overjoyed when they hear your critical comments. But you can reduce the unnecessary discomfort if you give adequate thought to the way you deliver your criticism.

Obviously, there's no easy mix-and-match formula by which you can select the exact words for criticizing each type of personality. Some people welcome firm and tough treatment. Others shrivel under this approach.

But here are some general rules of thumb for various types of employees that can be used as a starting point in thinking about how to talk to a specific person:

Older employees. The oldtimer is particularly sensitive to criticism. He is also bound to be the most reluctant to change. Soft-pedaling may be called for here. In any event, respect for his years must be retained.

New employees. The newcomer on the job may be particularly tense and over-anxious to please. Any sign of displeasure from you will be perceived as a hint that he is not filling the bill. Your criticism will have to take this sensitivity into account. You must not overlook his need for learning each phase of his work thoroughly. His training needs must be a primary factor in your consideration.

Women. Women are universally assumed to be more sensitive to criticism than men. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they are more sensitive to anything that seems like a personal attack. Be particularly cautious to make it clear that you are discussing a specific detail of the performance and not the employee herself.

Reliable performers. An occasional lapse on the part of an outstanding employee should be treated in a manner consistent with his over-all total performance. On the other hand, your best people may be your strongest. They may be the ones who prefer unembellished straight-from-the-shoulder criticism.

Repeaters. It's tempting to use the blunt approach with people who are constantly getting into trouble. But it pays to stop first to examine the reasons for the repeated lapses.

- Are you certain you have communicated your expectations clearly?
- Have you been guilty of overlooking past performance that was below par? Be certain of your facts before you go overboard here. On the other hand, firmness is certainly in order.

Facts About Objectives

You are more likely to stay on the track, as a critic, if you remember that the primary purpose of criticism is to let people know where they stand. Too many supervisors unwittingly create the impression that criticism is a method of discipline or punishment. If your tone of voice or manner makes your criticism seem like an attack, its effectiveness will be questionable.

The ultimate purpose of knowing where you stand includes knowing where you're going. Therefore your criticism should always have a threefold aim:

1. To communicate your standards;
2. To point out deviations or errors that make the performance below par;
3. To indicate the remedy, the correction, the possibilities for improvement.

Above all, criticism should never be considered a method of "keeping people on their toes in general." Used this negative way, it often produces unconscious reactions that hurt rather than help performance. Used positively, it can produce affirmative results: motivating people to rectify specific faults, to improve performance in concrete ways, or to achieve their own full potential.

Facts About Standards

The heart of criticism is the conveying of a clear set of standards. However, the situation is complicated for the supervisor by the fact that standards are not always constant.

To be sure, in some matters there are absolute standards. On a production job, norms can be set for quality and quantity. But even there, the shifting emphasis of management's immediate interest fuzzes criteria.

At one time, the most serious fault may be noticeable losses of output; or deadline failures; or cost failures; or loss of good will with customers, employees or other departments. The scales of judgment are never permanently fixed in dealing with human beings or with company objectives.

In effect, then, you must keep revising your standards of criticism. But even within the framework of these shifting pressures, you can set a pattern of consistency by taking the background into account. Most important, you can be a stabilizing influence by developing a consistent attitude toward criticism. This involves keeping in mind ...

The worst offense against good criticism is to form a judgment without regard to the conditions you yourself create. For example-

- Do your deadlines interfere with quality?
- How many other, simultaneous assignments must also be completed?
- Were you forced to make assignments without adequate specifications?
- Did the assignment have to be completed, even though specifications were changed?
- Do company policies impose restraints on how the job can be done?

Once you have satisfied yourself that criticism is in order, you owe it to your people to communicate your point of view.

The Guides to Sound Criticism

To communicate your criticism effectively, certain standards or guides are needed. You've probably seen them set out in one form or another. For instance, Research Institute studies of criticism have listed these:

1. Keep it impersonal. It's a situation that you want to correct, not a personality.
2. Stick to the facts. Exaggerations serve only to divert the individual from the part that's true, to concentrate on what he thinks he can refute. Then he and the critic end up with widely separated views of the objective situation, to the detriment of both. Similarly, general statements about a person's work leave him in the dark as to exactly what's wrong. This lack of specific knowledge blocks

any improvement the critic might expect.

3. Spell out a clear-cut remedy, Since a primary goal of good criticism is to help a person do better, you should give as much attention to a specific remedy as to the details of the error, This not only increases the possibility of improvement but also shows that one of your purposes is to benefit the employee.
4. Choose time and location carefully, The wrong timing or a poor location can obscure the benefits and magnify the inherent distastefulness of criticism, so that more harm than good results.

The most-widely-recognized admonition here is that criticism should be made privately, Yet, there's an exception: if an employee is in the midst of committing an irreparable and serious error, you may have to correct him promptly despite the presence of others.

Criticism should never be squeezed into odd moments, casual meetings, chance conversations. It should not be interspersed among longer items of business. In that case, the supervisor may be satisfying his own conscience ("Well, I did tell him!") but is actually fleeing from any real discussion.

If the deficiency is worth talking about at all, then it is worth the time needed to convey just how serious you consider it and what can be done about it Similarly, you must be willing to face up to the responsibility of defending your contentions if the subordinate wants to dispute the accuracy of your facts.

5. Avoid wisecracks, Two dangers spring from the injection of a humorous note into criticism:

- Some supervisors who really don't like to criticize try a light approach that undercuts the seriousness of the situation, It's not surprising then that employees "laugh it off."
 - With the best of intentions, a supervisor may use humorous words that fall on the ears of his listener like sarcasm, The hurt to an employee who feels he's the butt of hostile wit closes his mind to any sound aspects of the criticism. Unless you know from past reactions that humor serves your purpose well, better save it for the noncritical exchanges.
6. Tie up loose ends, The net result of effective criticism should be a strengthening of your relationship with your people. In the process of discussing their weaknesses objectively, and planning the corrections and improvements, you remove the anxiety of uncertainty for them.

But this positive advantage can be lost if you fail to follow through and tie up any loose ends.

Your follow-up should be planned with these considerations in mind:

- Your purpose is not to rehash the substance of your criticism.
- You don't want to drum your instructions into the employee once more.
- You want to give the individual a chance to ask any questions he may have about the right way you showed him.
- You want to let him know that the incident is water under the bridge. (Sometimes you can do this by avoiding mention of it and using some other item as the subject of your contact. But non-reference to the criticism is useful only if the two of you have already had a full discussion.)

Why the Rules Are So Often Ignored

The above guides, though fairly well known, are frequently ignored. Studying possible reasons for this anomaly, our staff has reached this conclusion:

Criticism goes astray because of failure to recognize that all the rules are offshoots of two basic principles:

- A. Keep your criticism responsible; and,
- B. Keep a proper balance.

Usually, behind the failure to observe either or both of these principles is the critic's lack of certainty about his own judgment.

Responsibility

It's responsibility that forces a supervisor to criticize an employee in the first place. That's part of his job, and to neglect it is to be remiss. But responsibility also requires that the supervisor be accurate and certain in his appraisal.

Particularly, the critic should avoid the natural tendency to dwell on end-results to the exclusion of causes. An adequate investigation would encompass the why and the who, as well as the what, when, where and how.

Responsibility in criticism also demands that you be specific about the details of the error and the remedy. It also provides a reason for following up later on.

Because of uncertainty about his responsibility as a critic, many a supervisor uses evasive, self-defeating tactics. Our researchers in the field have collected numerous case histories which reveal how criticism goes sour:

1. Silent criticism. There are occasions when silence can be expressive and clear. But more often than not it is misunderstood and interpreted variously as:
 - lack of knowledge;
 - a feeling that the matter is too trivial;
 - a postponement of criticism.

Each of these injures the critic or his victim, or both. A supervisor who doesn't want to discuss a matter ought to say so and close the incident once and for all.

2. Second-hand criticism. Here the critic evades responsibility and professes to speak for others without clearly indicating whether he agrees or disagrees with the judgments he is passing along.

This creates doubt as to where he stands. The only thing worse than that is to suggest that he really doesn't agree with the criticism but that the subordinate should act on it just as if it were valid.

Second-hand communication of criticism serves only to frustrate the recipient. He is in the position of a defendant who is not allowed to confront the witnesses against him.

3. Chain-reaction criticism. This happens when the target is not really the person responsible for the error, and the critic is trying to get him to exert pressure on a third party.

For example, the head of a shipping department is late in making shipments because of delays on the production line. Instead of confronting the production head, the general manager rebukes the shipping department on the assumption that Production will hear about it, or that Shipping will speak up in turn.

Chain-reaction criticism is bad for several reasons. For one thing, it's often recognized by the man in the middle as a weakness on the part of the supervisor - the latter is either afraid of his real target or doubtful that he can influence him. Also, it involves more people than rightly belong in the situation, multiplying bad feeling and confusion. Frequently the only effect is to unite the second and third party in mutual resistance to the critic.

Balanced Criticism

The principle that criticism must be balanced has been so distorted that many supervisors have been persuaded to leaven every portion of criticism with an equal amount of praise.

The true meaning of this basically sound principle involves a long-range angle too often overlooked. The test is whether, over a long period, you indicate to your people that you can praise when it's earned, as well as criticize when that's necessary.

Balance does not require that the volume of praise and criticism be the same in any given critical situation, or even in a series of them. What it does demand, however, in each case is that you bear in mind these three ideas:

1. Truth must be respected whenever you use facesaving praise. If you are misrepresenting the facts, your subordinate will know it and will discount both your praise and your criticism.
2. Keep the fault in perspective. Don't treat all mistakes alike. Some are important; some are hot. In dealing with an unimportant matter, explain why you're commenting on it. For example: "No great hann was done by it, Joe, but under other circumstances, it might prove very expensive to us."
3. Keep an eye on the way the scales balance out over the long run. Whenever you acknowledge good perfmmance, you are laying the foundation for tomorrow: you are making it possible for criticism, even of the toughest kind, to gain a hearing in the future.

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