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How to Give Critical Feedback

It's not possible, or desirable, to have meaningful relationships at home or at work at Cornell without letting others know what we need and want. At some time or other, we must honestly assert to others what we think and believe, regardless of how uncomfortable these conversations may be. When we're in positions of authority, (e.g., a supervisor, employer, team leader, or mentor) and we are accountable for another person's performance, we're regularly obligated to provide honest written and/or oral assessments of their abilities and performance. Similarly, even when we are not in a position of authority, we may have observations or experiences (as a team member, employee, intern etc.) of another's ability or performance that are important to convey.

How we manage such sensitive conversations with others will have a great impact on how what we say will be perceived and received. Precisely because emotions are triggered on both sides of these exchanges, developing greater skill in the preparation, approach, and execution of feedback is critically important to achieving positive outcomes.

Unfortunately, much of the feedback we give (or receive) in our lives is spontaneous and opportunistic. Delivering (or stumbling into) critical feedback disguised as an off-the-cuff remark when the other party is ill-prepared or preoccupied will likely backfire because it will elicit emotional defensiveness. Instead, having a structured discussion, agreed to by both parties, in which feedback is shared, will increase the likelihood of success. Below are some strategies to maximize your effectiveness when having a discussion involving critical feedback.

Before the discussion – be prepared

- **Remember that relationships matter**. What is the nature of your relationship to the person you'll be evaluating? Is the person your peer, someone you supervise, a customer? Some approaches for offering constructive criticism can be applied in all cases, and in all cases success depends on expectations and agreements as understood by both parties. For example, a supervisor providing critical feedback to an employee's performance rests on an agreement (made at the start of the employment relationship) about the employee's role and the supervisor's expectations. Delivering critical feedback to a coworker can require a more delicate approach, because the same assumptions regarding authority are not in place.

- **Review assumptions**. Most people automatically assume that they're right and everyone else is wrong, and it's their mission in life to correct others. One great thing to do before you lob criticism at someone else is to review where you might be making assumptions about the relationship, expectations or how the person is approaching a project or situation, etc. For example, if you're about to criticize someone for "never listening" your assumptions might include your perception that you've been clear in your communication about expectations. This may not be true. Considering potential assumptions can help set the foundation for a more positive discussion or feedback-sharing session.

- **Understand why you are offering criticism**. Feel confident that doing so is appropriate to the situation and constructive for the parties involved. Criticism voiced out of self-interest or competition may be destructive.

- **Engage in perspective-taking or role reversal**. As you develop a criticism strategy or response, try to understand the perspective of the person being criticized.

- **Relax and take calming breaths before the meeting**. If we're anxious about providing critical feedback or feeling frustrated or resentful about another person's behavior or performance, we might be tempted to head into a feedback-sharing discussion in a state of stress. The better choice is to take a few minutes to relax, breathe slowly and deeply, remember our highest intentions for the meeting and for sharing our feedback. Whether you just sit quietly for a moment, or say a prayer, or practice a stress management tip from a self-help book, making an effort to relax and center will make a positive difference in the tone of your meeting, and you'll be more likely to be skillful rather than reactionary in your discussion.

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During the discussion - Be respectful and direct

- When possible, start with a reflection of something that the person has done right, or that has enhanced relationship in some way.
- When giving the more difficult feedback be sure to address the person's behavior, not on her or his "person." In other words, refer to what a person does, not her or his "traits," or "character." For example consider the difference between *"you have been late for the last three staff meetings,"* vs. *"you're lazy and disrespectful."*
- Focus your criticism on a particular situation rather than general or abstract behavior. Whenever possible, give specifics. "Index" and "date" your criticism, much like a journalist: deal with "who, what, where, and when."
- Direct your criticism to the present ("here and now") rather than the past ("there and then").
- Seek agreement that a problem exists.
- Emphasize in your criticism your perceptions and feelings. Indicate what you think and feel about the other's behavior that you have described. Use "I" statements.
- Invite a collaborative discussion of consequences rather than offering advice. Form a partnership to deal with problems. Do not compete against the other party; compete with the other person against the problem.
- Keep judgments tentative. Maintain an "open door" of dialogue rather than presenting your "analysis" or "explanation" of another's behavior.
- Present criticism in ways that allow the other party to make decisions. Do not force criticism on the other. Encourage the other to experience "ownership." People are more likely to comply with solutions that they generate.
- Avoid critical overload. Give the other an amount of critical feedback that she or he can handle or understand at that time.
- Focus criticism on behaviors that the other person can change.
- Include in your critical feedback a positive "outlet." Reinforce positive actions and invite the possibility of change.
- Invite the other to share his/her experience of the situation, and to offer feedback about you; ask for reactions, be willing to be influenced.
- When summarizing, reinforce your desire to work through the difficult situations or behaviors, and that you value the other person.

After the discussion

- Thank the person for meeting and discussing the issue
- Consider sending a written summary of next steps and checkpoints

Remember role and value of praise

- Offering sincere praise remains a surefire way to bolster employees' sense of worth about their job performance and value to the department/organization. Praise employees individually or in a group setting; you have a better shot at enhancing employee morale and performance if you do not single out one employee publicly over others

- Giving deserved and timely praise eases giving critical feedback. If you're uncomfortable giving critical feedback then you may want to use a technique commonly referred to as "sandwiching." The basic recipe for a feedback sandwich consists of one specific criticism "sandwiched" between two specific praises.

- Remember the *negativity bias*. The *negativity bias* is a psychological phenomenon: people react to the bad more strongly and persistently than to the comparable good. It may take five positive statements of praise for the listener to hear one piece of critical feedback. Be generous with praise.

Seeking help

If you have difficulty giving critical feedback and perhaps feel a lack of healthy power and control, or you're experiencing too many push-backs and static filled engagements within your relationships and don't feel heard, then contact FSAP at 607-255-2673.

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