

Giving Advice and Criticism

Workshop 3

Jana has worked in a busy drugstore for almost five years, and the owner has told her she's in line to become assistant manager. She's dedicated and smart. That's why it pains her to see the new pharmacist, Raisa, making such a hash of things.

Raisa has no sense of how to prioritize her work. This morning when she arrived, twelve minutes late, there was a stack of prescription slips waiting to be filled.

Some were brought in by customers; others were phoned in by doctors. Did Raisa check to see which were most urgent? No. Looking nervous about the amount of work she had to do, she started filling the prescriptions in seemingly random order.

Now Jana notices a long-time customer, Mr. Gretzky, looking dismayed, but waiting patiently. At this point Jana feels she has to intervene.

"Do you have a script for Gretzky?" she asks Raisa.

"Who?"

"Mr. Gretzky—he's over there waiting. It's probably for his heart pills. You know, it's hard for him to stand around a long time, so you should work on his prescription right away."

"Oh, nobody told me," Raisa says quickly.

"You can see him standing there," Jana points out. "And all the scripts are marked—pickup, delivery, or whether the customer's in the store. Besides, if you'd get here on time, you wouldn't fall behind."

Raisa glares as she yanks a slip from the pile. "There!" she says.

"Gretzky—it's for an antifungal agent, not heart medicine. You know, I *am* a licensed pharmacist!"

"Well," Jana snaps back, "if Mr. Gretzky has a heart attack in the store, it will be your fault!"

Storming off, Jana thinks, "I'm just trying to help people, and see what I get for it!"



What's Inside

Here, you will learn to

- ◆ frame advice and criticism constructively
- ◆ address a coworker's personal behavior
- ◆ use "I" messages to avoid blaming
- ◆ framing advice and criticism

Constructive vs. Destructive Comments

What caused the blow-up between Jana and Raisa?

Certainly, Raisa could have shown more willingness to listen to advice. Using techniques like the ones you learned in Workshop 2, Raisa could have tried to avoid getting defensive and to focus instead on the usefulness of what she was hearing.

Still, doesn't Jana bear some responsibility for the conflict? Didn't she help provoke Raisa's negative reaction?



After all, Jana implied that Raisa was neglecting the customers, then suggested that she couldn't remember procedure. To top it off, Jana threw in criticism about Raisa's being late for work. No wonder Raisa became irritated and defensive! Even though Jana's intentions were good, her remarks were not at all tactful.

Workshop 1 introduced the terms *constructive* and *destructive* in relation to conflict. They apply just as well to advice. To help people hear you without undue defensiveness, you need to frame your advice in a way that allows them to preserve their self-esteem. Instead of challenging their opinion of themselves as good employees and decent people, try to reinforce it. That's what is meant by constructive advice.

Here are some qualities of constructive advice:

- ◆ **Nonjudgmental.** Constructive advice doesn't convey judgment of the other person. It doesn't say or imply that "you're wrong," "you're stupid," or the like.
- ◆ **Focused on the issue, not on the person.** Constructive advice concentrates on the difficulty at hand, not on the qualities of the person you're advising.
- ◆ **Framed as a mutual problem.** Constructive advice frames the issue as a mutual problem to be solved, not as a problem that the other person must solve alone.



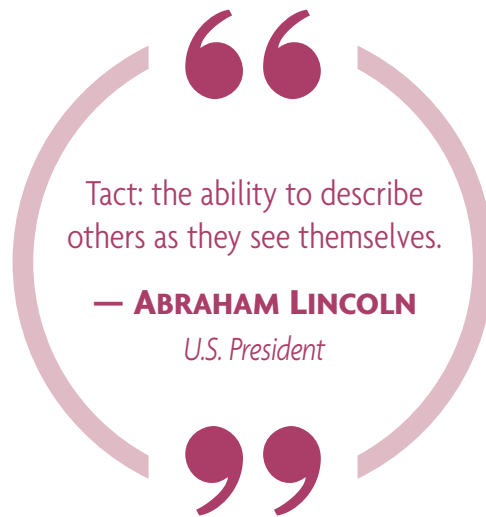
◆ **Balanced.** Constructive advice balances the positive and the negative. For instance: “I can see you’re working really hard and things are going well overall, but there’s one small thing we ought to look at.” Usually, in fact, you should state the positive before you get to the negative, and perhaps reinforce the positive at the end of the conversation as well.

◆ **Focused on the present.**

Constructive advice deals with today’s problem; it doesn’t dredge up matters from the past.

◆ **Empathic.** The word *empathy* refers to the ability to share the feelings of another person. Constructive advice is empathic in the sense that it shows you care about how the other person is feeling.

◆ **Open to discussion.** In constructive advice or criticism, the speaker conveys the sense that the listener may have a different—and possibly valid—perspective on the situation.



Watch Your Language!

Often you may *think* you’re being constructive when the words you choose imply the opposite. Look at the following common expressions and try to decide what’s wrong with them:

1. I can’t see why you . . .
2. If you look at this carefully, you’ll see that . . .
3. I realize you can’t be expected to . . .
4. You failed to specify . . .
5. I know you’re trying, but . . .
6. Most people here understand that . . .

Do those phrases sound innocent? This is what the listener might hear:

1. You’re so stupid that what you did is beyond comprehension.
2. You didn’t do careful work.
3. It’s not your fault you’re unqualified—you should never have been given this job.
4. You were negligent.
5. No matter how hard you try, you can’t make up for your lack of talent.
6. You’re dumber than most other people in the organization.

ACTIVITY 3.1

NAME _____

Framing Criticism

The following comments are examples of negative, destructive criticism. In the space provided, reframe each item to make it more constructive.

1. "You're always late. Why can't you get to work on time?"
2. "If you weren't always so hyper, you'd see we can't rush this job. There's too much at stake."
3. "We did it your way last time, and everybody said the result was a disaster. Stop trying to run everything."
4. "Why didn't you wait for help from somebody who knew how to do this right?"
5. "I don't understand why you ever thought this plan would work."
6. "The boss ripped this proposal apart, pointing out lots of mistakes you made, so you're going to have to do it all over."

Dealing with Personal Behavior

It's all very well, you may be thinking, to say that advice should be nonjudgmental and should focus on the issue rather than the person. But what if the issue *is* the person?

Say you have a coworker, Robert, who is always ill-tempered, loud-mouthed, and at times abusive. What you want to say to Robert is that, since nothing positive ever comes out of his mouth, he should staple it shut. That wouldn't, however, be a constructive remark. So what can you do about the situation?

First, of course, you can simply try to avoid Robert whenever possible. If you don't have to work with him, just stay away.

Second, if you do have to work with Robert, you should remind

yourself that he may have some reason for his ill temper. Perhaps he has a terrible home life. Perhaps his parents died when he was young and he's been insecure ever since. You don't need to invent excuses for him, but empathy requires that you try to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Third, understand that you're not actually objecting to Robert as a person. You may hardly know Robert as a person. What bothers you—what you want to change—is his *behavior*, the way he acts around you and your coworkers.

Finally, if you do decide to offer Robert some well-intentioned advice, you can focus on specific suggestions that would make the environment better for everyone, including him. That is, you can try to show him how *he* would benefit from changing his behavior.



Be Constructive: It's Your Responsibility!

Just as you have a responsibility for becoming a good listener, so, too, you are responsible for conveying advice and criticism in a way that helps other people benefit from it. This is especially true if you're a supervisor, but it is also true for your interactions with your peers.

ACTIVITY 3.2

NAME _____

Advising a Grouch

Assume you are beginning a team project in which Robert, notorious for his uncooperativeness and ill temper, has to play a major role. Think about how you might approach Robert to advise him to behave cooperatively during the project. How could you begin? What points could you make? Write some of the things you might say to Robert.

“

People ask you for criticism,
but they only want praise.

— **WILLIAM SOMERSET
MAUGHAM**

*British playwright, novelist
and short story writer*

”

Using “I” Messages

One verbal technique that can help you frame advice constructively is the use of “I” messages.

What is an “I” message? It’s one that avoids directly accusing the other person by making clear that the reactions you’re stating are your own.

Generally you can accomplish this by using first-person singular pronouns: “I,” “me,” “myself,” and so on. The opposite of an “I” message is a “you” message, one that assigns the blame or responsibility to someone else.



Look at the examples below. Can you see why “you” messages tend to make the listener feel defensive? An “I” message helps avoid directing so much blame at the other person. Also, with an “I” message, you can get your own feelings out in the open, helping the listener comprehend your motivation. This improves mutual understanding

and increases the chance that the listener will take your comments to heart.

Here Are Some Examples of “I” and “You” Messages:

“I” Message

I was upset when you arrived late for the meeting. I felt like you didn’t care about the project.

In my opinion, this plan has some flaws in it.

I don’t understand why nothing was done. I thought we had agreed on what to do.

“You” Message

You showed you didn’t care about the project by not bothering to come to the meeting on time.

Your plan is flawed.

You dropped the ball. You didn’t follow through on the agreement we made.

ACTIVITY 3.3

NAME _____

Identifying “I” Messages

For each of the following comments, mark “Y” if it is an “I” message and “N” if it is not. Remember, a true “I” message takes responsibility for the ideas or emotions being expressed and avoids blaming or putting down the other person.

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1. You don't know what you're doing here, do you? | Y | N |
| 2. Let me do that—I know a better way. | Y | N |
| 3. Personally, I'm worried about some of the consequences of this plan. | Y | N |
| 4. I think you should be fired! | Y | N |
| 5. To me, it seems there might be a better alternative. | Y | N |
| 6. I'm not sure I understand the reasoning behind your proposal. | Y | N |
| 7. Let me guess: You messed up because you were totally lost. | Y | N |
| 8. After recommending you for the job, I felt let down when it seemed like you weren't giving it your best effort. | Y | N |
| 9. Can you help me get a handle on this? I'm having trouble seeing what went wrong. | Y | N |
| 10. I'm just fed up with your stupid behavior. | Y | N |

1 N, 2 N, 3 Y, 4 N, 5 Y, 6 Y, 7 N, 8 Y, 9 Y, 10 N

Is Humor Advisable?

Some people are adept at presenting their criticism with a dose of humor. With a joke or a teasing remark, they can make their point gently without arousing the listener's defenses: “Hey, Mark, I thought I was supposed to be the one with all the goofy ideas around here. Are you trying to horn in on my territory?”

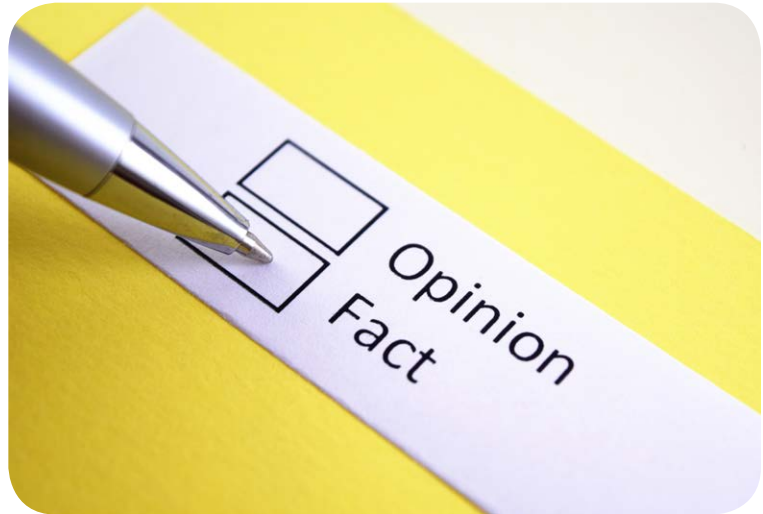
If you're good at light humor, you can often use it to your advantage. If you're not so good, or if the situation is tense, you're probably better off avoiding attempts at humor, because a lame joke can be taken the wrong way.

Preparing to Get It Right: Facts, Time, Place

In addition to the way you frame your advice or criticism, some other important factors help determine whether it will be effective:

1. **Accuracy.** Before you criticize or advise someone, make sure you have the facts exactly right. Know what you're talking about. Even if you're sure your general approach is correct, a mistaken detail can make you seem ignorant.
2. **Clarity and specificity.** Deliver your information clearly, and be specific. Don't leave the other person guessing about your meaning. Not only is vagueness not helpful, but it can leave the other person feeling criticized for no good reason.
3. **Time and place.** Your choice of time and place has a crucial impact on the effectiveness of your comments. If you are discussing a particular event, you should speak up soon enough after the event so that it is fresh in the person's mind. Yet you also want to choose a time when the person is calm, not too busy to listen to you,

and free of distractions. You want a quiet place, if possible, where you won't be interrupted. In most cases you want to be alone with the person you're advising so that you don't embarrass him or her in front of others.



How can you make sure your comments are accurate, clear, and delivered at the right time and place? The answer is that you should prepare well in advance. Gather all the information you can about the situation and its causes. Think carefully about how to phrase your remarks. Then plan the best time and place to talk with the other person.

It is much easier to be
critical than to be correct.

— **BENJAMIN DISRAELI**

British Statesman

ACTIVITY 3.4

NAME _____

My Style of Criticizing

This activity will help you understand how often you apply the techniques you've learned so far in this workshop. Answer these questions as honestly as you can, using the following scale:

- 5 Always
- 4 Often
- 3 Occasionally
- 2 Seldom
- 1 Never

- _____ 1. When criticizing someone, I try not to say negative things about him or her personally.
- _____ 2. When I offer criticism, I consider it a learning experience—for me as well as for the other person.
- _____ 3. If I'm upset about people's performance, I make clear that they're to blame for the problem.
- _____ 4. I don't plan my critiques in advance; I just let it fly.
- _____ 5. People claim they don't understand why I'm criticizing them.
- _____ 6. When I state a critique, I show that I'm willing to accept that I might be wrong.
- _____ 7. After criticizing someone, I find out later that there was more to the story than I thought.
- _____ 8. I'm careful to choose the right moment to give someone advice or criticism.
- _____ 9. If I need to criticize one individual, I say it in front of everybody.
- _____ 10. Even with the most obnoxious people at work, I manage to state my criticisms positively.

To calculate your total score for this exercise, first reverse the scores for items 3, 4, 5, 7, and 9. That is, if you wrote a 5 next to one of those items, make it a 1; if you wrote a 4, make it a 2. (A 3 stays the same.) Now add up all the numbers.

The higher your score, the more likely you are to offer advice and criticism in an effective manner. The maximum score is 50. How close did you come? In what areas do you need to work the hardest to improve your ability to give advice and criticism?

_____ **SCORE**



GETTING CONNECTED

Go to a Web bookstore and look for business books about the art of providing criticism and feedback. For example, at Barnes & Noble—

<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/>

—you can search for *feedback books*. How many current book titles do you find on the subject? Why do you think it's such a popular topic?

WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- To help people hear you without undue defensiveness, frame your advice in a way that allows them to preserve their self-esteem.
- Even when you object to someone's personal behavior, you should focus your comments on specific behavioral changes that might improve the environment for everyone.
- "I" messages, which avoid accusations and show that the reactions you're stating are your own, can help you frame advice constructively.
- Before offering advice or criticism, you should prepare in advance so that your remarks are accurate, clear, and delivered at the best time and place.

“

I like criticism.
It makes you strong.

— **LEBRON JAMES**

Basketball Star

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