

HBR Blog Network



Everything You Need to Know About Giving Negative Feedback

by Sarah Green | 12:00 PM June 30, 2014

There's a lot of conflicting advice out there on giving corrective feedback. If you really need to criticize someone's work, how should you do it? I dug into our archives for our best, research- and experience-based advice on what to do, and what to avoid.

Never, ever, ever feed someone a "sandwich." (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/04/the-sandwich-approach-undermin/>)

Don't bookend your critique with compliments. It sounds insincere and risks diluting your message. Instead, separate your negative commentary from your praise, and don't hedge.

Schedule regular check-ins (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/06/how-to-give-your-team-feedback/>) with your direct reports, so that giving feedback — both negative and positive — becomes a normal part of the weekly routine.

Don't lump your critical feedback together with discussions of pay and promotion (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/02/stop-pretending-that-you-cant-give-candid-feedback/>) — as in typical year-end evaluation. This creates a toxic cocktail of emotions even the most mellow employee will have trouble managing. Instead, make these separate conversations.

The adage "praise in public, criticize in private" is an old management mantra. But sometimes, you have to be critical in public (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/03/how-criticizing-in-private-und/>). Holding people accountable sometimes means discussing performance issues with the group, even if it feels uncomfortable.

Ask permission (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2011/03/dont-be-nice-be-helpful/>). This may sound odd — especially if you're the boss — but you can tip people off that a critique is coming (making them more receptive to hearing it) if you start the conversation with, "Can I give you some feedback?"

Avoid jumping to conclusions or seeming like a bully by sticking to the facts (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/05/how-to-deal-with-a-slacker-coworker/>). For instance, if employees are leaving early and showing up late, they could be having a family emergency or a health issue. Simply state the behavior you've observed and let them explain what's going on.

Try framing your critique in terms of the positive result you want to achieve (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/12/when-you-criticize-someone-you-make-it-harder-for-them-to-change/>), rather than as what's wrong with the person. Make it about the impact the employee could achieve by working differently. Ask "What are your goals?" (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2009/12/giving-a-high-performer-product/>)

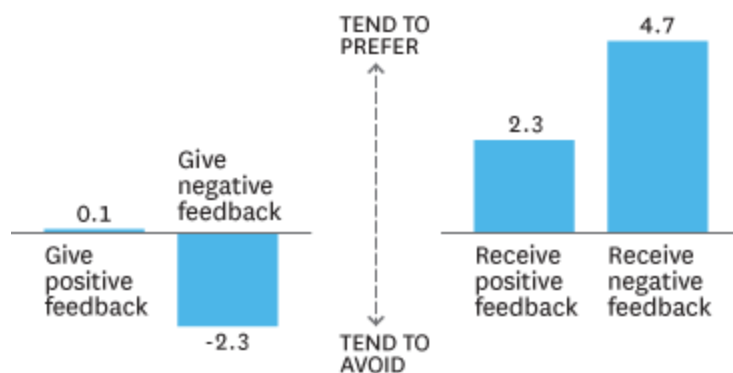
Be specific about the new behavior you'd like to see (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2009/04/feedback-that-works/>).

If you're delivering some particularly hard-to-hear news, consider giving the person the rest of the afternoon off. Studies have shown that top performers are especially vulnerable to major setbacks (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/02/star-performers-need-extra-affirmation-after-a-setback/>) . Show compassion not by softening the blow with false praise, but by giving bad news straight and then offering some breathing room.

If the person you're giving feedback to gets defensive or lashes out, keep your preferred outcome and preferred working relationship in mind (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2009/05/how-to-disarm-combative-conver/>) . You can't prepare for every possible thwarting mechanism someone might throw at you, but you can control your reactions.

Recognize that everyone wants corrective feedback — yes, even Millennials (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/01/your-employees-want-the-negative-feedback-you-hate-to-give/>) and even experienced, expert workers (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/01/sometimes-negative-feedback-is/>) . Consulting firm Zenger Folkman found that while managers dislike giving critical feedback, all employees value hearing it — and often find it even more useful than praise.

**NO ONE LIKES TO GIVE NEGATIVE FEEDBACK,
BUT EVERYONE WANTS TO HEAR IT**



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(<https://hbrblogs.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/noonelikes.gif>)

There's one important caveat here, however, and that's the ideal praise-to-criticism ratio (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/03/the-ideal-praise-to-criticism/>) . While we may not be willing to admit it to ourselves, we do need to hear praise. And studies of both the most effective teams and the most happily married couples have shown that the ideal ratio is about five compliments to every criticism. So do shower your team with kudos — just don't do it at the same time you're critiquing them.

And when you do offer plaudits, praise effort — not ability (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/12/building-a-feedback-rich-culture/>) . Carol Dweck's well-known research has shown that's the best way to keep people motivated (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2012/01/the-right-mindset-for-success/>) and it makes criticism feel less threatening and personal. After all, if you've been told your whole life, "You're so smart!" a rebuke might make you wonder, *Am I dumb now?* Focusing your praise on behaviors — "You guys really put a lot of attention to detail into this" or "I'm so impressed with how hard you worked to get this done on time and under budget" — means that when you have to deliver some corrective feedback, people are more likely to take it in the same vein rather than as a personal attack.