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## Criticizing a Project Team Member's Performance No. 2 in the Series, Guidelines for Delivering Instructive Criticism

by Claudine E. Paris

Below are five simple rules for delivering "criticism at its best". Review the first article in the series, [Guidelines for Delivering Constructive Criticism](#), for a more detailed description.

- Think it through before you say something. Don't just shoot from the lip.
- Criticize in private. Take only one point at a time, in a timely fashion (otherwise known as "nip the problem in the bud").
- Criticize without comparison.
- Criticize with specificity, not labels.
- Instructive criticism gives project managers a platform for criticizing team members without arousing the confounding emotions of fear and anger. The more positively you deliver the criticism, the more likely you are to get results. You can keep on getting those results, not by taking a sigh of relief, but by making sure you reinforce them.

### One Reason to Criticize

Many of us avoid giving criticism for fear of harming the relationship, until one day the proverbial straw becomes one too many. A mélange of emotion takes over: anger, frustration, disappointment, hurt, fear and; in this state of low IQ and high volume, we spew our current and saved-up criticisms.

This article is about taking care of relationships with team members by remembering that there is only one reason to criticize: to motivate someone to change behavior. How do you do that? Not by beating on them. You do it by taking deliberate, considered action. The guidelines below may help.

### Need to Know and Need Not to Know

Human beings (including you) often do the wrong thing because they lack awareness or information. Consider that some people may not know that eating their lunch during a conference call is obnoxious to others. Or that they talk "too much" during meetings. Or that they have a "negative attitude." Because their behaviors seem so obvious, we conclude that they must know and don't care. The truth is there's simply information they need to know. And likewise, there's information they need not to know . . .

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"It was pretty embarrassing to me to have one of my team members chomping away on his lunch during the conference call. Very uncouth."

However real your embarrassment, the receiver has a need not to know about it. Why? Because it diverts from your goal of improved performance to attention on emotions and away from discussion about the problem behavior. Remember, you want a commitment to change, that's all. So, bite your tongue. Refrain from punishing.

When people have information about their unwanted behaviors they often sufficiently punish themselves. They start talking to themselves about how stupid or thoughtless their behavior was and don't need you to say things that further fuel their emotions.

### Instructive Criticism

"In the future will you please eat your lunch before or after the conference call. The sounds were distracting."

Here, you've asked for what you want and given a brief rationale. This leaves the receiver free to focus on what you've said instead of on emotions. You've left the receiver emotionally intact and yet given enough information for him to comply.

### Destructive Criticism

"You're late again. It's very inconsiderate of you to show up after the meeting has started so we have to backtrack. It's like you're on some kind of power trip."

The receiver needs not to know that you think she's an inconsiderate power monger. These remarks amount to a retaliatory attack and cause hurt feelings. Is that what you want? Does it help you achieve your goal of gaining commitment and loyalty?

### Instructive Criticism

"You need to arrive on time for meetings. When you're late I have the choice of either proceeding without you, which means you may miss getting information you need, or repeating what I've already said, which essentially punishes others for arriving on time. I really don't like either option."

Here you've clearly stated the change you want and factually stated the reason why.

### Ask for What You Want

Although this seems like a simple rule, it's not. Asking for what you want requires that you first know what you want. What you don't want is clear; it's in your face and easily describable and even quantifiable.

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Few things are more difficult than knowing what you do want; describing it and asking for it are even harder. You'll need to noodle through it, though, because mind reading doesn't work.

Beware of the natural tendency to communicate what you already know, i.e., what you don't want.

### Destructive Criticism

"That's not what I asked for."

"That's not right. You didn't listen."

"No, no, no. That's not what I expected."

"You didn't think it through. This is all wrong."

These "not" comments do double injury: they hurt and they don't help. They are analogous to emphatically telling someone which road not to take. Even highly motivated people cannot glean from these remarks what, exactly, to do differently in the future.

Now, I've suggested what not to do. Do you know what to do instead? You could guess. But why not make it easy? On to instructive criticisms.

### Instructive Criticism

"It appears I wasn't clear about my expectations. I'd like for you to get the status report in the interoffice mail before 10:00 a.m. on the last Thursday of each month. This gives people a chance to review it before our noon meetings on the following Monday. How does this fit in with your priorities?"

Rather than trying to reconstruct the earlier conversation, you simply took responsibility and reiterated or clarified your instructions. You set the context for why this action needs to happen on time. You checked to make sure the receiver could realistically commit to the task.

"It looks like we weren't on the same page. I can see how you might have interpreted my instructions as you did. What I meant was . . . In the future please ask me questions if my instructions seem at all unclear."

Notice the absence of blaming and finger-pointing. The emphasis is on problem solving and future gains.

### Build on What's Right

Start with what's right. I consider this good politics.

### Destructive Criticism

"I don't agree."

"That won't work."

"That's been tried before."

"No one will accept that."

Ideas don't always spring forth fully conceptualized. Totally rejecting others' ideas and work shows a lack of conceptual flexibility and creativity.

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### Instructive Criticism

"I think you're on the right track for changing our incentive plan."

"You're taking us in the right direction. We do need to know more about the corporate goals."

"Yes. You're right, we need to blaze new trails. I agree that we can't do it the same as was tried before."

So you didn't like the whole thing, you liked parts of it. Build on what you like. Nail down those good behaviors and on-the-right-track thinking.

### Encourage Dialog with the Receiver

Telling is not the same thing as communicating. Your role is to clearly communicate your expectations. This requires that you explain what you want, how you want it, and when, specifically, you want it. Then you need to ask for the receiver's understanding of your expectations.

### Destructive Criticism

"I've given you very clear, excruciatingly detailed instructions and I still don't get what I want."

This remark is, ahem, very telling. If you're still not getting what you want, maybe you're not communicating what you want. Maybe the person lacks the understanding of your expectations and cannot absorb meaningless details. Maybe the receiver needs more than instructions, e.g., demonstration or examples.

The following remarks show the absence of instructions and I give them here to alert you to the potential problems of such off-handed assignments. "I'm pretty busy right now and can't spend any more time on this with you. I think you've got the general idea, though."

"What I want is similar to what you've been doing. I think you'll get a feel for it as you go along."

These remarks leave the receiver in a position to do little more than guess. Often they guess wrong. Wrong guesses lead to failure and finger -pointing.

### Instructive Criticism

"Let's go over this together to make sure we understand each other's expectations and issues."

"Do you know why we do this procedure? Maybe it would help if I set the context so that you have a way of thinking about how this fits in and how it's supposed to materialize. This will make it easier for you to problem-solve in the future."

"I need to hear from you what went wrong and what you think needs to happen to keep it from going wrong again."

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"I think the situation calls for a good dose of mentoring. I'm going to have Janice walk you through it a couple of times. I think you'll be quite capable of doing it on your own very soon."

"Tell me, where was the breakdown? What obstacles did you encounter? Was there something you needed to know and didn't feel comfortable to ask? Did you need help and didn't realize it?"

"Let's talk about how to think about this. I'd like to understand your point perspective, why don't we start there."

These remarks clearly communicate your values and place value on the receiver's knowledge.

Notice how instructive criticism respects and engages the other person and gives them a greater sense of job ownership and, with it, problem ownership.

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