

How to Deal with CRITICISM More Effectively

Performance reviews don't have to be traumatic. They can be the first step toward improvement and satisfaction for you and your staff—or you and your boss.

BY JAMES D. KIMES, CMA

Despite what we say, we don't like to criticize or be criticized. Invariably, when criticized, we react defensively. When we must criticize or evaluate others, we postpone it as long as possible. As a result, we don't offer timely enough criticism, and it's often ineffective when we do. Yet we shouldn't dread criticism, whether giving or receiving it.

There are some things we can do and some we can avoid in order to smooth the process. If criticism is handled properly by both parties, it can improve performance and strengthen relationships. Based on my personal experience as a financial officer and consultant for many years, I developed some guidelines for criticizing and for receiving criticism.

1. Avoid making personal judgments

Healthy criticism must be perceived as being objective. If it isn't, anger will erupt. Allowing anger into the critical process is anathema and must be avoided by both sides. Anger isn't professional for either, but it reflects more on the skills of those critiquing, so criticism must be positive

in its delivery. Offering one or more approaches to behavior encourages one to accept advice more agreeably.

Our water treatment product line sales reps were making costly clerical errors because the bid calculations were too complicated for on-site bids. Yet on-site bids were important because the sales reps felt that if they didn't secure the business before they left the customer, the sale would be lost. Instead of reaming out the sales reps for sloppy work, we focused on the problem. As financial VP, I called a meeting of the sales VP, the product manager, and key district managers. I wasn't critical; moreover, I commiserated with them, felt their pain, and suggested we consider a Hewlett-Packard 41 series programmable calculator (pre-PC years). Once programmed, the calculator would ask questions, and then the sales rep would key in the parameters. The calculator would produce the error-free answers to the customer's unique problem. In all likelihood, the sales rep would walk away with the business after impressing the customer with the black, formidable-looking, hand-held computer-like device. We unanimously agreed to purchase 65 of them. This move eliminated the clerical mistakes, increased water treat-



ment business, and improved morale. What's more, the process involved no hard feelings.

2. Never criticize anyone in public

Criticism can be either positive or negative. It's acceptable to give casual praise publicly, but deep praise should be reserved for *mano y mano*. What's the difference? Casual praise can consist of something like: "Great job on the Harrison report, Karen." Such a comment can be made while hardly breaking stride. Yet everybody heard: The boss is happy with Karen and said so to her face in front of her colleagues. Deep praise involves more detail and would likely embarrass Karen and minimize the intended impact if given in a casual way. Actually, it would have a negative effect then.

3. Never criticize amid interruptions

Choose the time and place carefully. This guideline automatically eliminates meals. Try to avoid time boundaries. If you know Karen has to pick up a child at 5:30 p.m., don't plan a performance review for 4:00 p.m. Also, try to

anticipate your schedule and switch your calls to an answering system. Discussing performance can get emotional.

4. Document your criticism

Don't compile an attorney-type dossier, but be specific and methodical. Have dates ready in case they're needed and times if appropriate. Prepare notes, but don't read from a list. Set the stage so that it's obvious that what you're saying or about to say isn't an arbitrary or spur-of-the-moment event. Also, don't give the impression that this review is your career centerpiece. It's something that needs to be done, thoroughly but timely, so you both can move on. But be careful not to hurry or trivialize it. Criticism, when executed well, will be a win-win situation.

For example, I once had to fire a skillful plant manager at one of our East Coast factories. Top management had hard, documented evidence that Harry had been running a business on the side, using company facilities, materials, and labor to operate his little enterprise. We didn't confront Harry on factory premises but, rather, engaged him in a face-off in a hotel room. Another VP and I presented

our case, brandishing the files of evidence that we had amassed. Harry decided not to fight it. He surrendered peacefully, as it were, and resigned on the spot. There were no subsequent repercussions. No charges were brought, and no recriminations were forthcoming. Mission accomplished.

5. Be direct but not crudely blunt

Be resolute, but also be charitable. I once had to fire a young lady for habitual tardiness after repeated warnings. There were tears, but I remained firm. I was able to find Shirley a job with my former employer. They were happy and so was Shirley. She cleaned up her act and prospered. One day as I drove home I heard this incessant honking. When I turned to see what was going on, it was Shirley, smiling and waving. Things had worked out.

6. Be specific

Don't attribute criticism to the remarks of others. For example, if a customer said one of your staff insulted him, you have to name the customer and provide details. It's your responsibility to know how well your staff is performing, and your criticism can't be based on guesswork. Otherwise it could prove embarrassing for you and be counterproductive.

The key here is making sure you stay close enough to your staff to allow what I call "critique tweaking." It's hard to say, but it's effective. The process involves an occasional word to employees here or there to let them know that you know what is going on with them. What your little messages convey is: "Do more of that" or "Please don't do that again." Then, when you must confront staff with a problem, they will naturally assume it's based on firsthand, personal observation not secondhand input.

7. Don't pile on

In football, a player can be penalized for "piling on," falling onto an opposing player carrying the ball after he is down. When the infraction is obvious and criticism is expected, don't overdo it. Go easy, but don't excuse it. More than likely there has been a sufficient amount of self-deprecation already. If you acknowledge the gravity of the offense but show restraint in how severely you deal with it, gratitude could become the first step for improvement and prevent a recurrence.

One of the most difficult tasks is to offer criticism to one of equal rank. I once worked especially close with a

VP of sales when I was VP of finance. Ben, a joy to work with, was so honey-smooth he could have sold capitalism to Karl Marx. We shared a common boss, Sean, who rose to the presidency via sales and marketing, thus having little knowledge of my function. Ben routinely sat me down and, in a friendly way, told me how I might be more effective with Sean. Never once was I offended. Instead, I always left the session feeling strengthened and grateful. Ben knew the art of criticism and never piled on. I and many others were beneficiaries of his priceless expertise.

8. Never say, "If it had been me..."

What you're implying here is that your approach is irreplicable. In contrast, you might even try something like: "You know, I might have done the same thing if I had been in your shoes; however..." Understanding another's situation can have an enormously positive effect on someone's psyche.

Often you're called on to change some aspect of yourself, which is one of the most difficult adjustments you can make. Management style tends to be a projection of an individual personality. It isn't mentally or emotionally healthy to lead a double life. You can't be Clark Kent at home and then don your superhero outfit for work the next morning. If you don't march to your own managerial drum, it weakens your identity as a strong, successful leader. In order to grow, you must learn to make adjustments within the framework of your own individual bearing, much like a baseball player makes adjustments in the way he swings a bat. It's important to fashion your own style and let that define you. This worked for stellar managers Jack Welch and Lou Gerstner.

I knew early in my career there would be some personalities with whom my management style would clash. It happened, but what usually won me the day was consistency. Staff members eventually will "become accustomed to your pace." And though they might disagree with your style, they will buy into substance. I'm sure there were some soldiers and government employees at all levels who didn't care for the styles of General George Patton or President Harry Truman. Yet they were considered effective in their jobs—bottom line, a good general and a fine President.

9. Don't take the offender's side if he's wrong

In a situation where an exceptionally strong personality has stepped over the line and the infringement warrants

a “talking to,” don’t divulge any intimidation you may feel. Don’t be apologetic that you have to chide the person. This attitude makes the situation doubly bad because now the offender is emboldened to not want to make changes. After you have specified your criticism, make direct and frequent eye contact. Be aware of and control your body language because it reflects your inner fears. Focus on how the offense could have been circumvented or how the situation could have turned out positive.

As the company’s financial executive, I once had to confront a divisional president in a hearing before the company CEO regarding malfeasance. Such meetings tend to be traumatic. After their famous duel, Aaron Burr, according to biographer Gore Vidal, supposedly said that he wasn’t a more accurate marksman than Hamilton—it was that Hamilton’s hand shook and his didn’t. My hand didn’t shake that day. Was I nervous? Of course. Only a robot wouldn’t have been. Yet nobody knew it but me. As the old deodorant commercial advised, “Never let them see you sweat.” A week later, the divisional president resigned. No questions were asked, and we all moved on.

10. Don’t expect full concurrence with critique

Don’t set as your goal a full confession or complete concurrence by the offender. Most prison inmates continue to declare their innocence despite the ample measure of evidence used to convict them. It’s rare when someone being criticized is totally honest about his/her own culpability.

I once worked for two executives, a CEO and a president of a publicly traded firm. Even though these men were diametrically opposed in management style, they had one thing in common: If I admitted I had made a blunder, they would drop whatever they were doing and go to bat for me. If you admit your mistake before the boss hears about it from someone else, you’re in a much better position. I learned this lesson early, thus saving myself a lot of grief. Just think of the positive effect such an approach can have on integrity in business.

I love words, and one I especially like is disingenuous. Put simply, it means lacking in candor. We see disingenuousness demonstrated a lot on the Sunday morning talk shows. Those who choose to be candid will likely be viewed as naïve or a loose cannon by their cohorts. Some pundits say that if Bill Clinton had admitted his presi-

dential trespasses early on and had asked forgiveness from the American people, his legacy might have been different.

On the other hand, if you’re being criticized, don’t just cave in and ask for the death penalty without a jury trial. This reaction can send the wrong signals. For one, it may imply that you just want to get this critique over with so you can get back to work. Rather, you should direct the discussion, without making excuses, toward possibly why you erred. Then you can begin to adjust your behavior accordingly and change the content of future critiques in your favor.

For example, if an outfielder drops a routine fly and tries to make excuses like the sun was in his eyes or the grass was slick, it isn’t going to hold up too well. But if the fielder admits he took his eye off the ball temporarily or that he was watching the base runner instead of the ball—either of which is the most likely case—he builds credibility among his teammates and with his manager. This admission conveys that he knows he violated a fundamental rule of baseball, and those kinds of errors, if committed infrequently, are correctable. It could save him a genuine dressing-down in the dugout or a trip back to the minor leagues.

Not a joy, but a task to be done well

Giving or receiving criticism will never be “a joy forever,” as Keats put it, but it can and should be done well. Performance reviews likely will always be regarded with some degree of dread. But the knowledge of how to criticize effectively can be learned, and when you are on the receiving end of criticism it can be much less painful if you:

- ◆ Are more willing to make adjustments,
- ◆ Are more honest with yourself, and
- ◆ Set your own standards of performance higher than the standards others set for you.

If you are willing to criticize yourself honestly and conduct your own review frequently in a positive, healthy way, you may find you’ll receive little or no criticism, and that will be “a joy forever.” ■

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