

Personnel Pointers

Conquering Communication Conundrums: Receiving Constructive Feedback by Melinda Caldwell

"To avoid criticism do nothing, say nothing, be nothing." -Elbert Hubbard

I began last month's column with a bit of wisdom from our childhoods. Here's another one you'll probably remember: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Again, this is an important lesson to learn in the processing of growing up, but (again) the reality of the working world reminds us that it's not completely true. Words can—and do—hurt us, especially when it seems as though the person speaking has absolutely no regard for our feelings. However, this reality does not change the fact presented in last month's column: giving and receiving constructive feedback is important to growth and success. Sometimes, it is necessary to be confronted with things that are difficult to hear. Before we blame every negative workplace interaction on the person giving the feedback, let's take a look at some strategies for better receiving feedback.

Because we take our work seriously and have a sense of ownership, it is easy to become defensive when confronted with criticism. The next time you receive feedback from another individual, work through the following steps before you allow emotion to take over:

- **Consider the critic's intent:** Is the person who has approached you with feedback doing so in a spirit of cooperation and working toward a more positive outcome or is it a mean-spirited interaction? It is rare that the critic's intent is to be purely negative, so you should generally assume that the person providing the feedback is doing so to be helpful. Keep in mind that no matter how difficult it might be to hear, the individual may have a good point or a better idea that will benefit all involved in the long run. Also, remember last month's column and the fact that the art of providing constructive feedback is a difficult one. Sometimes passion for the issue/problem can be easily misconstrued. The way in which the feedback is presented does not necessarily imply that the critic's goal is to be negative or belittling.
- **Bring your feelings into balance:** No one is trying to say that the process of receiving feedback is not, in part, an emotional one. However, if emotion takes over the process, the chances for a positive result are greatly diminished. In an effort to find balance, think about employing one or more of the following tactics:
 - Ask for time: "I need a few minutes to consider your comments. Can I get back to you?"
 - Take several long, deep breaths. Patience in dealing with the issue always has value.
 - Burn off some negative emotional energy by taking a quick walk. Sometimes the physical activity can help to put things into perspective.
 - Take a step back from the conversation itself and try to obtain the most objective viewpoint possible. If you have already determined that the critic's intent was constructive

and not mean-spirited, it is important to move on to a place where you can consider implementing his or her feedback.

- Prepare yourself to cope with the feedback. Regardless of the critic's intent, you need to approach the situation with a positive and confident attitude. Remind yourself that you are a good, capable person who has the ability accept and learn from criticism, no matter how it might have been delivered.

Marilyn Lesmeister, a Leadership and Volunteer Development Specialist at North Dakota State University, outlined the following three techniques for responding to feedback in her paper entitled "Coping with Criticism" (HE-501, September 1992):

- **Technique #1 - Distracting:** This technique should only be used in a situation where you have determined that the critic's intent is simply to be hurtful and mean-spirited and that there is no truth to the criticism. This technique works best in situations in which you have determined that the critic's primary goal is to elicit an emotional response, because it allows for you to calmly acknowledge that you have heard the critic without becoming defensive or upset and gives you time to decide what to say next. Lesmeister explains that the ultimate goal of distracting is to stop the criticism. By choosing to be unaffected by manipulative or unjustified criticism, the critic will probably stop because it is no fun to criticize when it does not elicit the emotional reaction he or she is looking for. Examples of this technique include phrases such as: "You could be right about that...." "What you say makes sense...." and "Perhaps I could...." Lesmeister warns to avoid using "Yes, but...." The critic does not want to hear an excuse and using this phrase may simply encourage him or her to continue being critical.
- **Technique #2 - Admitting the Truth:** This technique is very effective when the person providing feedback has pointed out a legitimate concern. As we all know, mistakes happen, and this technique allows us to get past the mistake or barrier and move on to a productive outcome. Lesmeister points out that admitting the truth and moving forward allows us to avoid getting bogged down in self-criticism and allows others to accept us who we are. An example of this technique is: "Yes, I probably didn't think it through carefully, and now that I know another approach, I can correct it." Again Lesmeister warns against the use of the word "but." She states: "Avoid saying, 'I made a mistake, BUT....' The use of the words 'but' attempts to explain why the mistake was made. There are many reasons why mistakes are made. This is the time to focus on future behavior: 'I made a mistake, AND I plan to do better next time.'"
- **Technique #3 - Requesting Specific Feedback:** Lesmeister cites this as the most powerful technique to use to deal with valid criticism. This technique also has the most potential for resulting in a positive outcome for all involved, because it focuses on the future and implementing solutions rather than on dissecting the mistake and dwelling on the past. The key to this technique is asking questions. By using questions to gain specific feedback, it becomes possible to move on to productive activity as quickly as possible. Furthermore, Lesmeister points out that this technique allows us to break the manipulative cycle of negative criticism and defensive behavior by improving communication and understanding. Here are a few examples of this technique in practice: "If you were in my shoes, what would you do?" "Could you give me an example?" "Can you help me understand your view of the problem?" The success of this technique hinges on a genuine request for specific feedback. Keep emotion in check and paraphrase what the other person is saying to make sure you understand the feedback and to help the critic clarify his or her expectations.

Again, we all know that interpersonal communication is one of the most difficult things in life to

master. It is especially important in being an integral part of an effective team. The most important concept to keep in mind is this: Whether you are the giver or the receiver of feedback, your words are powerful. They can be used either as weapons to cut down and cause destruction or as tools to build up and foster progress. Every time you open your mouth, the choice is yours.

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