M253 Resource Sheet

Constructive criticism

1 Overview

Giving and receiving criticism – effectively and with good grace – is difficult and many people try to avoid it. This is a serious mistake, at it is through criticism that we can develop our skills and practices. This Resource Sheet discusses ways to give, and receive, criticism and how to handle criticism within groups.

2 Introduction

> **cri'tical** *a.* **1.** Censorious, fault-finding …
>
> The Concise Oxford Dictionary

You have just done your best, and the work you produced is not 'good enough' – your superiors or colleagues are unhappy with the results, or if it's written it comes back covered in red ink.

You have been waiting for an important piece of work from a colleague, but now that you have it, you find it is not what you need, it is inadequate, or the work is of poor quality.

You are a member of a team that has reached a point where there is time to pause and reflect on how well, or badly, the team has functioned.

These are situations which call for **constructive criticism**: criticism that seeks to build better practice, standards, or results.

> **constru'ctive** a. **…** helpful, opp. *destructive (constructive criticism)* …
>
> The Concise Oxford Dictionary

3 Constructive criticism

Constructive criticism, which should enable each person, whether as an individual or as a member of a team, to improve their own practice and performance, is aimed at *improving future practice*.

Most people think of criticism as painful, and even as destructive of a person's self-esteem (as indicated by the dictionary definition above). Properly done, however, *constructive* criticism certainly should not be destructive, and may not be particularly painful if the recipient views it in the light of intended help rather than as a personal attack. Much depends on the circumstances in which the criticism is offered, and the terms in which it is couched.

There are several important points for both parties – the *critic* and the *recipient of the criticism* – to remember and act upon.

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- Avoid making criticism personal: focus on the problem (or the product where that is appropriate) instead of the person.
- Avoid emotive language and expressing personal feelings.
- Remember that constructive criticism may not be aimed at a 'problem' so much as at achieving some improvement.

Exercise 1

Think of something that someone else does that has been bothering you. Spend no more than two minutes and write down the first thoughts that come into your head of what you would like to say to that person (no holds barred). Once you have done that, try to rewrite what you would say, removing any personal criticisms and feelings.

Discussion

Of course, everyone will come up with something different. This is just one example.

'You really irk me when you dive in while I'm trying to cook a meal and criticize the way I'm doing it. Either I'm cooking it too long or not long enough, too much salt or not enough. Nothing satisfies you when you watch me cook, but you seem perfectly happy to eat the results without complaining! You're not such a great cook yourself!'

This can be rewritten to remove some of the personal criticism.

'I wish you wouldn't comment on what I'm doing while I'm trying to cook. You seem happy to eat what I prepare, and I find it disconcerting to try to deal with your comments whilst I'm trying to cook. Maybe we could discuss what I'm going to do before I start, or discuss what I've prepared and how after we've eaten the meal.'

Emotive language and other problems

As the name suggests, emotive language is any language that communicates human emotions. Language can be **neutral** or **emotive**, and emotive language can be positive or negative. Some people try hard to choose words and phrases that are 'fair minded' when they have something to say. Others may feel too timid to voice criticism directly. Whether or not this describes you, you should be aware that avoiding using terms that describe something as either 'pure evil' or 'pure good' is more than simply trying to achieve so-called political correctness. Language that is 'fair minded', or even 'timid', does keep open the possibilities for the parties involved to discuss and reconcile differences, reduce conflicts of interest and arrive at solutions better suited to all parties in a discussion.

> There are people who object to this.… They are the Gordian-knot cutters; they may undo the knot, but they ruin the rope.
>
> S. I. Hayakawa (1978)

The Gordian knot

According to an ancient Greek oracle, the populace of the Greek city-state of Phrygia were told that their future king would come into town riding in a wagon. Soon after, a peasant called Gordius and his wife arrived in an ox cart. Seeing Gordius, the Phrygians made him king. In gratitude, Gordius dedicated his ox cart to Zeus, tying it to Zeus's temple with a highly intricate knot – the Gordian knot.

A later oracle foretold that the person who untied the knot would rule all of Asia. The problem of untying the Gordian knot resisted all attempts until 333 B.C., when the very young Alexander the Great grew frustrated at his inability to untie the knot and cut through it with a sword.

Example 1 Emotive and neutral language

Emotive language tends to be two-valued: that is, whatever the language describes is either (from the speaker's point of view) very good, or very bad. Realistically, most people recognize that human judgements are *multi-valued*: something might be: perfect, very good, good, acceptable, not very acceptable, poor, bad, very bad, awful. The use of neutral language is an attempt to keep open the possibilities offered by multi-valued terms of judgement. The following table pairs some examples of emotive and more neutral language for the same things.

Table 1 Examples of emotive and neutral language

Emotive	*Neutral*
I *hate* it when you …	it creates a problem for me when you …
angels of mercy; old dragons	nurses
with the connivance of …	with the cooperation of …
completely useless	unable to do this task
stupid	uninformed, ignorant

Using more neutral language when offering criticism is not a matter of 'political correctness', but of keeping the pathways of dialogue open.

A number of aspects influence whether language can be considered emotive or not. These include:

- subjectivity (how someone feels about something) versus objectivity (how a completely uninvolved outsider might view something);
- facts (which are verifiable) versus opinions (which are subjective and are not generally verifiable except in the mind of the person holding them!);
- tone (of voice when speaking, or written analogues such as the heavy use of exclamation marks, heavy underlining, using all capital letters in emails);
- denotation (the 'dictionary' meaning of words) versus connotation (implied meaning of words);
- the functions the chosen words have within the context in which they are used.

Example 2 Denotation and connotation

Many words or expressions come with a certain amount of 'baggage' – sometimes negative and sometimes positive. Sometimes the 'baggage' ends up obscuring the original meaning of a word. One example is *gay*, which originally denoted 'full of or disposed to or indicating mirth; light-hearted, carefree; sportive; airy, offhand; showy, brilliant, brightly-coloured; finely dressed.' At first this word was used to connote homosexuals; this connotation has now become so common that it has become a denotation (it is the second meaning given in the Oxford Concise English Dictionary), and many people will avoid using terms like 'a gay parade' for fear of being misunderstood.

Example 3 The function of words within their context

To give another example, suppose I said, 'He's a pig.' The word *pig* denotes 'a non-ruminant omnivorous ungulate bristly mammal of family Suidae' (Oxford Concise English Dictionary), and if you can see that I am referring to a farm animal there may be no problem. But if I pointed to a man on the street and said it, you would know that when used of a person the word *pig* connotes someone who is selfish and greedy or dirty and smelly with unsanitary habits – or at least you would know that that is the way I *feel* about the person I pointed out. The word *pig* functions differently in the context of a farm and of a city street.

Example 3 shows that the context in which words are used is important to determining whether the language is emotive or neutral.

Exercise 2

Rewrite the following paragraph to eliminate or make neutral the emotive language.

'I am sick and tired of dealing with you. You're *always* late with everything. And all you do is make excuses. One time it's your computer failing, the next time you got stranded in an airport somewhere. Frankly, you're just lazy.'

Discussion

One possible rewriting is as follows (yours may differ, but should try to achieve the same degree of neutrality).

'You have been late in producing the last three items of work you agreed to do. That's created a problem for me and for the others, as it holds us up, too, and the project gets delayed as a result. You have said that on one occasion your computer broke down, and on another occasion you were stranded in an airport. These things do happen, but it would be helpful if we could find ways of working that mean that you can take these disasters more in your stride and still fulfill your obligations to the team.'

Note that this rewriting invites the criticized person to 'find ways', perhaps alone or perhaps in concert with his or her team mates. It also makes specific reference to the problem – 'the last three items' – and avoids the emotive 'always'. Saying something is *always* or is *never* immediately invites a response from the criticized person enumerating those times when the all-inclusive *always* or *never* did not apply, and this can easily degenerate into the two parties arguing about how many times something did or did not happen, which is both angering and a waste of time since it solves nothing.

3.1 Giving constructive criticism

Preparing to give constructive criticism is important: get it right, and the recipient can accept the experience as valuable; get it wrong and the recipient will be upset or the criticism may turn into a competitive shouting match about who is worse.

Giving criticism is often as daunting as receiving it: one can feel negative, perhaps hope to skirt the issue or avoid it altogether, or end up very stressed before even beginning. Knowing one is about to receive criticism can be nerve-wracking. Thus, whether one is on the giving or receiving end of criticism, it is worth spending a few moments before beginning to collect one's thoughts. For the critic, it is worth planning what to say and do and how to approach the topic. For the recipient, remembering that the point is improvement, not destruction, and reminding oneself that one's self is *more than the single item to be criticised* is helpful.

As a critic, you need to:

- identify the problem and figure out what the desired outcome should be before beginning any criticism session;
- be certain what it is you want to say, then keep to that (do not let a session widen out from a specific criticism – e.g. problems with a particular report – to general, less focused, criticisms – e.g. a person's annoying habits);
- if you can, choose a good time (unrushed, relaxed for both parties) in which to offer any criticism;

- give the recipient time and space to respond to your criticism (you may be wrong, you may be unaware of the circumstances, or your criticism may revolve around a genuine difference of opinion);
- hear the person out (if you respond to the response, keep the tone of your response un-emotive: this should not become a battle of personalities, wills or opinions);
- do mention the positive aspects of the topic you are focussing on; but
- be careful not to mix your negative and positive messages so that it is difficult for the recipient to decide whether what is being criticised is seen by you as acceptable or not;
- try to make positive suggestions for improvement as a part of your criticism.

Example 4 Positive suggestions for improvement

Recently I was very busy as head of a large department. I had to attend many meetings, and one meeting never seemed to finish in time for me to get to the next one – so I was habitually late for most meetings in a day except the first. This was irritating to others (as not infrequently I was chairing the meeting, so people had to wait for me to arrive in order to start) and it certainly was very stressful to me. But I was given some very helpful and positive suggestions which ensured both that I would be at meetings on time and allowed enough leeway that if a meeting ran over time it did not have as much impact (and create as much stress). The suggestions were: to leave a clear half-hour between the scheduled end of one meeting and the start of the next, and to set an alarm function on my watch to give me 15 minutes' notice of an appointment.

I could simply have been criticised (quite rightly) for being late to meetings and left to my own devices to work out how to be more timely. The two simple suggestions I was given meant that I could immediately take some positive steps towards managing my time more effectively. As these changes reduced my stress level and meant others were not having to wait for me, everyone was much happier.

Exercise 3

One person on your team persistently seems to misunderstand or misinterpret what he or she has agreed to do. Note down a possible suggestion for improving the problem.

Discussion

I thought of the following (your idea may be different).

Try suggesting that the person state in their own words what they think they are going to be doing. When this seems to tally correctly with what everyone else believes, suggest that they write it down (also in their own words) in a place where they can refer to it again, such as in a log book. This is called *checking understanding*. Doing this highlights any misunderstandings or misinterpretations at the outset of an agreement, rather than at the end, where the person can be seen to have 'failed' to complete the agreement.

3.2 Receiving constructive criticism

We have all been criticised at some time. Think back to the last time you were criticised. How did you react? What did you feel? What sort of body language did you have? How did you respond verbally? Your response shows how much weight you give to criticism. By turning away, avoiding eye contact, whispering your responses — or, conversely, 'squaring up', moving close to your critic in an intimidating way and using a loud tone of voice and emotive language — you show that you are reacting negatively to the criticism, whatever its intention. Showing that you genuinely value constructive criticism as a means to improve your own practice gives you a degree of control over the situation in which you are being criticised.

As the recipient of constructive criticism:

- remain, or make yourself, calm and try to relax;
- try to receive the criticism in the spirit in which it is intended: as being helpful;
- do not interrupt unless your critic has invited you to, but if you need to, take brief notes so you will not forget any points you want to discuss or have clarified;
- accept your critic's viewpoint and thank them for what they have just told you (it has probably been as hard for them to tell you as it is for you to receive the message).

Exercise 4

Do you have any strategies for calming yourself in stressful situations? What are they? (Write them down.) If you do not have such strategies, now is the time to make an effort to find a few such strategies, try them and see which work for you. (Then note down the ones that do work for you, and try to set aside some time to practise them. Practice is all-important, because under stress you are likely to forget either what your strategy is, or else to use it — unless you have had some practice at it.

Discussion

For myself, I find that measured breathing helps me to calm down under situations of stress, for example before an interview or examination. I breathe in slowly for a count of 5, hold my breath for a count of 5, breathe out slowly for a count of 5, hold my breath for a count of 5, and repeat this several times until I am calm. Another strategy is closing my eyes and imagining myself in a pleasant place (e.g. in a garden). Another common strategy is to alternately tighten and relax muscle groups slowly, beginning with the feet and working up the body. Books or websites (see the *Further resources* section for some ideas) on dealing with stress management should help you discover some strategies to try. Remember to note down those that work for you, and to practice them.

Having heard your critic out, you should feel free to:

- ask for clarification of any of the points raised that you are not certain about or where the other person is being unclear;
- ask for suggestions for change if these are not offered as part of the criticism.

3.3 Responding to criticism

Sometimes it can help if you allow a little time to pass before responding to criticism. If you feel angry or upset initially, the passage of an hour or a day may enable you to calm down and consider the criticism more rationally. If you need to, signal this to your critic by asking (politely) for time to consider what they have said. *Then respond*.

If you feel a criticism directed at you *is* warranted, it is helpful to the process to acknowledge that. For example, if you have been criticised by team mates for frequently being late to produce your share of the work and you know the criticism is accurate, you could acknowledge this by saying, 'I realise that my lateness in completing my share of the work has caused problems.' If you were aware you were late but didn't realise what a problem it caused, you could acknowledge that by saying something like: 'I hadn't realised what an impact my lateness was having on the rest of the team.' If there is a genuine reason for the problem, you can state that — but beware of trying to justify your shortcomings with a host of excuses. Being late once or twice can be due to circumstances beyond your control, but if you are habitually late and find there are a dozen different reasons why, then your tardiness is likely to be a

symptom of another problem such as never allowing yourself sufficient time for travel, or a long enough gap between one meeting and the next, or taking on too much for the time you have available. *If you are to improve the situation, you need to take a clear, rational look at the problem and its possible solutions, not get lost in a morass of excuses!*

If you think a criticism is unwarranted or wrong, it is possible to say so at some point. If you wish to respond to a criticism, perhaps by clarifying some facts, try to keep your tone unemotional if you can. If you were late handing over a key piece of work to your team because your computer broke down at the wrong time, say so. Hear out any response your critic(s) may make.

3.4 Reaching a satisfactory conclusion

It can be helpful all around if, at the end of a session (or a set of related sessions) both the critics and the criticized summarize in their own words what they feel was said during the session and list any actions that someone may have agreed to undertake or explore further. Ending the session with a polite exchange – perhaps a thank you for taking the time and effort – by each party to the other can end things on a positive note.

Ultimately, though, a constructive criticism session is designed to end in one of two ways: an agreement as to what the problem was that elicited the criticism (if both sides have agreed not to take the matter further) or an agreement to carry out certain actions. These might involve undertaking (or giving) some training or some specific actions (such as upgrading one's computer, if it is prone to failure). It is then up to the parties to do what they have agreed to do.

4 Summary

Constructive criticism is meant to be valuable: to improve performance or product, and it should be given, and received, in that spirit. Planning what to say before giving criticism helps keep the criticism bounded and reasonable. Accepting criticism but reserving the right to ask for clarification or to state reasons why something happened is of key importance. Acknowledging where one is wrong is also helpful to the process of giving and receiving criticism. Wherever possible, constructive criticism should result in concrete suggestions for ways to improve.

Use a personal log book to record valid criticisms when they are made, so that you have a record of what was said for later review and reflection. You can also record suggestions and those actions you decide upon, and later whether these are effective or not.

5 Further resources

Most sources of information on constructive criticism assume that a supervisor or manager needs to criticize an employee who is performing poorly. Thus these sources contain advice such as not mentioning the positive aspects of the criticized person's behaviour or products. This Resource Sheet has assumed a more mutual and consensual view of constructive criticism: that it is valuable when it is given between peers as well (or even is given by an employee to a superior), and that it is best conducted in terms of giving, and getting, mutual support to aid future improvement. This is a more positive view of constructive criticism than the view that it is only intended to improve poor performance to an acceptable level.

Constructive criticism

The following website gives brief points to watch for in giving and getting constructive criticism:

http://www.iwmf.org/training/constructive.php

The following website has an excellent page on *constructive feedback*, which is perhaps a better term than 'criticism':

http://cte.udel.edu/insthandouts.htm

The following website has some good advice on how to accept (and even to solicit) constructive feedback:

http://www.sideroad.com/Management/accepting-constructive-feedback.html

Relaxation and stress management

The following website is an excellent resource, providing a downloadable series of pages in PDF format about all aspects of stress and stress management and reduction:

http://www.mindtools.com/stress/UnderstandStress/IntroPage.htm

The following PDF gives very short how-to descriptions of five common stress reduction techniques:

http://www.sa.usf.edu/wellness/resources/stress.pdf

Davis, M., Eshelman, E. R. and McKay, M. (2000) *The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook*. 5th edn. New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, CA.

This book contains a wealth of simple directions for a wide variety of stress reduction techniques in the form of a workbook.

Girdano, D. A., Everly Jr., G. S. and Dusek, D. E. (2000) *Controlling Stress and Tension*. 6th edn. Allyn and Bacon, Boston.

This book has a slightly more 'academic' tone than Davis *et al*., but nonetheless is a fairly comprehensive and easy-to-use guide for identifying the causes of stress, then dealing directly with the causes.

6 Reference

Hayakawa, S. I. (1972) *Language in Thought & Action.* 4th edn. Harcourt Brace Janovich, San Diego.