

Corrective Leadership

HOW SHOULD MANAGERS USE PRAISE AND CRITICISM TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE?

By Lori Pizzani

Which would you rather hear from your boss: praise or criticism? Now ask yourself: Which has more impact on your job and career? Does criticism or a compliment resonate longer with you and teach you more?

The results of a survey of more than 2,500 employees from various companies around the globe found that 57% of participants preferred negative feedback from their bosses and 43% preferred positive feedback. For the purposes of the survey, negative feedback included suggestions for improvement, exploration of new and better ways to do things, and pointing out something that was done in a less-than-optimal way. Positive feedback included praise, reinforcement, and congratulatory comments.

Professional services firm Zenger Folkman in Salt Lake City released the results in February 2014. Why would employees prefer to hear negative comments from their

managers? A significant number of respondents, 72%, expected their performance to improve if they were given corrective feedback.

The perception that bosses are eager to point out what's wrong is false. The survey found that giving negative or corrective feedback is something that most managers frequently avoid.

"People believe constructive criticism is essential to their career development," says Zenger Folkman CEO Jack Zenger. "They want to hear it from their leaders, but their leaders don't feel comfortable offering it up." Thus, he concludes, "The ability to give corrective feedback constructively is one of the critical keys of leadership."

WHY CRITICISM LINGERS LONGER

"Criticism tends to stay longer because criticism induces fear, and fear produces a lot of powerful emotions," says Dr. Alicia H. Clark, a licensed clinical psychologist in Washington, DC. Fear affects critical areas of the brain, including the amygdala (which triggers the fight-or-flight response) and the hippocampus (where long-term memories are stored).

Positive feedback is tied to self-esteem, which is the product of trying really hard to do something and succeeding, according to Clark. "If praise that we receive was about something

that we stretched for, we will remember it too," she says.

Trying to avoid the anxiety associated with corrective criticism is a mistake, according to Clark. When people receive criticism, some are put off by it and believe the problem is with the person providing the criticism. A better way is to ask what "the grain of truth" in a comment was. "We have an opportunity to see this setback as a learning experience," Clark says.

"Praise is powerful, but it is criticism that we remember," says Jim Ice, managing director of jim ice & associates in Murrysville, Pennsylvania. "Our human nature drives us to magnify criticism and discount praise," says Ice, an organizational sociologist who consults on team behavior within organizations.

The experts who contributed to this article acknowledge that both criticism and praise are useful managerial tools and are not mutually exclusive. The trick is learning to use both methods correctly and effectively.

I'VE CONCLUDED THAT PRAISE HAS A SIGNIFICANTLY GREATER IMPACT ON PERFORMANCE AND RESULTS WHILE CRITICISM CAN ACTUALLY RETARD PERFORMANCE AND RESULTS.

"The key is to know your employees, what motivates them, and how to talk to them individually," says Zachary A. Schaefer, founder of consulting firm Mediation and Communication Solutions in St. Louis and an assistant professor of speech communication at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville. "Whether using praise or critique, the point is to incentivize employees to increase their self-awareness." For thick-skinned employees, Schaefer suggests using the "Band-Aid method"—quickly giving them the honest truth, even if it is difficult, much like ripping off a bandage. For sensitive employees, he recommends using the "praise sandwich," where managers begin with praising a small action, point out what behaviors need to be changed and end with a positive point."

The truth is that "both criticism and praise are equally harmful unless you apply them correctly," says Stephen R. Balzac, president of management consulting firm 7 Steps Ahead, based in Stow, Massachusetts. Criticism focused on someone's failings or simply saying they "just can't cut it" only decreases performance. Praise that is vague or focuses on things an employee can't control leads to overconfidence and diminished performance.

Praise and criticism affect the human brain in very different ways, and when used incorrectly by managers, both can be counterproductive.

To avoid pitfalls, managers need to be aware of the power of perception.

Understanding the difference between criticism and constructive criticism is key.

THE POWER OF PERCEPTION

Because being evaluated is a subjective experience, “even well-meaning praise can be turned around and interpreted as criticism,” Ice says. A comment such as “You did a great job on this project” can be falsely interpreted by an employee as “I wonder what I did wrong on the *last* project?” To reinforce or change behavior, both praise and criticism are important.

“We tend to focus on the negative and not the positive,” says John Brubaker, a performance consultant and author in Lewiston, Maine. “Managers need to catch employees doing things that are right and give them the appropriate praise.” When talking to an employee, if a manager leads with negative feedback or ends with negative comments, the negatives will be the only message the employee hears. Also, adds Brubaker, “You need to resist the urge to browbeat.”

Criticism has a place, but no matter what the situation is, only *constructive* criticism should be used, according to Dorothy Tannahill-Moran, an executive coach and leadership instructor with Next Chapter New Life in Portland, Oregon. “It’s important to understand the distinguishing characteristics of criticism versus constructive criticism,” she says. “Criticism is all too often done as blaming, targeting, and demeaning an employee. Constructive criticism focuses on the task, objective, evaluation, and engagement in a dialogue about the task.”

To show respect, have such discussions privately. “The goal is to help employees understand expectations versus results” with the aim of improving future performance, says Tannahill-Moran.

“There are two types of criticism: warranted and unwarranted,” says Leigh Steere, co-founder of Managing People Better, a management research firm/think tank in Boulder, Colorado. “Correction is warranted when some aspect of an employee’s job performance or behavior is negatively impacting business results or relationships.” In contrast, unwarranted criticism comes in various flavors, including a micro-manager nitpicking a reasonable work effort because the employee’s methodology doesn’t match the manager’s. “Managers must avoid making derogatory remarks,” Steere adds.

GIVE PRAISE A CHANCE

“In general, people respond much better to praise,” says Kathi Elster, an executive coach, business strategist, author, and one-half of the leadership team at K Squared Enterprises in New York City. “People actually want and need feedback. They want to grow, and praise will create trust.” Moreover, she adds, people tend to really hear what you say if it is praise and will typically stay engaged with you and the company.

Even so, criticism should not be excluded from how we manage people, Elster says. “If used correctly, it can be very effective. [Once a bond of] trust is developed, people are more likely to be able to hear criticism.”

“Career-oriented people often have big egos and may not take criticism well, even when it is necessary,” says Halley Bock, president and CEO of Fierce, Inc., a leadership

Giving Effective Feedback

Successful feedback involves employees hearing their manager’s perspective on what was executed well and what needs improvement, according to Jim Ice of jim ice & associates. He has four main suggestions for managers:

PROVIDE FEEDBACK INTENDED TO HELP. Too often, feedback is given for the wrong reason, including a manager’s need to demonstrate his or her knowledge, experience, or expertise. Selfishly motivated feedback is viewed as patronizing and demeaning.

BE SPECIFIC. Generalities are useless and don’t help an individual to improve. Provide feedback (positive or negative) for specific behaviors and actions and within a specific context (time, place, and project). General praise is too easily watered down. Generalized criticism can be taken to cover multiple situations, including where a critique isn’t true or necessary.

DESCRIBE THE IMPACT. Explain (specific to a behavior or action) why you believe the person did a great (or a lousy) job on the project and the impact of that work. Both praise and criticism that contain a clear description of the impact on you, the project, and the company will stick. Knowing the impact provides meaningful information about the situation and the motivation to either replicate it or change.

MAKE FEEDBACK A REGULAR TWO-WAY EVENT. Any feedback (positive or negative) will be better received if it becomes a part of the regular expectation for manager-employee communication. Episodic and infrequent feedback produces drama. Two-way feedback takes on importance when it is a mainstream part of the process.

and corporate training firm in Seattle. “Many find it difficult to distinguish criticism of their work from criticism of their personality, which can cause them to be less happy at work and perform poorly. By contrast, frequent and sincere praise creates high-functioning work environments and enriches relationships.”

“I’ve concluded that praise has a significantly greater impact on performance and results while criticism can actually retard performance and results,” says Rex Houze, president and CEO of consulting firm Improving Performance and Results in Allen, Texas. “Genuine, sincere, specific praise will give you more of the behavior you are praising.” He suggests that managers “look for opportunities to praise outstanding, improved and consistent behavior” with comments such as “I believe in you,” “You are important to our success,” and “I appreciate you.”

Houze cautions that “criticism, no matter how well intended, will many times create defensiveness, negative emotions and resistance.” He teaches managers to replace outright criticism with “corrective feedback” intended to stop inappropriate behavior.

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KEEP GOING

“Find the Coaching in Criticism,” summarized in *CFA Digest* (March 2014) [www.cfapubs.org]

“Stress at Work: A New Global Epidemic?” CFA Institute webcast [cfawebcasts.org]