

## Eric P. Bloom: Giving constructive criticism



**By Eric P. Bloom**

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Like a parent disciplining a child, the punishment must match the crime. You can't just fire someone just because you want to. If an employee makes a minor mistake or inadvertently breaks a company policy, it simply becomes a teaching moment. That said, if someone does something dangerous, illegal or totally contrary to company policy, you must act clearly, decisively and quickly.

There are many types of employee discipline. In future columns I'll deal with more severe forms of employee discipline, such as written warnings and termination. For now, let's just discuss a gentle but very effective form of discipline, constructive criticism, which is also often referred to as constructive feedback.

It has been my experience that sometimes you have a good employee doing the wrong thing. It may be due to a lack of skill in a particular area or it may be a lack of understanding of the rules. In either case, it's your job as the manager to take the person aside and explain what he/she is doing wrong and explain what is needed to improve/correct the situation. This is constructive criticism.

When giving constructive criticism consider the following steps:

- Start by talking about something that the employee is doing well
- Say that, in general, he/she is doing good work, but needs a little help in one particular area
- Talk about the issue in a friendly, mentoring and teaching type manner
- Discuss specific steps that will help correct the issue
- Discuss a date and/or time to have a follow up discussion on the topic
- Change the subject to something fun and non-work oriented, like a local sports team or fun weekend plans

The order of these steps is designed to:

Make the employee initially feel safe and thus not defensive.

- Be sure the employee understands that the issue
- Define action items and establish a timeframe for the issue correction
- Leave the employee with a positive feeling and willing to accept the needed feedback and follow through on the defined action plan

When I think back on my career in regard to constructive criticism, a memory comes to mind when I was the receiver of this type of advice. Early in my career I often did a very poor job proofreading my presentations. My manager at the time, who I still have great respect for, took me aside, explained the importance of proofreading and helped me develop a process to correct the issue. At the end of our conversation, I felt thankful for his help, but I also understood that it was a correction I was required to make quickly.

You should also remember that there may be times when you are the receiver of constructive criticism. That said, consider the following:

- Always welcome constructive criticism, even if you don't like to hear it, or like the person delivering it, it may be quality advice
- Feel free to solicit constructive criticism from those you trust, it may provide you with some insights on how other people perceive you
- The primary advice and takeaway for today's column is to know that:
- Constructive criticism is an effective and gentle way for a manager to simultaneously give advice and correct an issue with an employee
- If done correctly, constructive criticism gives the employee three messages; advice on corrective action, support of the employee, and the need to change

For additional information on today's topic, I suggest the book "Job Feedback: Giving, Seeking, and Using Feedback for Performance Improvement," by Manuel London.

Until next time, manage well, manage smart and continue to grow.

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