

Guest business blog: Giving criticism without giving offence

Posted by [Gill Hasson and Sue Hadfield](#) on Wednesday, October 6th, 2010 at 6:02 am.

Handling tricky situations with staff, colleagues or your boss is never going to be easy. Assertiveness experts Gill Hasson and Sue Hadfield give a host of useful tactics on handling criticism in the workplace.



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Before you criticise someone examine your own reaction.

How do you react when you are criticised?

You probably thought: 'It depends whether it's constructive criticism,' or, 'It depends who's giving the criticism.'

Quite often people criticise someone else just because they are in a bad mood and they want someone to take it out on. The person criticising may want to feel superior (because of their own insecurities) or they may be feeling jealous of you and want to take you down a peg or two. You need to be aware if you have the tendency to do this yourself but you also have to be able to sort out this kind of behaviour in others.

Much criticism is just an expression of disapproval: 'That skirt's too short for you,' and quite often criticisms are just thinly disguised insults: 'You're talking rubbish.' You will know from your own experience that thoughtless comments can ruin your day – however you tried to disguise your reaction at the time.

It is important to be able to differentiate from constructive criticism that is designed to help you evaluate how to improve and destructive criticism that is the result of the other person either having a bad day or having a mean personality.

Sarcasm is never useful – it is aggressive and hurtful – even though it makes other people laugh and may make the person being sarcastic feel superior: ‘I can see you must have taken at least three minutes on that.’

Assertive people welcome criticism if there is a good relationship or respect for the person giving the criticism and if the intention is to help the person to improve.

However most people immediately feel defensive and begin to justify their actions, others get angry, and some feel upset and worthless. Once you have examined your own reaction to criticism and you are aware of how other people may react you will find it easier to criticise sensitively and confidently.

Honest and specific feedback is the only way to help people to improve and you are not doing them any favours if you don’t point out what is wrong just because you are afraid of their reaction. Once you are clear that your criticism is constructive there are ways of speaking your mind without destroying the other person’s self esteem in the process.

- Choose the time and the place. As soon as possible is best – but not when you are angry or stressed. Never criticise in front of others if possible – it is humiliating.
- Make sure that you are relaxed and friendly. Towering over someone, raising your voice, arms folded – are all aggressive – check your body language and tone of voice.
- Begin by saying something positive: ‘I’ve always admired the way that...’ but make sure it is specific. Then the negative and then end on a positive: ‘I appreciate the way that you’ve listened ...’ (This is the PNP sandwich – useful for people who are touchy – but be careful or they will begin to anticipate the ‘but’.)
- Criticise the behaviour not the person. Instead of: ‘You’re so unreliable,’ say, ‘That’s the second time this week that you haven’t done the work that you promised.’
- Give them time to respond. If they are defensive or deny what you have said then paraphrase what they are saying: ‘So you mean that you thought that...’
- Decide what you are going to do if they don’t agree – or if they agree but nothing changes. You don’t have to tell them this – it is not a threat but a promise to yourself.

If they accept your criticism ask for a specific change of behaviour or ask for suggestions of ways to improve. Talk about the positive consequences that will result.

Gill Hasson and Sue Hadfield are teachers and facilitators of motivational workshops. Their company ‘Making Sense’ delivers motivational workshops in schools, workplaces and community centres.

They are co-authors of [How to Be Assertive in Any Situation.](#)