

Giving Criticism as a Coach

Introduction

This checklist has been designed to explain how to succeed at the skill of giving criticism, which is a form of feedback.

A coach may have to give criticism on a number of occasions. Sometimes, they may view the encounter with some trepidation and in some cases avoid the issues, pretending it is not happening and that the issues will resolve themselves. Usually, this doesn't happen and the problem gets worse. There is no need not to confront the issues, as much can be done beforehand to ensure that the risks of the feedback session or interview going wrong are minimised and the desired outcomes are achieved. It is vitally important though, that the criticism given is constructive not destructive.

As in all interviews, good communications skills are important to achieve success. Communication can be defined as 'the process of transferring ideas or thoughts from one person to another, for the purpose of creating understanding in the person receiving the communication.' Two key skills of giving criticism as feedback, therefore, are questioning and listening.

Preparation for any feedback encounter is crucial and is particularly important when delivering criticism. You need to think about the outcomes you want, *what* you are going to say and *how* you are going to say it. You also need to consider *where* you are going to give the feedback and ensure you have allowed yourself sufficient time. You shouldn't rush it.

As with the giving all feedback your objectives should be to achieve: -

- Ownership of the feedback by the recipient
- A commitment to change where desired
- Some contracting of an action plan for implementation after the feedback session.

A separate checklist considers some of the wider issues of preparing to give feedback (see Related Checklists).

National Occupational Standards for Management and Leadership

This checklist has relevance for the following standards:

B: Providing direction, unit 6; D: Working with people, units 1, 2, 6

Definition

Criticism is a form of feedback which can be defined as 'a process of giving others information about their activities, skills and abilities.' As a coach, your objective is to bring about a change in behaviour to a desirable or improved level with a similar effect on performance.

Action checklist

1. Understanding the role of criticism

Many coaches view giving criticism with apprehension as they are concerned about the response as well as their own feelings. They should remember, however, that many positive benefits can accrue from properly administered constructive criticism and that the path to success by a coachee will never be entirely smooth and untroubled. Problems must be confronted if future success is to be achieved. Remember also, that there is probably greater potential to learn from our mistakes as from our successes. There is nothing wrong with making mistakes - the crime is failing to learn from them.

2. Plan the feedback interview

It is important to undertake thorough preparatory work by ensuring you allow plenty of time, total privacy is ensured and you have gathered all relevant information. Give some thought also, to likely questions and objections and prepare your likely responses. Tell yourself that you must stay calm and collected and not react in an emotional way to any provocation.

As a coach giving criticism you should adopt the following guidelines:

- You *should focus on the behaviour and not the person*. This is the most important point to bear in mind. This avoids personal attack and the criticism is attempting to change undesired behaviours.
- Be assertive and aware of your rights as well as those of the other person.
- Don't be aggressive or overbearing and don't be non-assertive, apologetic or meek and mild.
- Be direct (not blunt) and to the point and 'don't beat about the bush.'
- Avoid sarcasm and demeaning comments.
- Avoid blaming the individual with aggressive 'you' statements.
- Display appropriate body language, especially in terms of eye contact, body positioning and physical mannerisms.
- Be specific about the bad behaviours and be non-judgemental.
- Mutually explore and possibly offer suggestions or options for improvement or change.

3. Rehearse your approach

It may be helpful to mentally rehearse your approach, particularly the opening, even to the extent of writing this out and possibly repeating it to yourself several times so that you are familiar with it and you say it naturally. You should aim to give the criticism as early as possible in the interview, hence the importance of preparing your wording or your opening comments extremely carefully.

4. Be constructive

The feedback interview involving criticism should be aiming to be constructive and not destructive, so that everything that is said will be viewed as helpful and developmental. The interview should be carried out in a private and confidential setting and characterised by openness and honesty. Statements that are judgemental, accusing and patronising will immediately encounter resistance and a range of defensive behaviours, with the result that the objectives of the interview are unlikely to be achieved. Side by side, alongside a table, or across the corner of a table is often a good setting, especially when a visual portrayal is needed.

5. At the interview

It is advisable to:

- Get to the point quickly
- Be specific. You should state what the problem is, and where appropriate, how the problem is affecting them, you, your work area or the team. You should have specific facts at your disposal to support your comments.
- Own what you say. Use the 'I' word and take responsibility for what you are saying. These sorts of phrases are usually appropriate:

'I want...' 'I think...' 'I would like...' 'I don't like...' 'I know that...'

Don't use 'you' – it is blaming.

- Use assertive body language. A loud voice, finger wagging, inability to look the recipient in the eye, are *not* recommended. People are much more comfortable if you look at them directly and in a calm, unemotional manner. Remember, 'weak views, forcibly expressed' won't achieve much.
- Explore suggestions for improvement. While you should know what you want in terms of outcome, you can ask for suggestions from the recipient first before suggesting your own. They may well suggest what you want, which will increase ownership. Phrases like:
'What do you think we should do?' 'How can we resolve this?' 'Let's consider the options.' are usually appropriate and will, hopefully, lead on to agreement resulting in the desired change.

7. Review your approach and performance

A feedback session delivering criticism should be reviewed by the coach as a valuable learning vehicle. If you handled the interview to your satisfaction, congratulate yourself and analyse why. Equally, if there is room for improvement, review your mistakes and learn from them. Openness and honesty with yourself is just as important as openness and honest with your coachees!

Managers should avoid:

- Destructive criticism
- Being poorly prepared and rushing the feedback encounter
- Ambiguous messages which lack clarity.

Additional resources

Books

Improving employee performance through workplace coaching: a practical guide to performance management

Earl M A Carter and Frank A McMahon

London: Kogan Page, 2005

Executive coaching: a guide for the HR professional

Anna Marie Valerio and Robert J Lee

San Francisco, Calif: Pfeiffer, 2005

Coaching for change: practical strategies for transforming performance

Kaye Thorne

London: Kogan Page, 2004

The seven Cs of coaching: the definitive guide to collaborative coaching

Mick Cope

Harlow: Prentice Hall Business, 2004

The coaching handbook: an action kit for trainers and managers

Sara Thorpe and Jackie Clifford

London: Kogan Page, 2003

Personal coaching: releasing potential at work

Kaye Thorne

London: Kogan Page, 2001

Go MAD about coaching

Andy Gilbert and Ian Chakravorty

Leicester: Go Mad Books, 2001

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from the Management Information Centre. More information at: www.managers.org.uk/mic

Related checklists

Coaching for better performance (089)

Giving feedback as a coach (222)

Devising a coaching programme (224)

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