



## **Constructive Criticism Isn't 'Constructive' at All**

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February 2020

**QUESTION:** When I interview a potential candidate, I ask them how well they take criticism. I have never had anyone say that they do not take it well. Yet in reality, I find that when I criticize a staff member, they often get upset and some actually cry. They make the changes I suggest, but they often seem resentful. This frustrates me, as I am trying to operate a business. I expect my staff to do as I ask. I don't need to be dealing with a bunch of people who simply cannot take direction. Is there a way to make sure that I am hiring thicker-skinned employees?

**ANSWER:** As the old adage goes, "It's not what you say, it's how you say it," and I have a feeling that you need to consider the manner in which you deliver the feedback. Listen, no one likes to be criticized. And most people want to do the job the right way. So, if an employee is not doing the job as you want them to do it, then you need to let them know. The resentment may be tied to your delivery of the critique rather than the critique itself.

For example:

- Did you raise your voice when you gave them the criticism? If you did, the employee will hear and remember the volume of your voice and not the words you used.
- Did you point out their mistake in front of a coworker, customer, or vendor? If so, they will remember their embarrassment and resent you for causing it.
- Did you ask the employee why they were doing something a certain way and allow them to respond before telling them to do it differently? And, if so, did you actually listen to their response? If you did not, on both counts, they may harbor a grudge and will have a need to "let it out", usually to co-workers. And of course, the co-workers will tell of their experiences in a similar situation working with you and the hurt feelings escalate.
- Did you tell them the way you would like the task done and why? If not, you missed an opportunity to teach, which would have secured the knowledge in a positive manner and opened the door for more dialogue and learning.

I could go on and on. The phrase 'constructive criticism' is a misnomer and is rarely effective in the development of a person's skillset. I would begin by discontinuing the use of this phrase. In its place, begin to use these opportunities as teachable moments and remember, 'telling isn't teaching'. Approach the conversation from a coaching perspective versus a directing standpoint. When you see something, you need to address, note it, and look for an opportunity to meet with the employee privately as soon as possible. If you are angry wait until you calm down and think about how you are going to frame this

conversation. You are now wearing a teacher's hat and your goal is to change the way the employee is performing and/or behaving. This requires awareness and accountability on the part of the employee – it's a process and they need to be an active participant in their own development.

Here are some tips to guide you:

- Always focus on the task or the behavior, not the person.
- Explain the 'why' as well as the 'how'.
- Keep your voice at a respectful level.
- Prepare for the meeting by developing questions that will allow the employee to become aware of the same issues/concerns that you notice – so they are more willing to work on correcting it.
- Do not argue.
- Encourage feedback.
- Listen to the employee's responses and encourage them to ask questions for a deeper understanding.

The goal is to develop employees and get their buy-in. You do this by coming alongside them as a partner in their learning, not as their parent looking to correct and scold. In the current workforce environment, companies need to do everything they can to attract and retain staff. If you have a reputation (whether deserved or not) of being demanding, let me assure you, word will get around and you will have difficulty hiring and keeping high quality staff.