

## **Feedback should not be criticism**

By Mike Smith, SPHR On the web at [mikesmith-hr.com](http://mikesmith-hr.com) email [ms@mikesmith-hr.com](mailto:ms@mikesmith-hr.com)

Managers give their staff direction and feedback. When done effectively work happens and it is well done. Unfortunately, the two most frequent sources of poor performance are ineffective direction and feedback. We will talk about effective feedback. Often managers give what they consider useful feedback and wonder why employees are not receptive to the manager's constructive criticism. There is no such thing as constructive criticism. The two words don't belong together when we are talking about giving feedback to maintain or improve work performance. After all, "constructive" suggests building up whereas "criticism" suggests tearing down and recipients won't listen if you give feedback in the form of criticism.

### **An Emotional Issue**

How would you respond to the question, "Did you stay up all night trying to figure out how to mess up?" Not well. Nobody would. Even if the manager doesn't give feedback in non-specific, emotionally loaded ways, some employees hear any type of feedback that's not 100% positive as criticism. What can you do?

You definitely must provide needed feedback; after all, that's a manager's job. However, if you are trying to achieve behavior change how you give the feedback is as important as what you say. There are ways to give feedback that are productive, not counterproductive.

### **Guidelines**

Here are some guidelines to help you in providing feedback:

- Plan what you are going to say.
- If the situation is in any way upsetting or frustrating to you, wait until you calm down, then give the feedback.
- Do it privately.
- Don't give corrective feedback to employees in front of others. Some people find that demeaning. No matter your intent, tone of voice, or words, the employee will likely perceive it as negative, when you correct him or her in front of others.
- Listen to the employee's side. While you may hear (what you consider) an excuse, it is important to listen to what the employee has to say about the performance. If it's an excuse, say so. But if it's a plausible reason you were not aware of, indicate you understand and that you had not thought of it that way
- Be helpful.
- Use words, body language, and tone of voice to show that your intent is to help. This will encourage the employee to listen to you.
- Avoid anger. You should only be angry at work once or twice a year. If you come across as a YST (yelling, screaming, and threatening) manager, your employees will tune you out the same way you tuned out your parent(s) when you were young.
- Show how it should be done. Hopefully, you know how it should be done. Tell the employee. It is not helpful to hear the manager say, "Try again, maybe you'll get it this time." It is neither a learning experience, nor a positive interaction to make a mistake and receive criticism rather than help from your boss.
- Do it now, don't wait. Except to calm down, waiting makes your feedback less powerful.
- Don't give up. People do things for a number of reasons. Rarely do they do things wrong on purpose. No matter how specific you were, when you tell someone your expectations or give feedback, once may not be enough.

## **Bottom Line**

Respond immediately to behavior that is not likely to be self-correcting, that interferes with others' work, or that is costing money. For other, less critical, behavior, use this rule of thumb:

Once is an incident; twice is a coincidence; three times is a pattern. And patterns of performance must be "confronted" through the use of constructive feedback. Otherwise, poor performance can act like a cancer in the organization.