

DEALING WITH CRITICISM AND NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

Three Strategies for Keeping Your Cool Under Fire

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Have you ever been given “feedback?” Whenever people hear this word, we’ve been conditioned to associate it with negative criticism. Negative feedback or criticism, when delivered carelessly--no matter how warranted it may be, has the potential to irreparably destroy relationships to the point of no return.

Whenever two or more people are gathered, it’s impossible to avoid criticism at one point or another. Right or wrong, people are naturally inclined to evaluate others—the character of the person, the value of what the person may have done or is about to do, and the intention of the messages being delivered. It’s easy to misinterpret all of the above. That’s why interpersonal communication is one of the biggest stumbling blocks in performance and building relationships both on and off the job. Some else will eventually have issues with who you are and what you do.

Whenever you run into situations in which you *receive* negative criticism, usual responses vary from aggressive—defensive, argumentative, anger, or revenge, to passive—depressed, humiliated, or leaving the scene. It’s a natural fight or flight mechanism designed to protect us. While these are normal responses, they are also generally the worst approaches (there are always exceptions—see my article *Managing Workplace Conflict* in the Articles section of www.otclearning.com. Depending on the nature of the feedback and the situation, an overly aggressive or passive approach will only serve to fan the flames or leave issues unresolved.

To work effectively with, not against, negative criticism or feedback, consider three possible responses. You may choose to use only one, but you may use all three if the situation requires a more thorough response. In the end, there is no substitute for your best judgment. In all cases, remain as tactful and diplomatic as possible.

Three Strategies for Dealing with Negative Criticism or Feedback

1. Ask for details or specifics.

When on the receiving end of negative feedback or criticism, you may ask the sender to fully explain the nature of the criticism using open-ended questions beginning with the words who, what, when, where, why or how i.e. *What happened*, or *Who was involved*, or *Where did this take place* etc. You don't want your questions to sound like an interrogation, but you also want to know the breadth and depth of the criticism so that you can address it completely and accurately. There's a tendency for negative issues to escalate in people's minds and therefore become more exaggerated in the retelling. It's not uncommon for the sender of the criticism to engage in what's known as "heaping." Once one issue is out on the table, s/he might continue with something like... *and while we're on the subject, here's another thing that's a problem*, or *and another thing...*, or *and remember that time when you did XYZ?*

It's important to understand not only the current issue in the sender's mind, but also understand that the frustration has just triggered a possible cascade of underlying issues. If only one issue is being raised, deal with that one by asking for details. If others are raised that seem to be related, then deal with them as part of the overarching theme. If other unrelated issues are heaped on the scene, then make an agreement that you'll discuss them item by item at this time, or postpone the conversation on them until later. Chances are the issues will seem smaller and more manageable then, and tensions generally cool off. In either case, address each of the issues in an organized, rational approach. Do not lose your temper. Add strategies # 2 and #3 if appropriate.

2. Agree with the critic's right to an opinion.

If the issue is a one based on opinion, you might say something such as, *I can see why you would feel that way based on XYZ. You're entitled to your own opinion* (if an opinion is what's being expressed). *If I were in your situation I might feel the same way too.* This helps build empathy and keeps tension low. You may add to this response, if appropriate, with technique #3, and that is to self-disclose or explain your situation. For example, adding to the above sentences, *The reason why we did what we did is for the following reasons....* You may also agree to disagree on matters based on subjective information. *Let us agree to disagree on this issue. Agreed?*

If it's a difference in facts however, provide evidence of your position without an "I told you so" attitude. Adding to the above you might say, *If I were in your situation, I might feel the same way too. Are you familiar with the recent study done by 'such and so' that provides new data on this issue? That's why we took the measures we did.*

3. Self-disclose.

This gives an opportunity for you to explain your procedures, practices, policies, what took place, etc. to ease the mind of the critic. It's very important to keep your voice calm and "explanatory" in tone. There's a fine line between explaining yourself and sounding defensive. It's all in HOW you say your words and visually look when delivering your entire message. Your voice accounts for 38% of the impact of your message, and how you look (facial expressions, eye contact, posture etc.) accounts for 55%. Together, your non-verbal signals impact 93% of the message. Choose your words carefully, but more importantly, keep your delivery calm and professional. Explain, don't get defensive or hostile.

Other tips:

- Consider the validity of the feedback before responding. If you take the 5th, you may not want to dignify the criticism with a response, but it also

implies you have something to hide. Provide proof if appropriate, whenever possible.

- Avoid the *Yes, but...* syndrome. This sounds like making excuses. The word “but” erases the message preceding it. Try *Yes, and...* instead. *Yes, I understand your point and here’s actually what happened...*
- Avoid using the word *you* in a negative context. *You* creates ownership. If you use it within a compliment i.e. *You’re doing a great job*, people will own it and respond positively. If used in a negative context, i.e. *Your reports are coming in late*, people will also own it personally and are more likely to get defensive. Keep your conversation about the situation and not the person. Try, *These reports are coming in late. What’s going on?*
- Choose your response(s) carefully--the right blend of verbal, vocal and visual control without losing your cool.
- Respond to what is being *said* and not what you think is implied. Get the facts. Clarify your understanding of the message by paraphrasing what you’ve heard. Interpersonal communication is all about *correctly understanding* the message being sent.
- Realize that a criticism of behavior is not a rejection of you as a person.
- Feedback is an attempt to make things better. See the value in the message and look at this as a positive, constructive way to advance the relationship to more solid ground.

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