

Ten tips for giving criticism

John Maxwell (source: <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/9972.htm>)

1. Clarify your motive

The goal of confrontation should be to help, not to humiliate. Three key questions will help expose your true motives. First, ask yourself, Would I criticize if it were not a personal matter? Sometimes we react differently when we are emotionally or personally involved. Here's what I mean:

Sluggo: "That new kid in school is a big fat-head!"

Nancy: "You shouldn't call people names like that. I never call people names."

Sluggo: "Well, I just got mad when he said you were silly looking."

Nancy: "What else did that big fat-head say?"

Second, ask yourself, Will criticism make me look better? Cutting someone down to boost yourself up is the lowest form of ego gratification. It's the sign of a very insecure person. Remember that it isn't necessary to blow out another person's light in order to let your own shine.

Third, ask yourself, Does this criticism bring pain or pleasure to me? When it is painful for you to criticize others, you're probably safe in doing it. If you get the slightest bit of pleasure out of doing it, you should hold your tongue.

2. Make sure the issue is worthy of criticism

To whom does it really matter? Sometimes our pride causes us to engage in skirmishes that need never happen. Continual, petty criticism is the mark of a small mind; you have to be little to belittle. The secret to not letting yourself distracted and needled by insignificant issues is to keep your head up and your eyes on the goal.

3. Look at yourself before looking at others

Instead putting others in their place, put yourself in their place. Have you successfully done what you're accusing the other person of failing to do? Look at things from his or her point of view. You may see that you're the one who needs to make changes.

4. Be specific

When you confront you must be tactfully explicit. Say exactly what you mean and provide examples to back yourself up. I once had a staff person who had great difficulty confronting; he hated to make people face up to areas in which they needed to change. On one particular occasion I coached him. He rehearsed with me everything he was going to say to the individuals in question.

After the confrontation I asked him how it went. He assured me everything went smoothly and there were no problems; in fact, he said the people did not even question him. At that moment I knew something had gone wrong. Total acquiescence is not a normal reaction to honest confrontation.

Two days later the truth came out. One of the individuals said to me, "The other day we spent thirty minutes with Pastor So-and-so, but we have no idea what he was trying to tell us." The pastor had spent half an hour dancing around the issue without ever addressing it. He would have been better off to have left it alone. If you can't be specific, don't confront. People can usually tell when you're skirting an issue and will not respect you for it.

5. Don't undermine the person's self-confidence

Try to find at least one area in which you can praise the person before you expose the problem. Stay away from all-inclusive statements like, "You always..." or "You never..." Assure them that you have confidence in them and their ability to handle the situation correctly.

6. Don't compare one person with another

Deal with people on an individual basis. Comparisons always cause resentment and resentment causes hostility. There's no need to create a bigger problem than the one you already have, so why arouse heated emotions? If you stick to the facts, you'll be less likely to put the person on the defensive.

7. Be creative or don't confront

Will Rogers said, "There is nothing as easy as denouncing. It doesn't take much to see something is wrong, but it does take some eyesight to see what will put it right again." Look beyond the problem and see if you can help them find some solutions. For most of us it's much easier to be critical than to be creative. But unless you're willing to help to some degree in turning the situation around, you're not ready to comment on the problem.

8. Attack the problem not the person

Deal with the issue at hand. When a confrontation becomes a personal attack, you destroy your own credibility and find yourself in a no-win situation. The expected outcome of a confrontation should be that the offender leaves with a clear understanding of the problem and the hope that he or she can turn it around.

9. Confront when the time is right

The right time is just as soon as you know something is wrong. When you've completed your homework, then you're prepared. Sometimes people tell me about their relationship problems ask me for advice. The scenario is always the same and this is my advice: You cannot escape the need to talk to the other person. When you wait too long you lose the opportunity moment, and the issue becomes history. When you confront the person in a timely fashion you are better able to keep the facts straight and use the incident as an opportunity help the person grow.

10. End confrontation with encouragement

Always give confrontation the "sandwich treatment." Sandwich criticism between praise at the beginning and encouragement at the end. To leave a discouraged person without hope is cruel and vindictive. Goethe, the German poet said, "Correction does much, but encouragement does more. Encouragement after censure is as the sun after a shower.

In my effort to simplify things as much as possible, I have come up with one-word descriptions of the various ways people will respond to confrontation:

BYE. The "bye" people never profit from confrontation; they don't hang around long enough. Their egos are too fragile.

SPY. Spies become suspicious of everyone. They begin an investigation to find out who in the organization is out to get them. Often they will avoid risking a failure again.

FRY. Some people will simply get mad and either fly off at the handle or do a slow burn.

LIE. The liar has an excuse for every mistake. Therefore he never faces up to the reality of his situation.

CRY. Crybabies are overly sensitive and become hurt by confrontation. Unlike the "bye" people, criers hang around in hopes that people will see how mistreated they are and sympathize with them.

SIGH. These people have a "That's-too-bad-but-there's-nothing-I-can-do-about-it" attitude. They don't accept any responsibility for making right the wrong.

FLY. This category of people takes criticism and flies with it. They learn from it and become better because of it.

Which category has fit you in the past? Are there changes you need to make before you can take criticism and fly with it? I challenge you to start today.