

USING FUNCTION ANALYSIS TO GIVE CRITICISM AND INFLUENCE THE BEHAVIOR OF TEAMS



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ABSTRACT

This paper defines criticism, analyzes our reactions to it, describes non-value-adding approaches to giving criticism, and proposes an effective strategy for giving feedback that is systematic and based upon function analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Criticism or negative feedback can be defined as solicited or unsolicited value judgement by others. Some experts describe criticism as any responses others make to our behavior (1). People learn mainly through criticism. We tend to repeat behavior that we think gets us desirable responses from others with one exception—if the criticism is irrelevant or hostile or if the critic is not a valuable person in their lives, we resist criticism or give “AMC,” Absolute Minimum Compliance. However, most people are concerned about what others think of them, so criticism plays an important role in our lives. The most important feedback we give is often negative (2). Most people resent criticism and few know how to respond constructively towards it.

We often associate anxiety and defensiveness with the criticism. A strong link between anxiety and criticism leads to avoidance of and over-reaction to criticism. Criticism is not upsetting to all. Fortunately, in some cultures there is far less emotional sensitivity to criticism for work-related performance.

Criticism of team members can come from each other, team leaders, customers, and the organization. It can be expressed in numbers, words, or in casual or formal ways. For many teams, especially self-directed ones, feedback becomes ad hoc, goes undocumented, and is often too vague (3).

Criticism should be the result of an orderly procedure. Research shows that criticism functions best when critics have confidence and an orderly way of giving feedback, and the person being criticized is willing to collaborate. Criticism is most effective when the critic and the recipient of criticism collaborate on problem identification and choosing the remedies for the situation (4). This is a newer way of thinking about criticism. Previous thinking placed most of the responsibility for problem identification and proposing remedies on the critic.

This paper will cover the following recommendations for giving and receiving criticism:

- Use function analysis,
- Create collaboration,
- Gain commitment to change, and
- Reinforce change.

The purpose of this paper is to define how the process of giving criticism can be improved, resulting in less upset, better reception of the criticism, and enhanced likelihood for criticism to lead to committed change. Experts on team-building have said that “good, continuous feedback is like gasoline to a team ready to roll. The shrewd team leader keeps it pumping, for all the right reasons” (5).

WHEN CRITICISM IS NON-VALUE-ADDING

We may sensitize to criticism as children, leading to avoidance of criticism. Avoidance leads to several non-value adding characteristics of the typical way that we give criticism:

Non-value adding characteristics

Indirectness: The indirect approach means gently delivering comments buried in flowery, positive comments. Indirect forms of criticism sounds like this:

"We have been very happy to have you on our team, and we really appreciate the fine work that you have done with us. You bring us your skill in construction management and strong interpersonal skills. Just a little pointer here, though: the next time you work with this type of project, you might consider trying a different approach with the team. Otherwise, it's been a great year and I'm looking forward to your success with the next project we tackle together."

As you probably noticed, the key criticism in this example—that a better approach was needed—was buried in the middle of this little speech. This indirect approach violates an important rule of understanding and memory: it places key information at the weakest position in the speech, which is the middle.

This indirect approach "worked" in the past because it seemed to serve the function of "preserve positive feelings" after the criticism was delivered. However, this approach has two current disadvantages: first, people suspect that there will be uncomfortably negative feedback as soon as they hear the soft, overly positive beginning and end of this type of speech, so they negate the value of all of those positive words. Second, recipients of criticism who listen for direct information often fail to hear the negative criticism or coaching at all. They simply hear the glowing statements and assume that all is well.

A final reason for being direct relates to the greater complexity of indirect speech. Recipients of criticism who speak your language as a foreign language will find indirect speaking far more confusing than direct speaking, and this can lead to both misunderstandings and to increased anxiety as recipients attempt to decode your meaning. As you can see, indirect communications can lead to

communication breakdown and uncertainty about the actual message.

Feelings-orientation: Stressing feelings or trying to maintain constant positivism have strained both logic and integrity to the limit. In an attempt to be perceived as caring and perceptive, many people have sacrificed logical thought, trust, and a desire to help on the altar of maintaining happy, upbeat feelings. Actually, most people experience feelings-oriented communications as either strained, euphemistic, or, if done with full integrity, as very stressful. Few of us are professional psychologists who can manage discussions of feelings in a totally constructive manner.

Finally, unlike "feelings" that we have for loved ones, the feelings we have for co-workers or workshop members are usually not love. In the absence of love and intimacy, discussion of feelings is even more difficult. Co-workers and workshop members are essentially strangers, and their feelings and psyches are not as well studied or understood as those people whom we cherish and live with. Consequently, our skill at communicating feelings outside of our homes is compromised.

Another disadvantage of feelings-orientation relates to the changing relationships we have at work. In the past, work relationships were stable, lasting years or even lifetimes. Currently, with downsizing, re-engineering, and matrixing, most people do not work together for more than brief periods and are becoming less involved in each other's lives. VE specialists may have relationships with clients that are measured in only days or weeks. As a result, true "caring" about coworkers and workshop members can be very limited.

However, the typical training in expressing criticism is still very feelings-oriented. For example, you might criticize someone as follows: *"I am very disappointed at the way you are behaving in the team creativity exercise."* This approach can be seriously out of date. This is why: If you are not in anything but a temporary relationship, feelings become a poor foundation for encouraging change and improvement. Specifically, if you are criticizing me, and you express your criticism as causing you to feel disappointed or dismayed, my lack of relationship with you leads me to not care how you feel about my behavior. Based on the shaky foundation of your feelings, I may have little to no motivation to change. If the case is that you and I are from different

cultures or backgrounds, then the emotion that you express may have little meaning to me. I may not understand your emotional reaction to a business problem. Use an emotional approach with individuals or teams who respect that approach, who use it themselves, and, most importantly, when they are in close relationship or are very familiar with you.

Delay: Another characteristic of the typical feedback process is that feedback, especially when it is criticism, is delayed until a pattern emerges or the critic can summon the courage to criticize. Whereas this delay has been rationalized often by the belief that “collecting data” is value-adding, it leads to intense resentment by the recipient who would have preferred to save face by knowing when criticism has been leveled and by having the opportunity to correct the situation before it became a “problem.” The clandestine nature of data collection as it relates to negative judgement is also often offensive. Finally, from a business or team-building perspective, delay simply leads to even less opportunity to get the team back on track. Criticism that is immediate, focused, and specific leads to less humiliation and the opportunity for quicker change.

Telling: In an authoritarian, top-down business environment, telling others what to do or think was not only typical but expected. In a team-oriented modern business environment, involving others in decision-making is not only the preferred and expected mode but it is the way to have the criticism recipient save face and partner with you to commit to a solution. In the traditional mode, the critic would make a lengthy, serious speech about a fault or criticism. In the new mode, the recipient of criticism explains the impact of the negative behavior, chooses an outcome, and commits to implementation. Below is an example of this type of dialogue, condensed for our purposes:

Example: criticism—not finishing a project on time

- *You (facts): Peter, let's talk about the project that was due on Tuesday. On Tuesday you said that you would have it done by the end of the day. You just finished today, Friday. (Silence.)*
- *Peter: Well, I guess you wished that I had finished on time.*
- *You (define actions): What are your options?*
- *Peter: Hmm... I could do better next time. Maybe ask for help when I get bogged down. Maybe use my planner to manage my time better. But, Rae, it really wasn't my fault. The equipment problems we had this week....*
- *You: What are your best options, Peter?*
- *Peter: When I have problems, I've got to start tapping into the other team members for help.*

- *You: Can you be more specific?*
- *Peter: I can ask for help as soon as I know there's a problem. Probably I should start with Stephanie, and have you as a back-up. I could also inform you right away so that we can handle the possible change in the deadline.*
- *You: What kind of impact would that action have on your future projects?*
- *Peter: I'd meet deadlines, or at least not have to sweat about changes and your reaction to them!*
- *You (reinforce and support): Great. I'm glad you thought of something to improve your dealing with deadlines. What action are you committed to taking?*
- *Peter: I'll get help as soon as I spot a problem. I'll call Stephanie and you.*
- *You: Good. I'm glad you've got a solution. Keep me posted.*

Not all conversations move so smoothly as it does in this condensed example, but these conversations improve with practice.

Person-oriented: In the highly individualistic environment of the past, the focus was on personal traits and their impact at work. This approach changed to the competencies model, where personal capabilities were delineated and used to benchmark individual performance.

However, these approaches which target individual style, personalities, and attitudes are frequently in conflict with ongoing improvements in managing workforce diversity. With the increased focus on respecting diversity, team leaders and group facilitators who attempt to target individual's characteristics could be making a serious mistake. Personal traits can have complex links to cultural, age, and gender differences. Seeking to create conformity in thought or behavior can lead to unnecessary strife and litigation rather than to personal development. For these reasons, the personal approach to criticism can be both prejudicial and a source of negative impact to the organization's bottom line.

Also, an individual focus in terms of criticism negates the true reason for criticism—that certain actions are having a negative impact on the team or process. The actual behavior or attitudes of the individual would not be crucial if they had no impact on co-workers or on team goals. Consequently, a high integrity discussion of behavior works best if it is presented the context of its true value—in relation to the rest of the team.

When given some insight into the ways he or she has negatively affected others, the recipient of criticism can use logic and a systematic method for righting his or her behavior to reach a higher and more impersonal but important goal of “getting things done” or “keeping the process on track.” This approach is also gratifyingly face-saving to the recipient.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH THE NEW APPROACH

Whereas the traditional approach has its problems, it does have a good feeling of familiarity associated with it. The new approach of increased directness, process-orientation, and recipient involvement has its own disadvantages.

“Direct criticism hurts people’s feelings” or “I don’t want to harm our relationship”

Although you might fear the “sting” in direct criticism, the recipient’s fear drops precipitously when he or she feels that you are telling the truth and not “playing games.” Criticism modifications such as padding the negative feedback with warm, positive words, giving more weight to protecting feelings than to helping the person to improve, and deliberately reducing the clarity of the feedback may feed recipients’ fear that they are not getting the truth or you are being patronizing. Direct, clear criticism delivered in a calm, neutral, optimistic tone is not only more effective but it hurts less than you think. For those from cultures that value directness, it is comforting to receive your clear, direct message.

Interestingly, at a large company where I work frequently, there had been an alarming lack of retention of high potential professionals from a culture that values directness. When they were interviewed, their anger at their managers was palpable. Their main reasons for leaving or wanting to leave? Only one: apparent lack of negative feedback and consequential lack of growth and promotion. This revelation astonished their managers, who were convinced that they had in fact given plenty of feedback. We discovered that the feedback they gave was in the traditional indirect style. The result was loss of skilled professionals and threatened lawsuits.

“Give me an example.”

This request for specific instances is a valid and useful one. For Value Engineering specialists, this should not be a problem. By applying function analysis to behavior, you have a way to define behavior. For examples, see Figure 1.

Figure 1: Comparison of Criticism Approaches

Situation	Traditional Criticism	Criticism Using Function Analysis
Interpersonal skills of a team member who insulted another for offering an idea during a brainstorming session	<i>“I was upset at the way you handled Jack’s idea during brainstorming.”</i>	<i>“Your functions during brainstorming are to encourage openness and reward contribution. When Jack said that we could change the materials to cut costs, you interrupted and said, “That’s stupid.”</i>
Team member refuses to allow others to talk as much as she does	<i>“Although you have been a great contributor and I appreciate what you’ve said so far, I feel that you are taking up a lot of the talking time in this group. We need to give others a chance to express their ideas, don’t you think?”</i>	<i>“What is the function of this phase of the meeting? ...Right, evaluate ideas and prioritize solutions for the team’s design. I hear you speaking much more than anyone else in the group. I estimate your speaking at 80% of the time. How does that compare with the functions we are trying to fulfill?”</i>
The team is evaluating during brainstorming	<i>“You’re not doing this right. You shouldn’t be evaluating at this point.”</i>	<i>“Tell me again what the functions are of brainstorming. ... Good, to create ideas and to be open. How does your current speaking fit with those functions?”</i>

This impersonal approach allows individuals to save face and allows critics to criticize and intervene early in the process. There is no need for hard feelings and no need to isolate the “problem” person at breaks or after sessions.

“I can’t criticize them in front of everyone.”

This is the typical excuse for postponing or avoiding criticism. To give criticism well, you have to have the courage to do it promptly. The recipient will be grateful, your prompt delivery will allow the specifics to be fresh in your mind, and you will avoid building a non-value adding amount of drama or

generalization into the actual criticism. It may be appropriate to give some criticism in private. It remains important to do so promptly and to do so using a process approach and specific feedback.

"It's easier to just tell them what they did wrong."

Even though it is easier to simply tell them what to do, having them participate more in the feedback process creates commitment to finding and applying the solutions. The traditional way of giving feedback was gratifying to the feedback giver because you received a chance to ventilate your feelings and concerns. The advantage of ventilation is outweighed by the time it consumes and by the lack of participation of the recipient. The hard part is exercising self-control sufficiently and planning communications well so that the recipient saves face, takes control of the situation, and proposes and commits to solutions that he or she can manage.

"It's easier to just isolate the individuals creating problems than to bring it up to the team."

Another difficulty with the new approach is the difficulty of continually putting the criticism in terms of the team. It is easier to treat the person as the problem. Turning their behavior or attitudes into a single case is less worrisome than the possibility that their behavior or attitudes are symptomatic of a team in trouble. The person who seems to deserve criticism might actually be a bright signal to the VE specialist who is wondering how the team is doing. For example, someone who is constantly disclaiming the value of the VE process could be viewed as simply a resistant or threatened individual. Better: the complainer may signal the VE specialist that others may think that the process is not valuable or that the team was inadequately prepared to start the process. The VE specialist needs to ask questions of everyone and possibly reformat the interactions to get better support or at least increased patience with the process.

FUNCTION ANALYSIS-BASED PROCESS FOR GIVING CRITICISM

The new process is very short, but it has some unexpected twists and turns. For example, in the traditional way, the feedback giver more or less lectures on the impact of the problem and what should be done to improve the situation. In the new way, the recipient of the criticism defines the impact and recommends solutions. Here is the process in outline form from the feedback giver's perspective:

- 1st: Observe behavior relative to functions
- 2nd: Describe behavior relative to functions
- 3rd: Ask questions
- 4th: Stop talking
- 5th: Get committed action
- 6th: Reinforce committed action

1. Observe behavior

In the traditional way, you might spend a lot of time observing for patterns in behavior and attitudes. In the new way, you should continue observing, but do not wait until patterns are clearly established. Why? Because they may never become clear, but the behaviors and their interpretations need to be noted for prompt presentation. Observe the following for greatest efficacy in giving feedback:

- The event that occurred just before the critical behavior (Example: what was being said or done just prior to the critical behavior)
- How the critical action looked or sounded precisely, as if you had captured it on video (Example: He or she did X, said Y, or showed Z behavior)
- What the immediate visible or audible reaction was to the behavior by other members of the team (What did they do or say after the critical behavior that was not value-adding?)
- What function was being violated by this behavior (Example: In a brainstorming session, was the function "create ideas" impeded by this behavior?)

2. Describe behavior

In the traditional way, you reported your feelings, made positive comments, and then leveled your evaluation. In the new way, you tell what you see or heard. Nothing more or less. Be clear and precise. Use a neutral tone of voice. Do not lecture. Be descriptive without being evaluative (6).

Example:

Traditional way: "I was disappointed when you became so critical of her in the meeting. She didn't deserve that kind of treatment. It also wasn't in keeping with the goal of the meeting -- to brainstorm. You pick on her a lot. This has really become a problem."

New way: "In the past hour, when Janet participated at first in the brainstorming session, you said to her, "That was a lousy idea." Ten minutes later, she tried to comment on the move liquid function, and you said, "We can't do that! We tried that years ago."

When she spoke the last time about the same function, you rolled your eyes."

3. Ask questions

Use questions that put the responsibility on the recipient to determine meaning and impact. Remain calm and neutral. You are signaling that you confidently expect the recipient to handle the potential problems with his or her actions. These types of questions include but are not limited to:

"What do these observations mean to you?"
"What is the impact of these behaviors?"
"How do these behaviors affect the team/our goals?"
"What are your options?"
"What actions can you commit to improve your role in this situation?"
"What do you think you can do about this?"

4. Stop talking

Better than asking these questions is pausing calmly and letting the recipient respond to the description of observed behaviors. This is face-saving and immediately puts the recipient in control of the discussion. Paradoxically, the person who is seemingly unaware of the impact of his or her actions on the rest of the team is often not only aware but needs to verbalize what he or she knows about an action and its impact. Silence gives the recipient the opportunity to take charge of the conversation, take responsibility for the problem that arose, and identify a solution.

5. Get committed action

Rather than lecturing the person regarding a solution, which is a potentially humiliating situation, in the new way you will ask for a committed action. This is a form of contracting for behavior, and the contract is initiated, surprisingly, by the recipient of the criticism. Examples of commitment-seeking questions:

"What actions can you commit to?"
"What is your best solution?"
"What is possible in the future as a result of your actions?"

Example of a committed response:

Recipient: "I think that I will have to practice controlling myself during brainstorming as far as Jack is concerned. He reminds me of a difficult team leader from my past. I'll make a commitment to remind myself that he is not Allen (from my past)."

6. Reinforce commitment

This is the simplest step and pleasant to do. In this step, you have the opportunity to praise the recipient for his or her committed action and to offer your support. It is a positive moment and a good way to end critical feedback giving. After the recipient has committed to definitive action, you simply say "Very good," "I'm glad that you figured out such a good solution," or "Let me know how I can help." Again, the control remains with the recipient, who had all the control in the first place, even when you used the traditional way to deliver feedback! It also ends the feedback session on a positive note, which is good for morale.

TIPS FOR GIVING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

The following tips will help you to continually improve your approach to giving negative feedback:

- Reduce the amount of emotion and relationship wording in criticism unless that is the other person's preferred style: speak in facts and ask questions
- Be specific when describing actions
- Be courageous: criticize promptly and directly
- Put responsibility on recipients, who have the most control over their own actions
- Stick to the current situation: don't generalize or philosophize
- Make your communication vivid: describe what you saw and heard in which context
- Respond positively to committed action
- Keep the tone neutral: there is no need to show anger, annoyance, or exaggerated warmth
- Don't tell stories or give lectures
- Follow up: when you see them doing it right, say so (or send a note to that effect)
- Don't hold a grudge: when they improve, do not remind them of past mistakes
- Keep cultural differences in mind: people from different cultures may show different verbal and nonverbal responses to criticism (7)
- Some people may prefer criticism "straight" and direct, while others may prefer the more traditional soft impact and tentative style of delivery (8)

CONCLUSION

American columnist Meg Greenfield had this comment about criticism: "Thin skin is the only kind of skin human beings come with." Her point is well-

taken: that criticism remains a sensitive issue for most people. Still, criticism leads to growth and improvement.

The process of giving feedback is uncomplicated and can be linked to function analysis. It does not have to be a deeply personal or emotional experience for either the recipient or the giver of criticism. What it does need in these times of shorter relationships is to be clear and designed to put the responsibility for change on the recipient. It is harder than simply telling recipients how to improve, and it provides less time for venting your frustration, but it does lead to empowerment of recipients to make a difference in their actions and therefore in the success of their teams as they journey through the VE process.

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