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Criticizing a Project Team Member's Performance

Five Guidelines for Delivering Constructive Criticism

by Claudine E. Paris

Project managers are caught in a seeming paradox:

- They need to create and maintain good working relationships so that they can get work done through others.
- At the same time, they need to constantly perform course corrections on others' performance.

In other words, they need to criticize.

The paradox is only apparent, not real. Skillfully delivered criticism enhances both the relationship and the targeted performance. The five simple rules for delivering "criticism at its best" are the subject of this article.

1. Think it through before you say something. Don't just shoot from the lip.

Reactionary responses to unwanted behaviors subvert the working relationships you need to solve problems. A problem worth solving demands your concentrated attention and focus to gain desired outcomes. This may mean not saying anything at all until you have mentally rehearsed your delivery and envisioned the receiver's response.

2. Criticize in private (and praise in public).

Public criticism offends not only the receivers, but the observers. No one wants to see another person publicly hung by someone too cowardly to address the issue one to one, face to face. When a problem arises during a team meeting, acknowledge it and say that this is something that needs to be addressed "later" or "between Dan and I" or "without taking up everyone's time."

3. Respond to problems in a timely fashion (otherwise known as "nip the problem in the bud") and take only one point at a time.

Realize your own propensity to put off discussing problem behaviors. Remember the difficulty in reconstructing problems because everyone remembers them differently. Remember your laundry list of complaints and the feeling of futility when you're unable to sort through them to find a fix. Force yourself to recognize lost opportunities for improvement. Compare that to the benefits of a timely focus on correcting one problem at a time.

If you truly want to improve a team member's performance or reach a better understanding with a colleague, act with alacrity. Decide which problem if solved would achieve the greatest gains and take steps to maximize those potential gains by addressing the problem now. Improvements achieved in one key area often spill over into related areas.

4. Criticize without comparison.

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Think about it. What's to gain? You may attempt to justify making comparisons by calling it "instilling a sense of competition," but you're kidding yourself if you believe your own rationalizations. Broad, unfavorable comparisons between this sorry team and that exemplary team you led last year is more a comment about your leadership than your team's performance. Individuals told they don't measure up end up finding fault with you rather than dealing with the ambiguous criticism levied at them.

5. Criticize with specificity, not labels.

Here are three kinds of specificity:

1. Behaviors:

- inaccuracy
- lateness
- absenteeism
- interrupting
- missed timelines
- incompleteness
- incorrectness (assumptions, data, etc.)
- yelling
- unaligned project deliverables (with customer expectations)

2. Absence of behaviors:

- didn't follow through
- didn't communicate changes to the client
- didn't solicit client feedback or input
- didn't inform project sponsor of problem encountered
- didn't achieve all deliverables
- didn't use sponsor to remove roadblock

3. Indicators of behaviors and/or non-behaviors:

- poor customer service evaluations
- complaints from colleagues or team members
- exceeding project budget

Criticism or feedback that cites specific examples such as those listed above requires no interpretation of meaning. A missed commitment, is a missed commitment. Poor survey feedback concretely identifies problem areas. These concrete descriptions focus on quantifiable problems and achievable improvements.

Non-specific criticism invites ugliness. It may take you a moment to appreciate that the following labels are non-specific; but realistically, the receiver can only guess what you mean by such criticism:

- careless
- inattentive
- distracted
- poor communicator
- unmotivated
- self-interested
- uncaring
- unfocused
- uninformed

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- impatient
- reactionary

The use of labels amounts to an attack on the person. An attack calls for a defense "I am not careless!" "I am not unmotivated!" The giver and the receiver engage in a heated argument about whether the receiver is careless or unmotivated without pinpointing the actual problem behavior and ways to improve it. Emotional pain without gain. The subsequent articles in this series will cover:

- the difference between instructive and destructive criticism, and how to deliver instructive criticism
- reprimands and disciplinary actions
- receiving and responding to criticism
- creating natural feedback loops
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