



[Buy book or audiobook](#)

The Truth Doesn't Have to Hurt

How to Use Criticism to Strengthen Relationships,
Improve Performance, and Promote Change

Deb Bright • Copyright © 2014 AMACOM, a division
of American Management Association • 244 pages

Take-Aways

- Criticism is in the top 10 of the most stressful workplace experiences.
- You can learn effective methods for giving and receiving criticism.
- Common mistakes that “givers” and “receivers” make include bad timing, making criticism personal, avoiding clear instruction and lacking empathy.
- Givers and receivers must have mutual trust and respect before a critique.
- Givers should be aware of receivers’ goals, know their preferences for hearing criticism and practice before delivering criticism.
- Receivers should view the criticism as information, not judgment. They should focus on what their supervisors say, not on how they say it.
- Receivers are in control of criticism.
- Receivers decide whether to accept criticism from the giver, examine the criticism and determine how to proceed.
- If the receiver can’t do anything about the critique, don’t deliver it.
- Offer employees coaching for giving and receiving criticism.

Recommendation

Performance consultant and former Olympic diving hopeful Deb Bright shows readers how to give and receive criticism. Drawing from her research on the effects of receiving criticism on workplace stress levels, and other studies about criticism, she explains how it works, how to create a workplace environment that's conducive to feedback, how to give and take criticism, and how to avoid common mistakes as a "giver" and "receiver" of critiques. She teaches givers how to build their confidence and become more comfortable when criticizing. Receivers learn how to accept criticism as useful without becoming emotional. Bright also covers how to manage teams and cope with difficult situations. *getAbstract* recommends her practical, applicable advice to anyone seeking to create a workplace that embraces healthy, productive criticism.

Summary

Understanding Criticism

Leaders should value the role of criticism in their organizations. Ignoring a problem and hoping it will disappear doesn't work. Supervisors need to be able to give – and receive – criticism. Many people in Western cultures have difficulty with criticism. Americans tend to indulge in euphemisms like "constructive criticism" or "negative feedback." Most people think criticism is intended to be hurtful, but the opposite is true. When you fail to give criticism, you are missing an opening you could use to help your employees reach their full potential. Criticism is not always negative. Sometimes you can use it to help a good performer reach an even higher level.

"Creating an Atmosphere of Acceptance"

For criticism to be effective, leaders need to create an organizational culture that accepts it. Mutual trust and respect help nourish a workplace that embraces and appreciates criticism. Create unambiguous relationship boundaries, and set shared goals and priorities. People working in a trusting atmosphere understand that criticism can help them and won't question givers' motives.

"Sure, the truth hurts, but it's what you do with the information that turns the initial hurt into something that propels you forward, feeling empowered along the way."

People have different preferences for how they wish to receive criticism. Some people like a direct approach, while you may need to treat others more gently. To learn what people prefer, ask them. If this is awkward, neutralize the situation by pursuing the subject casually over coffee. Discuss the circumstances you face in the third person. You might say, "Tell me about a favorite boss you have worked with," and then ask, "How did your boss approach you when you made a mistake or failed to deliver?" Understand and respect professional boundaries. "Receivers" stay more open to criticism when someone they trust delivers it and when it relates to performance, not personality. "Givers" and receivers should heed their mutual boundaries to avoid confusion.

"More than any other form of communication, criticism has the potential power to fatally ruin relationships."

Relationships always change and always take work. Your relationships can suffer from subtle or indirect “unspoken expectations.” When bosses don’t state clear expectations, workers make assumptions that lead to problems. Be aware of how you criticize others, and note when you want to criticize them but fail to follow through.

Common Giver Mistakes

Criticism that comes at unexpected times or from unexpected places is stressful. It can cause hurt feelings and other problems. People who give criticism commonly make the following six errors:

1. **“Quick draw”** – These givers “call it as they see it.” They don’t consider the consequences of criticism and that blind spot can destroy relationships. Givers who procrastinate make matters worse. When they fail to offer feedback, receivers assume things are fine and they get upset when givers finally confront them.
2. **“More about me”** – These givers have bad timing or deliver criticism according to their own preferences instead of the receiver’s preference. Such givers also may use a canned positive-negative-positive sequence rather than tailoring their criticism to the receiver. They start with something positive, follow with something negative and end with something positive. This “sandwich approach” backfires because receivers don’t hear the negative or don’t take the critique seriously.
3. **“Hey you”** – These givers make their criticisms personal, not impartial. When givers personalize criticism, their receivers hear blame and feel a lack of support. Such givers frequently use “you” phrases instead of taking a more neutral third-person approach.
4. **“Guessing game”** – These givers either express their issues vaguely or don’t provide clear instructions. They can be so polite they don’t outline anything specific to fix.
5. **“Who cares?”** – Stop to be aware of the receiver’s feelings. Some givers rush their delivery or they lack empathy. Givers in a hurry should wait until the moment is right.
6. **“The sky is falling”** – These givers fail to vary their criticism. Not every matter is urgent, but this giver treats everything as equally important. Eventually, employees ignore these doomsayers, and they lose credibility.

Common Receiver Mistakes

People who receive criticism also make mistakes. Common receiver errors include:

- **Rejecting information** – These “argumentative” receivers take criticism personally instead of regarding it as simple information.
- **Reacting before thinking** – These “quick responder” receivers might react first and think later or might leap to conclusions. How you react to criticism matters. Receivers, not givers, hold the control. Even so, some receivers react first without thinking through the criticism and requesting further clarification.
- **Denying mistakes** – These receivers either can’t admit their mistakes or they blame others. To build trust and respect, own your mistakes. People will forget your mistakes but they won’t forget how you handled them.

- **Becoming a victim** – These receivers think they're victims because they get vague criticism. Some givers need help bestowing criticism. They aren't specific enough or they change their mind about what they want. This frustrates receivers and makes them feel victimized. As a receiver, find a way to work with vague givers.

Delivering Criticism

Before you give criticism, be aware of the receiver's goals, know the employee's preference for how to receive criticism, and establish mutual trust and respect. Determine the purpose of the criticism you will deliver. Practice what you will say before you say it.

“Avoid focusing on being right and winning a battle at the expense of losing the war.”

If the receiver can't do anything about the matter you are criticizing, don't deliver your critique. In that case, criticism “is misdirected and sets off alarm signals to receivers.” When you do express a criticism, be specific. Use examples to demonstrate what you want. When a giver says, “You're not a team player,” the receiver wonders what to change. Receivers who don't hear specifics become wary and more likely to ignore the giver's message. Consider the criticism's urgency. In most situations, criticism can wait, though you must take action when something is urgent, such as a crisis with a client.

“Organizations that do not skillfully address criticism are breeding grounds for mediocre outcomes and low morale.”

Before giving criticism, be sure your relationship is solid and your mutual boundaries are clear. You don't want to hear “that's none of your business” or “I don't have to take that from you.” For example, some team members feel they can criticize each other because they work together. Other team members may think only the boss should give criticism.

“The stress related to criticism comes when the receivers aren't sure whether the intent is to help, hurt, rattle their self-confidence or set them up for a fall.”

Deliver criticism in private. Help receivers maintain their privacy and self-confidence. Ensure that the receiver knows the criticism isn't personal by saying, “I believe in you.” Prove that belief is genuine with your actions. Avoid trigger words such as “must,” and don't use insults, such as “stupid” or “lazy.” Alternatives to harsh language include, “Have you thought about trying this?” “Let me make a suggestion” or “Can I offer you some feedback?”

How to Receive Criticism

Receiving criticism doesn't have to be stressful. Determine how you will hear it. As a receiver, you're in control. Don't focus on how the giver delivers the critique; focus instead on what the giver is saying. Instead of listening with your mind working on how you can refute the criticism, argue against it or make a judgment, listen fully in order to understand. Keep an open mind, and view the criticism as helpful or, at least, intended to be helpful.

“A clear understanding of goals and objectives is vital to make criticism work. It is the foundation [of] criticism acceptance.”

Receivers screen givers by deciding whether or not they will accept criticism from them. They examine the criticism itself and decide how they will proceed. When screening a giver, make sure you understand the person’s stated intent in light of your relationship. Although becoming defensive is natural, exercise control. Say something like, “Thanks for making me aware” without adding further elaboration. That will give you time to think about a response. Seek clarification of anything you don’t understand. Examine the content and timing of the criticism.

“To postpone or avoid saying something in the hope that the situation will go away is almost never the solution.”

Scrutinize the critique to determine if it’s valid, if the desired actions are clear and whether the giver has positive intentions. Criticism is valid if the giver provides specifics. Most people rely on their intuition to decide whether a giver has positive or negative intentions. The following situations suggest negative intentions:

- The giver avoids eye contact – especially if the giver normally makes eye contact.
- The giver cuts you off or uses “trigger” words, knowing they will upset you.
- The giver approaches you at an inappropriate time or place.
- “The giver compares you with an identified, known enemy.”
- You’re not sure who gains from the criticism.
- The giver uses generalities or exaggerates.
- The giver uses examples that don’t match the critique.
- The giver doesn’t offer specific examples of how to make corrections.

“Personalizing the criticism’ involves an immediate emotional reaction that sometimes impairs clear thinking and the ability to engage in a meaningful exchange.”

If you detect one or more of these warning signs, you have reason to question the giver’s intent and weigh the value of the feedback.

Avoid Personalizing Criticism

Many people take criticism personally. To avoid that, understand your own self-confidence, think about the big picture and inspect the message of the criticism. If your confidence flags, list your strengths and successes, recognize your control over certain projects or experiences, and hold fast to your spiritual or religious beliefs.

“If the issue involves three or more members of the team, then it’s acceptable to bring up the issue to the entire team.”

Learn “quick charges” – specific techniques that can help you regain control. One is the “2M Simultaneous Focus Quick Charge.” The two *M*’s refer to a “macro” or big picture view and a “micro” or more immediate,

short-term view. Adjust your focus: Take in the whole frame, or zoom in on something specific. In the immediate situation (or micro frame), readjust your lens to think about the larger picture. Be open to criticism in the macro view. This will help you sort out the information and avoid emotional outbursts.

“If you feel the employee is angry and may lose control, you may want to delay the matter under discussion to another time...it’s difficult to engage in a meaningful discussion with a receiver who is not receptive.”

Becoming defensive or argumentative is a natural reaction to criticism. But you will grow and learn if you can adjust your basic attitude instead. Tactics for releasing a negative situation include the “Wastepaper Basket Quick Charge” and the “So What? What Now? Quick Charge.” With the first, for 15 seconds mentally write everything that comes to your mind on an imaginary poster board or sheet of paper. This should be enough time to exorcise your negative thoughts. Throw them all away in your mental trashcan. If you’re an auditory learner, try the second quick charge. Ask, “So what if...?” and “What now?” or “What am I going to do about it?”

Handling Hard Conversations

Difficult situations include receivers who cry or become angry, givers who avoid criticism because they don’t want to hurt the receiver’s feelings, and the like. Don’t assume that only female receivers will cry or that receivers are crying because their feelings are hurt. Don’t send crying receivers to the restroom. Others in the office could see them, assume the worst and start gossiping. Instead, leave your office to give receiver time to recover and regain composure.

“So often when we first hear criticism, our sensitivities are bruised, our emotions get churned up and we wind up feeling that we are personally being berated.”

Some receivers do cry; others are prone to emotional outbursts. At one defense company, a top-performing project leader had a reputation for telling team members bluntly when they didn’t deliver. Most accepted her behavior because they knew she cared, but one day her boss heard how she berated a team member who had failed to deliver a time-sensitive report. Instead of firing her, he offered her coaching, which sent a message of support. If you feel yourself losing control, breathe in deeply, hold your breath for one or two seconds, and let it out.

“For criticism to be accepted, it needs to be delivered effectively and it must come across as helpful.”

Some people are reluctant to give criticism. They may lack confidence, avoid conflict or try to keep others happy. Preparation helps you build confidence and feel more comfortable offering feedback. Some companies even ban the word “criticism.” These companies make their problems worse by avoiding steps that can settle issues and solve problems. When criticism is delivered and received properly, it contributes to a healthy, productive work environment.

About the Author

Deb Bright is the founder and president of Bright Enterprises, a consulting firm focused on enhancing performance.



Did you like this summary?

[Buy book or audiobook](#)

<http://getab.li/24586>