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What is this?

16 tactful ways to offer an employee constructive criticism



L-R: Brian Walters, Brock Berry, Deni Tato, Alli Truttman, Jesson Bradshaw, Mary-Cathryn Kolb, Rob Simons, Randy Korach, Jay Feitlinger, Priya Cloutier, Joy Frestedt, Raj Ganesan, Christen McCamie, Zee Ali, Tony Julianelle, Scott Hislop



The Business Journals Leadership Trust
By Business Journals Leadership Trust Expert Panel®

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While it's always difficult to receive criticism in the workplace, it can be equally difficult to give it. No matter how well-intentioned (and valid) the feedback may be,

many leaders worry about seeming like “the bad guy” or hurting their employees’ feelings.

The members of [Business Journals Leadership Trust](#) know the importance of reaching out to help an employee in a way that will make a positive impact. Below, 16 members share their best tips for tactfully and helpfully providing constructive criticism.

1. Ask them where they think they can improve.

Start with the positives. Then ask the employee to name areas they think they can improve. This will often flush out the problem area. If not, you can ask, “How do you feel about your performance in X area?” This will usually get you to the point. I typically say something like “This is an area I’ve struggled with too, and here is how I got better.” - [Brian Walters, Walters Gilbreath, PLLC](#)

2. Be careful about putting a label on your feedback.

If you label something as “bad” then there is an immediate inverse of “good” they are missing. If you focus on objective habit changes, set expectations and avoid labels, it’s easier to provide the necessary feedback without hurting someone’s feelings. - [Brock Berry, AdCellerant](#)

3. Describe the observed behavior, share your perspective and discuss preferred actions.

It is natural to recoil when criticized. I suggest a three-step process to deliver negative feedback that keeps the conversation from getting personal and delivers an actionable solution. First, describe observable behavior in fact-based statements. Second, share your perspective on the impact of the behavior. Third, discuss the preferred behavior. - [Deni Tato, Corporate Consciousness](#)

4. Review the employee’s personality assessment.

To start, seek out that employee's original HR personality assessment. Find out what kind of listener or learner they are and then develop a plan to deliver the news in the way that they best listen or learn – either by showing, telling or asking them questions that lead them to their own (inevitable) conclusion about their behavior or workplace performance. - [Alli Truttmann, Wicked Sheets](#)

5. Cultivate a strong relationship with staff.

No matter how constructive a conversation feels, the lack of a preexisting relationship with an employee can inhibit the message. Leaders must engage with staff so they will listen to constructive criticism. Without an underpinning relationship, a staff member may question your motivations. For this reason, it's important to cultivate an ongoing relationship that's founded in respect and empathy with your staff. - [Jesson Bradshaw, Energy Ogre](#)

6. Be direct and candid.

Don't beat around the bush, because that's going to cause confusion and a lack of trust. Give specific examples of when you saw the person do that behavior and how it affected others. Describe how they can change their behavior going forward. Be encouraging and supportive, and remind them of their positive qualities and the value that they bring to the organization. - [Mary-Cathryn Kolb, brrr^o](#)

7. Ask the employee if they are open to constructive feedback.

If you don't give people the feedback they need to hear, you're being cruel. Eventually, it will catch up to them. If you have their best interests in your heart, you'll give them the feedback they need to hear. One way to open the conversation is to ask them if they are open to constructive feedback. If they say "yes," it's easier to provide feedback. If they say "no," that's a different problem. - [Rob Simons, Simons.Coach](#)

8. Cite specific examples.

When providing constructive feedback to a team member on behavior or performance, it is important to cite examples that form the basis of your observation. If feedback is not specific it can more easily be disputed or dismissed. - [Randy Korach, Innovative Roofing Group](#)

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9. Put yourself in their shoes.

Put yourself in the shoes of the person you want to give constructive feedback to and ask yourself, “If it were me, would I benefit from this information?” The answer is almost always “yes.” Don’t take the opportunity to grow away from that person because you’re worried about hurting their feelings. If feedback is given in a constructive way, the right team member will always thank you for it later. - [Jay Feitlinger, StringCan Interactive](#)

10. Use the ‘compliment sandwich’ technique.

My first boss and mentor taught me this. Give praise for something well done, discuss areas needing improvement, then give praise for something else well done. It is important the person hears that they are not failing but simply need a bit of improvement. Somewhere in there, you should lay out some strategies for improvement and what it looks like. - [Priya Cloutier, Cloutier Arnold Jacobowitz PLLC](#)

11. Make feedback a regular team exercise.

We have all of our team members provide feedback on each other every quarter. We ask for three positive comments and three areas for improvement each time, then we discuss with each person what the feedback says about their work in the past quarter. Management adds strong positive insights and constructive ideas for improvement, including training opportunities and suggestions for seeking help. - [Joy Frestedt, Frestedt Incorporated](#)

12. Encourage the individual to explain the situation.

I encourage individuals to explain the situation by changing the perspective and asking, “Who should come first: customers, vendors, employees or peers?” Then, I sit down with them and intently listen, with empathy and without objecting to any of the points. When they think they are done, I say, “Please continue.” This shifts the focus to the situation without taking sides. - [Raj Ganesan, The Business Labs](#)

13. Foster a team-focused perspective.

Give positive feedback and encouragement often. When the need for constructive criticism arises, your team will already know you value them but just want to refine certain areas. Approach this from a team-focused perspective: “Let’s work on this area together” or, “The team would be more efficient if we changed this.” - [Christen McCamie, Nesta Real Estate Consultants](#)

14. Create a company culture that embraces ongoing improvement.

The atmosphere and company culture should include and embrace continuous improvement. This includes a feedback loop to improve each individual’s processes. If you set the expectation that there are going to be changes and recommendations for improvement and make that core value clear to your employees, you won’t ruffle feathers, because they’ll understand the intention behind it. - [Zee Ali, Z-Swag](#)

15. Ensure your hires are emotionally mature.

As leaders, if we truly care about the people we work with, we will push through our discomfort to help our teams succeed. Providing only positive feedback does not help people flourish or add value. To truly create a culture of constant learning, where feedback is continuous, we must first hire emotionally mature individuals who understand the difference between guilt and shame. - [Tony Julianelle, Atlas Real Estate](#)

16. Remember that employees usually appreciate useful feedback.

Employees typically appreciate feedback so they know how they are doing and whether they are meeting expectations. I find that the more feedback I provide, the better the relationship. I try to err on the side of positive feedback as much as possible, with lots of kudos for things I appreciate. I keep feedback short, sweet and non-personal if it's constructive. - [Scott Hislop, Transworld Business Advisors](#)