

Constructive criticism

Learning to provide constructive criticism can help you resolve issues without conflict or misunderstanding.

Why this matters

Providing constructive criticism can be helpful both to the person receiving it and the person delivering it. If you're give this type of feedback in such a way that the other person feels supported and inspired, it'll be helpful for them. If you can provide it in a clear way that effectively corrects problems or mistakes, it'll be helpful for you.

Unfortunately, some of us are more likely to provide hurtful or confusing criticism to the person who receives it. With a little reflection and practice, anyone can improve their ability to provide constructive criticism.

Explore and reflect

When providing constructive criticism, focus on being helpful, specific and geared toward behavioural change. Do each of the following in a respectful way:

- Begin with a clear articulation of the preferred outcome. This can sometimes eliminate the need for negative criticism altogether, as you work toward how the preferred outcome might be achieved.
 - For example, rather than “This steak is overcooked,” you can state the preferred outcome as “I prefer the middle of my steak to be pink.”
- Acknowledge the person’s effort and emphasize that you value them.
 - For example, “I appreciate you taking the time to make this for me.”
- Acknowledge an individual’s strengths (as there are always strengths) as well as providing performance feedback.
 - For example, “You always put together a great meal for us with a beautiful presentation.”
- Make feedback specific to behaviours rather than to the individual’s characteristics or personality.
 - For example, instead of “You always wreck my meals” you could say, “We all have different preferences in terms of how well we like our meat cooked.”
- Provide clear, concrete examples of behaviours.
 - For example, “If you took my steak off about 5 minutes before your own and just let it sit while yours finishes cooking, I bet it would be perfect.”

- Give them a chance to respond to your feedback.
 - For example, ask “would this work for you?” and then be silent to give them an opportunity to respond.
- Where appropriate, frame the feedback process as an opportunity for growth.
 - For example, “Your cooking skills are already amazing, and this little tweak is only because of my preferences.”
- Keep in mind that most, if not all, people can be emotionally triggered by criticism; don’t take this personally. When you feel someone reacting, take the opportunity to correct their interpretation by saying something like, “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean for that to come off as harsh criticism.” Then, reiterate what you value and appreciated about their efforts.

Following are examples of less constructive versus more constructive ways of providing criticism.

Not following directions

You asked a family member to pick up a short list of groceries. They come back missing cheese, which you need for the meal you’re going to make. You’re surprised, as you had shared what you’re making tonight.

Less constructive

You blame someone intentionally being lazy or careless.

“You knew that I needed that, were you thinking to just not bother at all?”

More constructive

Give the family member the benefit of the doubt and don’t assume negative intentions.

“I need the cheese for tonight’s meal. Were they out of it?”

Realize that the cheese may have fallen out in the car. Maybe you forgot to write it down. It may even be right in front of you and you don’t see it. By giving the person a chance to respond before you criticize, you save both of you embarrassment and frustration.

Interrupting

You’re asking someone to stop interrupting when you’re talking.

Less constructive

You get frustrated and stop talking all together, or just say “forget it.”

More constructive

Give the person the benefit of the doubt and don't assume negative intentions.

"I know you've got lots of ideas too. Can I finish my thought and then I'll hear you out?"

This makes clear what you're asking of them but doesn't end the conversation.

Repeated mistakes

When you've already talked about a problem and the person does the same thing again.

Less constructive

"We already talked about this. Obviously you just don't care."

More constructive

"When we talked about this before, you said you were going to try to do it differently. What got in the way of that?"

This leaves opportunity for an open conversation rather than making assumptions about their motives.

Misunderstanding

Someone claims that you were gossiping about a mutual friend. You don't believe you were.

Less constructive

"You're a liar, I never said that!"

More constructive

"Can you tell me why you think I said that?"

This gives them the opportunity to correct their statement and possibly remember what you actually said or didn't say. What they call gossip might be what you feel is just a conversation. Setting the record straight, rather than accusing them of lying is more constructive.

Take action

As you might notice, constructive feedback sounds considerably more positive to the listener. When comments are negative in tone and sound more like scolding than guiding, people can feel disrespected and are less likely to change their behaviour. You can build mutually respectful relationships by maintaining a constructive approach.

Going forward, practice providing constructive criticism until it becomes a habit.

Additional resources

Body language awareness. Effective communication isn't limited to the words we say. Our non-verbal communication includes body language, tone of voice, eye contact and facial expressions.

Choose your words. Learn how your choice of words can make a difficult conversation even more difficult.

Communicating with clarity. Learn how to adjust the intensity with which you communicate to improve your ability to clearly get your message across.

Strengthening relationships. Learn to build, maintain and deepen any relationship for a stronger connection.

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