

Self-Improvement

# How to Give and Receive Feedback at Work: The Psychology of Criticism



by Courtney Seiter

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But what do we lose out on when we avoid these tough conversations? One of the fundamental skills of life is being able to give and receive advice, feedback and even criticism.

If given and received in the right spirit, could sharing feedback—even [critical feedback](#)—become a different, better experience than the painful one we're accustomed to? Could feedback become a valued opportunity and even a bonding, [positive experience](#)?

In this post, we'll explore how to give and receive feedback at work in the best ways possible, along with some of the psychology behind handling critical feedback (in both directions). I'll also share with you some of the methods in which we offer and receive feedback at Buffer to try and make the experience less scary and more loving.

## What happens in our brains when we receive criticism

It's hard for us to feel like we're wrong, and it's even harder for us to hear that from others. As it turns out, there's a psychological basis for both of these elements.

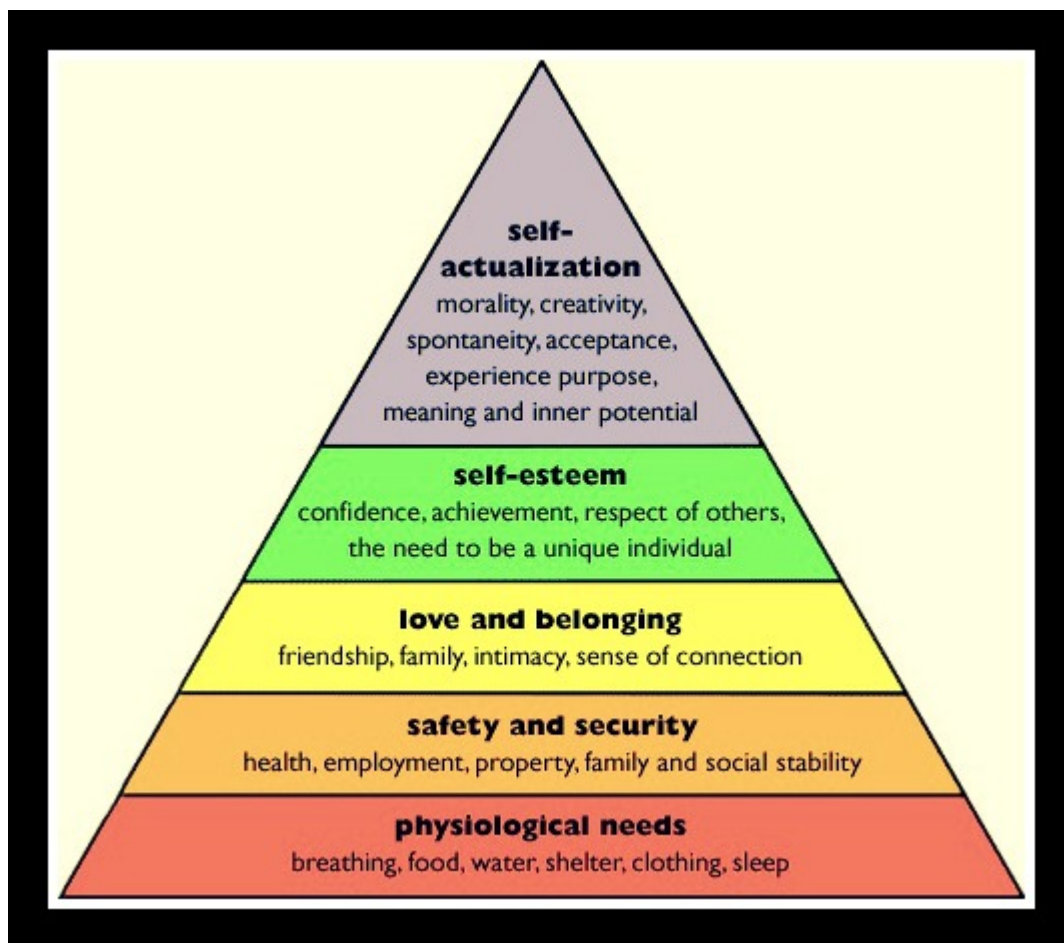
### Our brains view criticism as a threat to our survival

Because our brains are protective of us, neuroscientists say they go out of their way to make sure we always feel like we're in the right—even [when we're not](#).



“Threats to our standing in the eyes of others are remarkably potent biologically, almost as those to our very survival,” says [psychologist Daniel Goleman](#).

So when we look at Maslow’s famous hierarchy of needs, we might suppose that criticism is pretty high up on the pyramid—perhaps in the self-esteem or self-actualization quadrants. But because our brains see criticism as such a primal threat, it’s actually much lower on the pyramid, in the belonging or safety spectrums.



Criticism can feel like an actual threat to our survival—no wonder it’s so tough for us to hear and offer.

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Another unique thing about criticism is that we often don't remember it quite clearly.

Charles Jacobs, author of *Management Rewired: Why Feedback Doesn't Work*, says that when we hear information that conflicts with our self-image, our instinct is to first [change the information, rather than ourselves](#).

[Kathryn Schulz, the author of \*Being Wrong\*](#), explains that that's because "we don't experience, remember, track, or retain mistakes as a feature of our inner landscape," so wrongness "always seems to come at us from left field."

But although criticism is more likely to be remember incorrectly, we don't often forget it.

Clifford Nass, a professor of communication at Stanford University, says "almost everyone [remembers negative things more strongly](#) and in more detail."

It's called a [negativity bias](#). Our brains have evolved separate, more sensitive brain circuits to handle negative information and events, and they process the bad stuff more thoroughly than positive things. That means **receiving criticism will always have a greater impact than receiving praise**.

## How to offer criticism the best way possible

So now that we know what a delicate enterprise criticism can be, how can we go about offering it up in the right spirit to get the best results? Here are some tips and strategies.



## 7 criteria for effective feedback:

- ① The feedback provider is credible in the eyes of the feedback recipient
- ② The feedback provider is trusted by the feedback recipient
- ③ The feedback is conveyed with good intentions
- ④ The timing and circumstances of giving the feedback are appropriate
- ⑤ The feedback is given in an interactive manner
- ⑥ The feedback message is clear
- ⑦ The feedback is helpful to recipient

### Reflect on your purpose

The most important step is to make sure that your potential feedback is coming from the right place. Here's a list of some of the [main motivating factors](#) behind offering up feedback.



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The wrong reasons to give feedback:	The right reasons to give feedback:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Defend/excuse your own behavior</li> <li>▪ To demoralize/condemn</li> <li>▪ You're in a bad mood</li> <li>▪ To appease a third party</li> <li>▪ To make yourself seem superior/powerful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Commitment/concern for another</li> <li>▪ Sense of responsibility</li> <li>▪ To guide/mentor</li> <li>▪ To support/enhance</li> </ul>

"When we have difficult feedback to give, we enter the discussion uneasily, and this pushes us to the side of fear and judgment, where we believe we know what is wrong with the other person and how we can fix him," writes Frederic Laloux in his book [Reinventing Organizations](#). "If we are mindful, we can come to such discussions from a place of care. When we do, we can enter into beautiful moments of inquiry, where we have no easy answers but can help the colleague assess himself more truthfully."

## Focus on the behavior, not the person

After entering the conversation with the best intentions, a next guideline is to separate behavior or actions from the person you're speaking to.

Focusing the criticism on just the situation you want to address—on what someone does or says, rather than the individual themselves—separates the problematic situation from the person's identity, allowing them to focus on what you're saying without feeling personally confronted.

## Lead with questions

Starting off your feedback with a few questions can help the other person feel like an equal part in the conversation as you discuss the challenges together.



challenge—firing an assistant—with questions:

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Ashkanasy began by asking her how she thought she was doing. That lead-in gives the recipient “joint ownership” of the conversation, he says. Ashkanasy also pointed to other jobs that would better match the skills of his soon-to-be-ex employee. That promise of belonging helped relieve her anxiety about being cast out of the group she already knew.

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### **Inject positivity: The modified ‘criticism sandwich’**

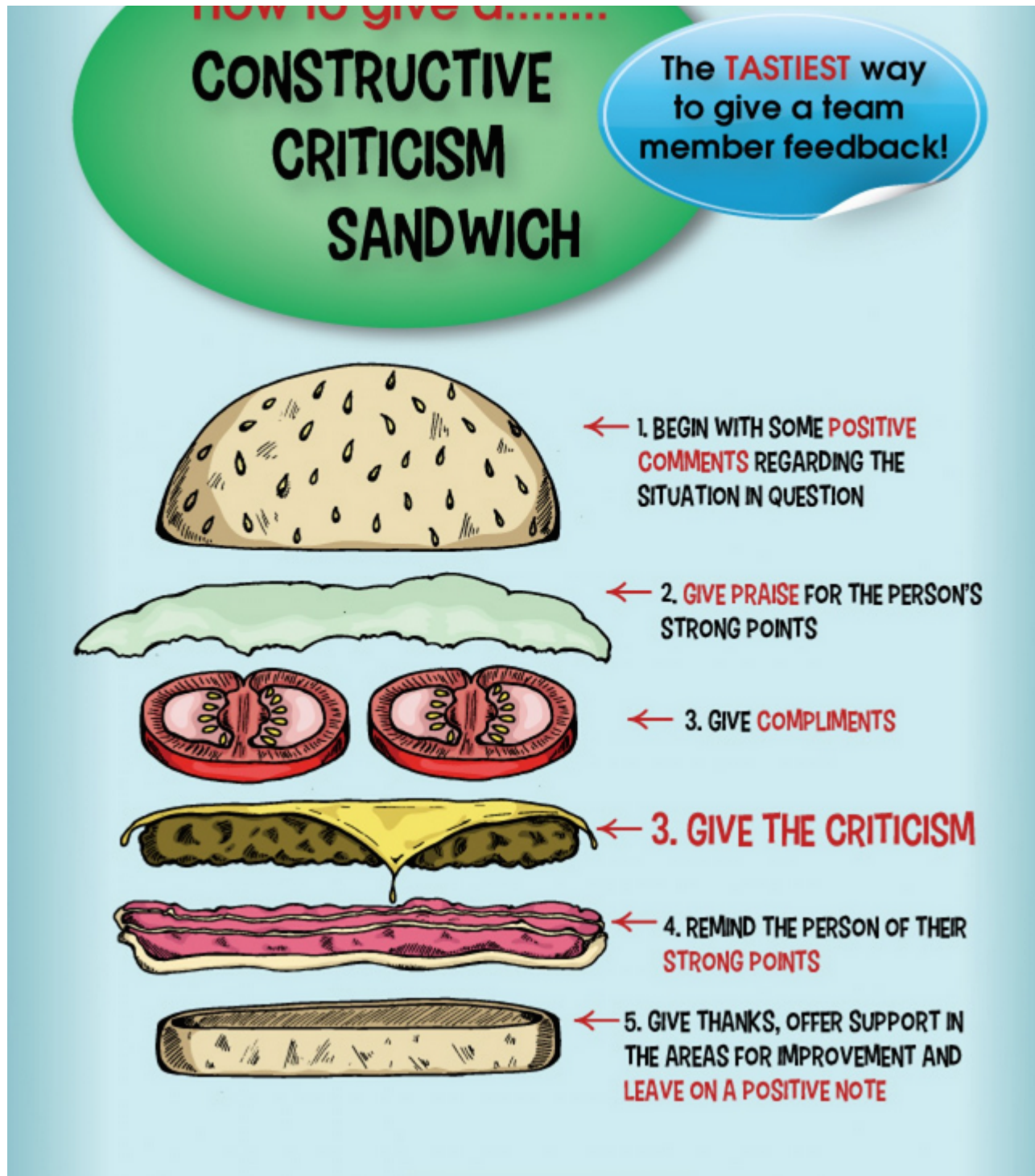
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“Sandwich every bit of criticism between two heavy layers of praise.” – Mary Kay Ash

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One well known strategy for feedback is the “criticism sandwich,” popularized by the above quote from cosmetics maven Mary Kay Ash. In the sandwich, you begin with praise, address the problem, and follow up with more praise.





In fact, the more of the conversation you can frame positively, the more likely your recipient is to be in the right frame of mind to make the change you're looking for.



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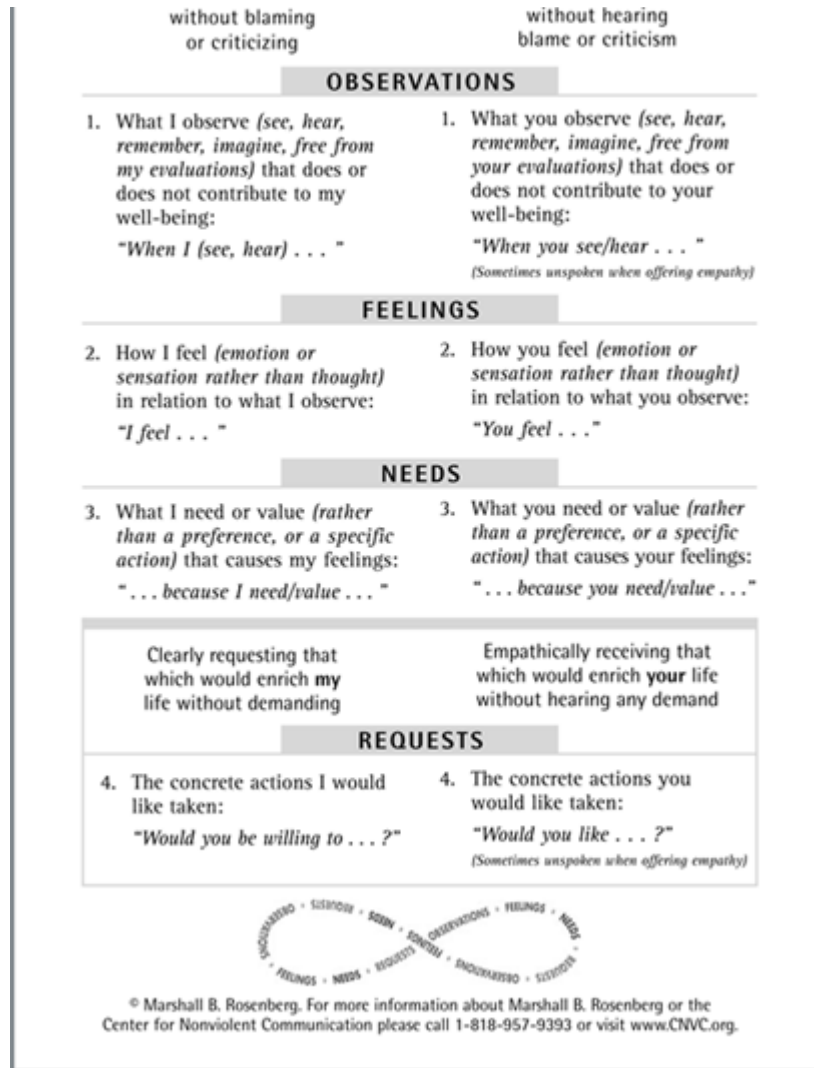
could make this even better is ...”

## **Follow the Rosenberg method: Observations, feelings, needs, requests**

In his exploration of the next phase of working together, [Reinventing Organizations](#), Frederic Laloux explores some of the world’s most highly evolved workplaces. One of the cultural elements common to all of them is the the ability to treat feedback as a gift rather than a curse.

As Laloux puts it, “feedback and respectful confrontation are gifts we share to help one another grow.”

Many of these organizations use the [Rosenberg Nonviolent Communication method](#), pictured here, to deliver feedback.



This method provides a simple and predictable framework that takes some of the volatility out of giving and receiving feedback.

## The best way to prepare for and receive criticism

So now we know some strategies for offering feedback with an open heart and mind. How about for receiving it?

### Ask for feedback often

The best strategy for being caught off guard by negative feedback? Make sure you invite feedback often, especially from those you trust. You'll be better able to see any



You can begin by preparing some open-ended questions for those who know you well and can speak with confidence about your work. Here are [some great example questions](#):

- If you had to make two suggestions for improving my work, what would they be?
- How could I handle my projects more effectively?
- What could I do to make your job easier?
- How could I do a better job of following through on commitments?
- If you were in my position, what would you do to show people more appreciation?
- When do I need to involve other people in my decisions?
- How could I do a better job of prioritizing my activities?

## **Ask for time to reflect on what you've heard, one element at a time**

When receiving feedback, it might be tempting to become defensive or “explain away” the criticism. Instead, let the other person finish completely and try to listen deeply. Then ask questions and reflect thoughtfully on what you've heard.

Stanford Professor Nass says that [most people can take in only one critical comment at a time](#).

“I have stopped people and told them, ‘Let me think about this.’ I’m willing to hear more criticism but not all at one time.”

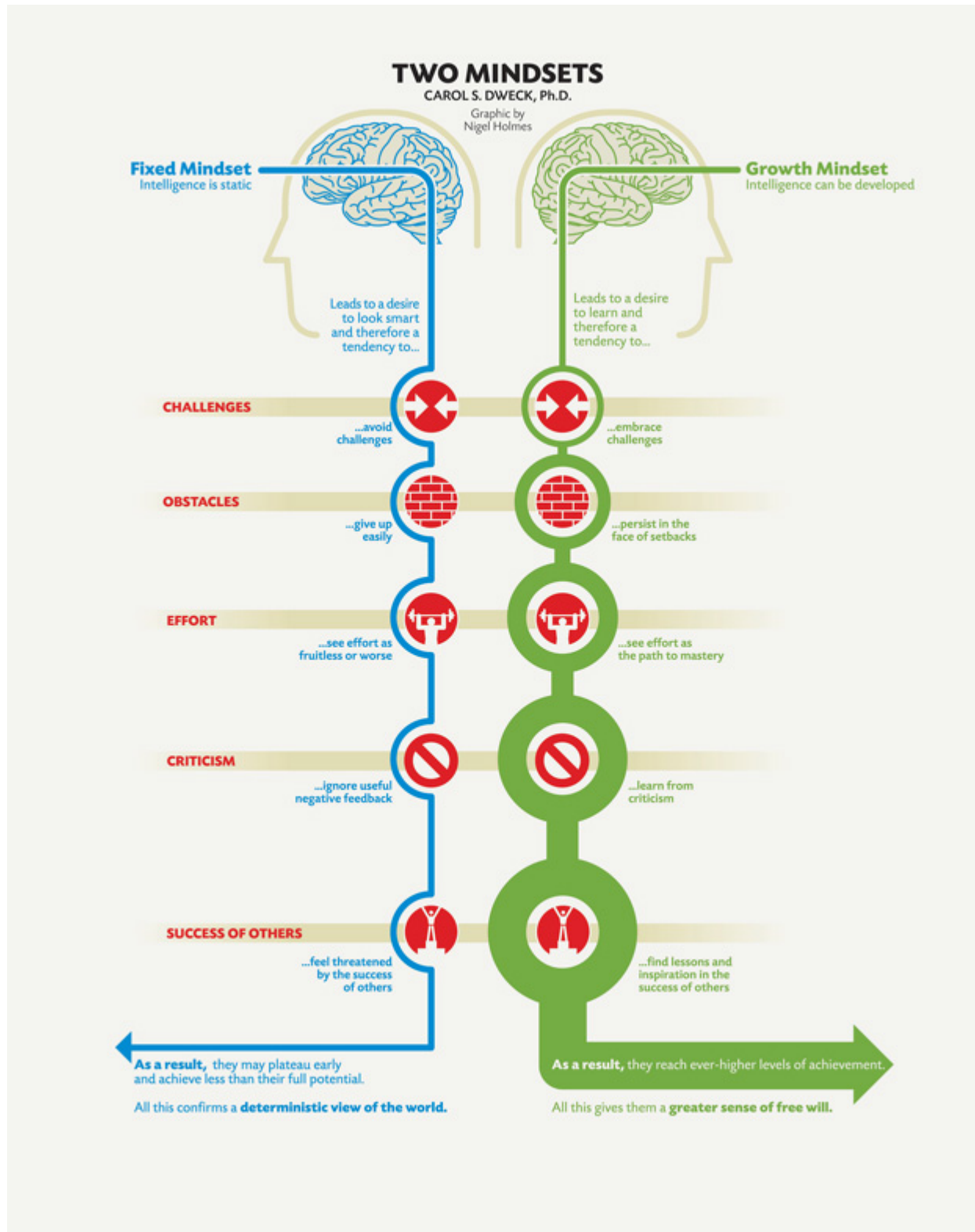
So if you need some time to reflect on multiple points of feedback, don't be afraid to say so.

## **Cultivate a growth mindset**

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ability to change and grow—as opposed to those with a fixed mindset—and are able to see feedback as an opportunity for improvement.





## Take credit for your mistakes and grow

It's easy to take credit for our successes, but failure is [something we don't like to admit to](#). For example, we're more likely to [blame failure on external factors](#) than our own shortcomings.

But lately, the [idea of embracing failure](#) has emerged, and it's a great mindset for making the most of feedback.

"Continual experimentation is the new normal," says business psychologist Karissa Thacker. "With risk comes failure. You cannot elevate the level of risk taking without helping people make sense of failure, and to some extent, feel safe with failure."

Take a page from the "embracing failure" movement and treasure the opportunities you're given to improve and grow.

## How we give and receive feedback at Buffer

As with many of the things we do at Buffer, the way we give and receive feedback is a continuous work in progress as we experiment, learn and grow.

Previously, the feedback process was more or less formalized in a process we call [the mastermind](#). Each team member would meet with a team leader every two weeks in a format with the following structure:

- 10 minutes to share and celebrate your achievements
- 40 minutes to discuss your current top challenges
- 10 minutes for the team lead to share feedback
- 10 minutes to give feedback to the team lead

This process had a few really good things going for it: Feedback was a regular, scheduled part of our discussions, which removed a lot of the fear that can surround



These days, masterminds happen weekly between peers and we've moved away from the formalized feedback section altogether as we strive for a more [holacratic](#), less top-down way of [working together](#).

But feedback is still an important part of the Buffer journey, and it is offered and received freely by any of us at any time it is applicable.

Since feedback often can be sensitive and personal, it tends to be one of the only elements we exempt from our policy of [radical transparency](#). It most often takes the form of one-on-one Hipchat messages, emails or Sqwiggle conversations.

## Our values guide the feedback process

[Buffer's 10 core values](#) are our guide to offering and receiving feedback with joy instead of anxiety.

Looking at our value of positivity through a lens of feedback, I see lots of great instruction on offering constructive criticism, including focusing on the situation instead of the person and offering as much appreciation as feedback.





## Always choose positivity and happiness

- You always approach things in a positive and optimistic way
- You never criticize or condemn team members or users
- You never complain
- You let the other person save face, even if they are clearly wrong
- You are deliberate about giving genuine appreciation

Since we each take on this goal of positivity, it's very easy to assume the best of the person offering their feedback to you and that their intent is positive.

Additionally, our value of gratitude means that we each focus on being thankful for the feedback as an opportunity to improve in a particular area.

Finally, our value of self-improvement means we have a framework for taking feedback and acting on it in a way that moves us forward.



## I HAVE A FOCUS ON SELF improvement

- You are conscious of your current level of productivity and happiness, and make continual changes to grow
- You have a higher expectation of yourself, than Buffer does of you
- You regularly and deliberately do things that make you feel uncomfortable
- You practice activities and develop habits that will improve your mind and your body

Although feedback isn't generally made public to the whole team, it's not uncommon for team members to share feedback they've received and the changes they're making as a result in [pair calls](#) or masterminds.

I'm sure our ideas will evolve even further on this idea (in fact, during the time it took me to write this we opened up a whole new discussion on feedback and resolving issues). Maybe you can give us a hand?

**I'd love to hear your best tips for giving and receiving feedback in the best spirit, or to learn how you handle feedback at your workplace! Share your thoughts with me in the comments.**

*Image credits: [Wikimedia Commons](#), [7Geese](#), [In the Library with the Lead Pipe](#), [Visual.ly](#), [Puddle Dancer Press](#), [Brain Pickings](#)*



Courtney Seiter

Courtney writes about social media, diversity and workplace culture at Buffer. She runs Girls to the Moon on the side and pets every dog she sees.

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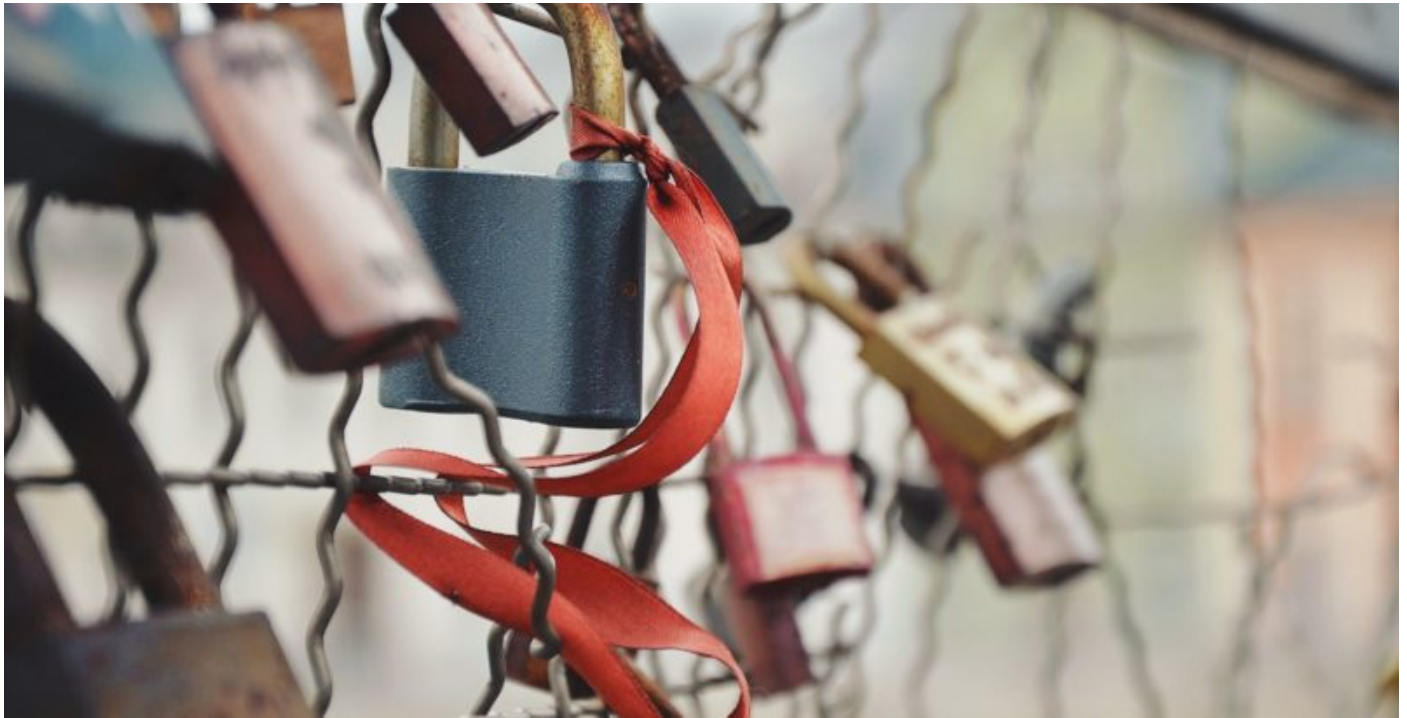


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OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS **LeoWid** • 4 years ago

Courtney, what an incredible post! As you know, as we're exploring a new feedback process internally, I feel that this could be extremely valuable!

I especially love the "ask for feedback often", I feel that that makes it so easy to mention even the smallest thing that's on someone's mind. I remember that when Steven started with us, he asked for specific feedback after every week and that was such a great feeling.

Again, thanks for this great read, going to Buffer this one lots of times! :D

2 ^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**Courtney Seiter** Mod → **LeoWid** • 4 years ago

Thanks a bunch, Leo! This one felt so great to research and dig into. I learned so much, including a lot about myself! Asking for feedback seems to be a real key. I'm looking forward to putting that into practice!

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**Abhishek** • 4 years ago

Hi Courtney, nice article. I would like to mention a slightly different point of view here.

The "constructive criticism sandwich" is also known as "shit sandwich" and according to some it is a terrible way to give feedback. One of the person of that view is Ben Horowitz. In his insightful article he has mentioned



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out correctly, the process can feel formal and judgmental to the employee.

After you do it a couple of times, it will lack authenticity. The employee will think: "Oh boy, she's complimenting me again. I know what's coming next, the shit."

More senior executives will recognize the shit sandwich immediately and it will have an instant negative effect."

He has also offered few keys for giving effective feedback.

<http://www.bhorowitz.com/ma...>

What do you have to say?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Courtney Seiter** Mod → Abhishek • 4 years ago

Thanks so much for sharing this article; it's got a TON of great points! I think the bit about authenticity resonates the most with me. It feels like it would be great to get positive feedback at least as often as one gets critical feedback, but perhaps they need not happen in the same sitting. Maybe it's better if they don't! I find that frequent feedback--both kinds!--kind of gets you in the right mental space to be a bit more accepting of feedback, even if it's critical. Can definitely see how the sandwich might begin to seem inauthentic! Thanks for bringing up that great point!

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Tim Augustin** • 4 years ago

Courtney, thanks for this amazing post! For me, it started a train of thoughts! It took some time to put them into words, but I think I could maybe add some more aspects.

First at all, to start with more or less philosophical thoughts: one thing I recognized is that the point with criticism sometimes is a linguistic one. In German, "Kritik" is first at all describing an evaluation of something, could be positive, negative or neutral. Everybody is aware of that, but thus doesn't prevent everybody from negative feelings if it's coming to criticism, so receiving "Kritik" is a very negative thing. Using the term feedback kind of clears away this problem; don't know if it's the same in English?

For me, everything narrows down to the situation which causes the criticism or feedback, and especially negative one. So there could be two scenarios.

The kind of best one (the bufferish one - I assume :-)) is an ongoing process, where giving and receiving feedback are self-evident and lead to a common understanding of how to build/create/code/finalize a project. I assume that feedback here doesn't lead to any negative feelings but to adjustments or some more experiments.

The opposite situation is one, where expectations on results of a task/project/... are not the same

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**Courtney Seiter** Mod ➔ Tim Augustin • 4 years ago

Hi Tim! Wow, these are such amazing reflections and I truly appreciate you taking the time to share them here! I love your thoughts about self-reflection and over-communication especially – those two elements feel absolutely essential to feedback that can help you and your team grow. And I completely understand what you're saying about how feedback from your spouse/partner feels different than any other type. I'm not sure why either, but I have experienced the same thing!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Luke McGrath** • 4 years ago

What a fantastic article, possibly my favourite on the blog.

This is something I've found myself wondering about Buffer more than once, specifically just how much I could be aligned with your values - so this post has been really eye opening for me. This really was my one sticking point. I guess I should have asked!

Feedback and criticism is vital for growth, but so hard to get right. It's great that you're meeting this head on. Thanks for sharing and very well written Courtney.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Courtney Seiter** Mod ➔ Luke McGrath • 4 years ago

Hey Luke! Thanks so much for the kind words! I'm glad this post answered some of the questions you had been pondering. :) It's definitely a work in progress here at Buffer as we work through the best way to handle this element that, as you mentioned, is so vital. I'm looking forward to keeping you posted on how things evolve!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Luke McGrath** ➔ Courtney Seiter • 4 years ago

You're welcome, it's a great post. Look forward to hearing more in the future, these tricky areas are the things most people don't talk about and therefore the hardest to learn how to do well!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Jaye Marsh** • 2 years ago

A mental note that sprang up during this article is the gift of learning a musical instrument. Every child I know who took lessons or joined the band at school developed their 'Growth Mindset'.

All the more reason to put music back in the schools...

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**nelo boy aka mr.RIGHTNOW** • 2 years ago

wow, i think reading this post has been an eye opening for me, taking in consideration so many things now and mostly valuing other people, words do have massive impacts and we should be

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**Sylvia** • 3 years ago

Hi Courtney, have you read "Thanks for the Feedback" by Sheila Heen and Douglas Stone? I haven't either...yet! But I heard her speak at a leadership conference and your "Ask for Feedback Often" questions really echoes a key piece of what she said! I'm trying to learn both how to receive and how to give feedback well, and to learn when it's better just to let it go~

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Courtney Seiter** Mod ➔ Sylvia • 3 years ago

Just put "Thanks for the Feedback" on my book list; thanks so much for the suggestion!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Sylvia** ➔ Courtney Seiter • 3 years ago

After you read it, let me know what you think!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Andrew McConville** • 4 years ago

That was a really great read, Courtney. I especially enjoyed the 'Focus on the behavior, not the person' and 'Cultivate a growth mindset' parts.

When giving or receiving feedback I'm always asking myself: How does the feedback benefit our users. When we frame everything with our users in mind it moves the focus off of the individual and to our users, allowing us to have shared purpose and not feel so exposed.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Courtney Seiter** Mod ➔ Andrew McConville • 4 years ago

Wow, sounds like you have a great mindset for enriching your teammates, Andrew!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Jeroen van der Tuin** • 4 years ago

Thanks for the ideas. We're setting up a recurring review process and this comes just at the right time.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Courtney Seiter** Mod ➔ Jeroen van der Tuin • 4 years ago

Sounds great, Jeroen! Hope there are some elements here that might come in handy!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**lifethinkist** • 4 years ago

Great article Courtney. I have a feeling that because of how well you wrote this and the thought you put into it that you'll now be much better at giving people feedback and motivating people at work without making their life a living hell ;) We can all get better at dealing with people, whether it's at work or not. That's why articles like this with so many tips are so great. I really like how you wrote the article by looking at both sides of the story in the same article too. I linked to your article this

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Here is a quick overview of another article I liked about understanding people. I always think about this excellent article when dealing with people at work. Especially when people might be in a bad mood, for instance if a manager or someone else gets upset at you for something.

The Critical 7 Rules to Understand People

- <http://www.lifethinkist.com...>

For me, the key takeaway here might be to give people positive feedback and praise everyone as often as you can. To inject positivity as Courtney put it when talking about the criticism sandwich.

[see more](#)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Courtney Seiter** Mod → lifethinkist • 4 years ago

Hey there! I really appreciate you taking the time to share these insightful thoughts here. Your intuition is absolutely right; I do think writing this post has given me a bit more insight into the topic! And I love your point about offering positive feedback often. That feels like such an important factor towards creating a relationship that is accepting of all feedback. Excited to check out the link you've shared!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**lifethinkist** → Courtney Seiter • 4 years ago

Thanks Courtney. Wow, thanks for taking the time to respond to me and everyone else. As if writing such a thorough and good article like this isn't enough work ;) Hehe...you'll be a manager in no time if you aren't one already. I'm sure you got lots of other ideas for posts, but if you do ever post more about people skills at work, you might consider making single tip posts that talk about just one tip or idea in them. Even if you reuse ideas from a great longer post like this. I try doing that sometimes. It can be less work, and sometimes even more people will read a shorter article about one tip, and grasp the advice in it better too. But of course, it depends on what the goals of your articles are too, or if you want them to be a certain length or something.

Again, great article. The effort and thought you put into getting all these different ideas in this article was awesome, like linking it to Buffer's values and feedback process. You found so much good information. I'm glad it looks like quite a few people read this and got something out of it.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Courtney Seiter** Mod → lifethinkist • 4 years ago

Hey there, I really love this idea! Thanks so much for the suggestion. :) And it is my pleasure to talk with our community in the comments! One of my

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**Bridget Willard** • 4 years ago

Sometimes the "criticism" that seems most necessary in the moment, when tabled for a day or two, isn't even that important.

These are all good tips and sort of bring me back to my psych major days.

Cheers.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Courtney Seiter** Mod → Bridget Willard • 4 years ago

Bridget, you're absolutely right! I know I've often reflected on feedback for a few days before sharing it and watched as it took on a new dimension or even diminished entirely. Excellent point to add!

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Bridget Willard** → Courtney Seiter • 4 years ago

Oh for sure.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**christina schultz** • 4 years ago

This is a really nice post, because it is very comforting to see that there are people focused on make community living essentially better. But especially because it brings up some contrary thoughts too. I think sometimes calling everything "great, awesome and really incredible" is confusing and therefore not always helpful.

It is equally important to strengthen the self conscience on alarming feelings such as "shame and fear" that show and teach us when we are "wrong". Of course this would mean to first be nice to yourself and in consequence with others

Very important to receive criticism and appreciate it.

Thank you Courtney for your article!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Courtney Seiter** Mod → christina schultz • 4 years ago

Hi Christina! This is a really great point and I appreciate you bringing it up. The main indicator for constructive feedback seems to be clarity of understanding, so it's true that too much positivity could confuse the point! I think working without ego could be the best way to separate criticism from feelings of shame and fear. It's something that I'm still working on myself!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Blitzen** • 4 years ago

Just as important as what is said and how it's said is this - who is saying it and what's their intentions?

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be pushed off without a parachute).

The above is an example of office politics. It's disgusting but not that uncommon.

If the criticism is coming from someone you really look up to, admire, and aspire to emulate one day - I think the criticizer doesn't need to be nearly as careful with their tactics or words. You know these words are coming from someone that knows what they are talking about, they are better than you at this thing, and they care about you getting better faster than they were able to due to not having access to the same level of mentorship.

Did Steve Jobs use the popular sandwich technique? I don't know for sure, but accounts suggest that he was to the point and even cruel. But, everyone knew it was coming from someone who knew his stuff and cared about success.

---

[see more](#)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**christina schultz** → Blitzen • 4 years ago

Exactly!

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Courtney Seiter** Mod → Blitzen • 4 years ago

Hi Josh! This is such a fascinating point of view and I really appreciate you taking the time to share it! I know I've read about many leaders who used more of a "tough love" approach that seemed to be very effective. I think if that technique is applied across the board with everyone, it could really work. I've gotten to rather enjoy thinking about each word I speak; that's probably the "Buffer effect." :) Appreciate your point of view here!

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Blitzen** → Courtney Seiter • 4 years ago

Absolutely.

Definitely not suggesting you're off the mark. In fact, most of us should certainly watch how we phrase things and follow the advice in your post. I just wanted to add that these rules apply to almost all of us, but it is possible to get to a place where within a certain domain, you can care a lot less about your choice of words.

Also, your point about applying this technique across the board is key. I think inconsistency from the higher ups is a culture killer.

Using Steve Jobs as an example again, if he was to the point and kind of cruel to everyone, people start to appreciate that this is just the way he does business and the cruel words probably hurt a little less. Then, someone like Jobs has to spend significantly less time and energy getting his point across, which is key for someone in his position where managing bandwidth is key.





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