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## COMMUNICATION ESSENTIALS FOR COLLEGE

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## 10.3 – Constructive Criticism

### Learning Objective

- Demonstrate best practices in delivering constructive criticism and feedback in person.

## Receiving Constructive Criticism

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criticism, accept it in good faith as a gift because that's what it is. If a close friend or colleague nicely tells you to pick out the broccoli between your teeth after lunching with them, they're doing you the favour of telling you what you don't know but need to in order to be successful or at least avoid failure. Your enemies, on the other hand, would say nothing, letting you go about your day embarrassing yourself in the hopes that it will contribute to your failure. Constructive criticism is an act of benevolence or mercy meant to improve not only your performance but also that of the team and company as a whole. Done well, constructive criticism is a quality assurance task rather than a personal attack. Be grateful and say *thank you* when someone is nice enough to look out for your best interests that way.

Receiving constructive criticism gracefully may mean stifling your defensive reflex. Important skills not only in the workplace but in basic communication include being a good listener and being able to take direction. Employees who can't take direction well soon find themselves out of job because it puts them at odds with the goals of the team and company. Good listening means stifling the defensive reflex in your head before it gets out and has you rudely interrupting the speaker. Even if you begin mounting defenses in your head, you're not effectively listening to the constructive criticism.

Receiving constructive criticism in a way that assures the speaker that you understand involves completing the communication process. You can indicate that you're listening first with your nonverbals:

- Maintaining eye contact shows that you're paying close attention to the speaker's words and nonverbal inflections
- **Nodding** your head shows that you're processing and understanding the information coming in, as well as agreeing
- **Taking notes** shows that you're committing to the information by reviewing it later

Once you understand the constructive criticism, paraphrase it aloud to confirm your understanding. "So you're basically saying that I should be doing X instead of Y, right?" If the speaker confirms your understanding, follow up by explaining how you're going to

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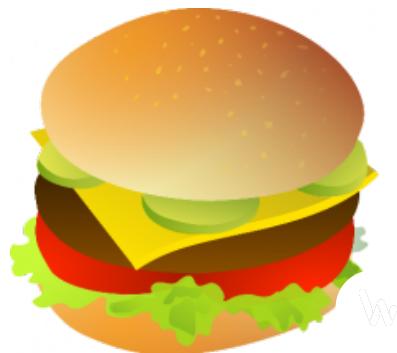
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Of course, if the constructive criticism isn't so constructive—if it's mere criticism (a “poop sandwich” without bread, to use the phrasing below), you would be right to ask for more help and specific direction. If the criticism is just plain wrong, perhaps because your manager is somehow biased or mistaken in thinking you're at fault when really there are other culprits they are unaware of, respectfully correcting them is the right thing to do. You don't want management to get the wrong impression about you in case that means you'll be passed up for promotion down the road. When disagreeing, focus on the faulty points rather than on your feelings even if you've taken the feedback as a personal insult. Always maintain professionalism throughout such exchanges.

## Giving “Poop Sandwich” Constructive Criticism

One of the most important functions of a supervisor or manager is to get the best work out of the people working under them. When those employees' work leaves room for improvement, it's the leader's job to convince them that they can do better with a clear explanation of how. As we saw above, clarity and precision are necessary here because the quality of improvement will only be as good as the quality of instruction. As miscommunication, vague and misleading instruction will lead to little-to-no improvement or even more damage from people acting on misunderstandings caused by poor direction. Not only must the content of constructive criticism be of a high quality itself, but its packaging must be such that it properly motivates the receiver.

An effective way of delivering constructive criticism is called the “**poop sandwich**,” usually said with a more vulgar alternative to “poop.” Like sugar-coating bitter medicine, the idea here is to make the receiver feel good about themselves so that they're in a receptive frame of mind for hearing, processing, and remembering the constructive criticism. If the constructive criticism (the poop) is focused on improvement and the receiver associates it with the praise that comes before and after (the slices of bread), the purely positive phrasing motivates them to actually improve. This message types' organization divides into three parts as shown in Table 1 below.



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**Table 1: Poop Sandwich Feedback**

Feedback	Example
1. Sincere, specific praise	Your report really impressed me with its organization and visually appealing presentation of your findings. It's almost perfect.
2. Constructive criticism	If there's anything that you can improve before you send it on to the head office, it's the writing. Use MS Word's spellchecker and grammar checker, which will catch most of the errors.
3. Sincere, specific praise	Perhaps you could also get Marieke to check it out because she's got an eagle eye for that sort of thing. The cleaner the writing is, the more the execs will see it as a credible piece worth considering.
	Otherwise, the report is really great. The abstract is right on point, and the evidence you've pulled together makes a really convincing case for investing in blockchain. I totally buy your conclusion that it'll be the future of financial infrastructure.

Of course, this style of feedback may develop a bad reputation if done poorly, such as giving vague, weak praise (called “damning with faint praise”) when more specific, stronger praise is possible. If done well, however, the poop sandwich tends to make those receiving it feel good about themselves even as they’re motivated to do better.

Poop sandwich feedback can be challenging, however, if the receiver hasn’t done enough praiseworthy work to get two pieces of bread together. In such cases, you can always reach for something to flatter them with (“I like your hair today, but . . . ”) in an attempt to put them at ease, then carefully word the constructive criticism so that it doesn’t put the receiver down. After all, the entire point of the poop sandwich is to make the constructive criticism more palatable by keeping it positive with feel-good sentiment.

## Attribution & References

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