

WP 1: What is Criticism Good For?

During my formative years as a competitive figure skater, criticism never felt inconsequential. It was an integral component of my training. I heard constructive criticism from my coach after every attempt at new techniques such as jumps or spins. Besides critiquing the technical elements of my execution, my coach also offered me her feedback on my creative choices; such as I should point my toes to elongate the appearance of my figure to appear more elegant or that I should be aware of the position of my fingers so that I can skate more gracefully. The experience of receiving feedback of my performance regularly during my youth has taught me the value of constructive criticism in self improvement not just as an athlete but also as a student and employee.

Constructive criticism facilitates improvement in certain areas. In the workplace, most managers utilize constructive criticism to assist employees in maximizing their efficiency, creativity, and professional development. The managers' goal is to encourage their employees and other coworkers to adopt more productive habits which would boost their work performances and lead to an overall increase in the performance of the company. In this case, managers generally do not utilize criticism to punish and belittle others but instead as a tool to facilitate improvement. For example, Ralph De La Vega, the president and CEO of AT&T, utilizes criticism as motivation and encouragement. Vega stresses the importance of de-constructing the stigma that criticism is an insult in the first place, and offers feedback to employees right away. By complimenting an employee immediately, Vega motivates his workers to continue their positive habits. On the other hand, when Vega immediately offers constructive feedback to his employees, he inspires positive changes right away. When Vega was the

president of BellSouth Latin America, a telecommunications holdings company, he ran a portfolio of multiple wireless companies each with their own CEO working independently with different boards and operations. Problems such as competing interests and goals amongst the CEOs arise when companies compete at a global level and simultaneously operate as local providers. As a result, Vega organized a meeting where he stated the “brutal facts” of the inconsistencies present in this system for the purpose of persuading the individual CEOs to begin working together. In his feedback, Vega insisted that by cooperating as a team, BellSouth Latin America would experience substantial growth. This constructive criticism presented to the eleven CEOs inspired them to form a unified plan, which proved critical for BellSouth Latin, because within one year, the company achieved a positive net-income. According to Forbes magazine, a leader who offers effective constructive criticism enables employees to work cohesively towards a unified vision, which inspires growth within the workplace.

Anybody and everybody can improve through feedback. As a former athlete, I was given feedback all the time, even when I believed that I had performed my technique perfectly. In those circumstances when I thought I could not improve anymore, my coach would humble me by pinpointing a flaw in my performance. My instinct to react stubbornly would kick in, and I would simply ignore the valuable feedback that was given to me. By ignoring constructive feedback given to me by my coaches, I was at risk of losing valuable points during competitions. Only after becoming more introspective and realizing that my pride and stubbornness were not a logical response to constructive criticism, I was able to start taking feedback seriously.

Sometimes, even the most talented people need feedback. It was a surprise to many when Elon Musk listened to Consumers Reports' which claimed that the Tesla 3X automobile was not a recommendable car due to its 60 - 0 mph braking weakness. As someone with an impressive

roster of companies under his belt, many expected Musk to become defensive and issue a Twitter rant. Instead, Musk took note of this braking concern and issued a statement claiming that Tesla will fix the problem with a firmware update. Musk demonstrated that he is open to criticism and is willing to communicate with his consumers about the strengths and imperfections of Tesla products. He assessed the situation, took note of the issues, and admitted to his own mistakes. By showing his openness to negative feedback, Musk is not only able to create better products, he is also able to generate a positive image of Tesla to consumers.

On the opposite side of constructive feedback lies destructive criticism. Unlike constructive criticism, destructive criticism is purposely intended to harm and insult the receiver and can foster a psychologically unsafe workspace. Knowing the difference between constructive and destructive criticism can help any receiver deal with their feedback efficiently. The main intention of destructive criticism is harm and destroy someone else's work, reputation, and self-esteem. This type of criticism can lead to anger, aggression, and depression. Some of the specific characteristics of destructive criticism include vagueness and personal blows, which contradicts those of constructive feedback which tends to be more specific, good intentioned, actionable, and clear. Rather than being problem solvers, deliverers of destructive criticism are resorting to blaming others for shortcomings. In the workplace, there are colleagues that bully their coworkers. According to Inside Higher Ed, "[h]igh rates of losing staff or assistant professors or graduate students are often symptomatic of the presence of bullies." One of my personal experience with destructive criticism was during a group project for my business communications class. One of my group members, who I constantly clashed with, called my portion of the project "a complete mess". He didn't exactly say why my portion was a "mess" but it felt very targeted and made me very angry. At the time, I snapped at him and said some

hurtful things. Looking back, both his and my responses to each other were unnecessary and harmful to not just us but the rest of our group. The best way to handle destructive criticism is to keep calm, not get angry or hurt over the feedback, and ignore the criticizer.

When criticisms are made, effective communication and the establishment of good relationships between the giver and the receiver are often in jeopardy. Unfortunately, not all constructive criticism actually appear constructive. We have probably all heard of the phrase: “It’s not what you say, but how you say it.” It can be difficult for the recipient of criticism to take in feedback and use it for self-improvement, as criticism can often be viewed with a negative connotation, such as insulting or demeaning. For most people, being criticized is uncomfortable, embarrassing, and sometimes hurtful. As a result, we can become angry and defensive of ourselves and our actions when we are criticized. Even worse, people often lash out at those who are criticizing them, minimizing communication between parties and harming positive connections. One instance of poor communication occurred when my mom criticised me for my posture. Even though I knew my mom meant well with her remarks because good posture has been linked with increased energy, reduced back pain, decreased fatigue and muscle tensions, as well as other health benefits, I still felt insulted due to her choice of words. My mom would say my posture is “unattractive” which made me “ugly”. It was difficult to not take my mom’s criticism personally but I knew that she had my best interests at heart. The case with my mom is an example of a poorly shaped constructive criticism. One of the worst nightmares for a company is employee demotivation. As a result, company leaders must really take into consideration the way they verbally frame their feedback before delivering their thoughts. Often times, poor communication lead to miscommunication amongst employees which breeds

wrongful assumptions and gossip. As a result, poor communication can lead to conflict, decreased productivity and employee commitment.

Constructive criticism aims to provide guidance to help the receiver improve in certain areas of expertise. Without constructive criticism, our chances of improving in the right direction are hindered.