



Book The Power of Positive Criticism

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Recommendation

Hendrie Davis Weisinger is simple, clear and very focused as he applies emotional intelligence techniques to the area of criticism and reframes criticism as a valuable, vital tool, and not just a necessary evil. The tips in this self-improvement book push the reader toward greater self-awareness, a major element of emotional intelligence. The suggestions are elemental: Most of them are easy to implement, and even the hardest ones to enact require only a modest time commitment. The book's message is consistent to the point of repetition, though its simple language gives it real power. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to anyone who gives or receives criticism, which is to say, everyone. In particular, if you are a manager, an executive and or supervisor who deals with difficult personalities, here's how to tell them what you need them to know.

Take-Aways

- Embrace and value criticism as a developmental process, essential to learning, growth and success.
- Positive criticism recognizes the merits and demerits of a situation and then evaluates them, looking for improvement.
- Be very clear about what you want to communicate and why.
- Make sure to clearly express both your expectations and your criteria for criticism.
- Positive criticism aims for improvement, so first recognize positives.
- Understand the recipient's motives and frame criticism so the recipient will improve his performance.
- Choose your words carefully, avoid negative language and offer specific solutions.
- Make sure to offer to help with changes, so the recipients do not feel alone.
- Form a partnership with the recipient to make change happen.
- Learn to recognize your own emotional state so you can stay calm under stress.

Summary

Getting the Best from Yourself and Others

Criticism is a complex, essential and powerful process. It is important because situations affect our welfare and must be evaluated. It is essential because so many things depend on it, including leadership and management development. It is powerful because it can help an organization thrive or flounder and make or break careers. Use criticism to assess the merits and demerits of a situation and make appropriate judgments. When you do, you will get the best from yourself, from others and from your organization.

The Power of Positive Criticism

Use these 20 tips to exercise the power of criticism wisely and effectively.

1. **Befriend criticism** - You are bound to encounter criticism, so embrace it. Think of it positively. Too many people avoid criticism as negative; they even substitute the word "feedback," which isn't the same thing at all. Try to hear criticism for what it is and learn to appreciate it. Everyone needs criticism to become successful. Accept that and you will value it.
2. **Take responsibility for how you communicate and criticize strategically** - See yourself as a force. Your goal is to get the recipient of your criticism to be more productive. This takes advance planning. Consider what you want to change, what you want to communicate, what your motives are and what specific solutions you can offer.
3. **Be improvement-oriented** - If you are negative, the recipient of your criticism will become defensive. To facilitate improvement, offer helpful suggestions for curative action and reinforce the fact that the recipient will get another chance.
4. **Protect the self-esteem of the recipient** - Low self-esteem makes people fearful of change, responsibility and new assignments. High self-esteem makes people eager to try new challenges. Avoid derogatory language and comments. Don't make criticism a right vs. wrong issue.
5. **Choose the right words** - Start your criticism with a "positive intent statement." This helps the recipient understand that your criticism has a positive goal. Avoid emotionally charged words like "always," "never" and "should." The word "could" is good instead; it creates options for the recipient.
6. **Criticize your criticism** - Not all criticism is valid or effective. Be sure yours is.
7. **Involve your recipient in the criticism process** - Ask for input, which will keep the employee involved, minimize defensiveness and help you know if you are being understood. Create a plan for how you'll work with the recipient to help create change. When you set up the plan, emphasize the importance of the person's job. Ask for a firsthand evaluation of the situation or behavior. State clearly how the changes will benefit the employee so you garner the person's aid. Ask how you can help.
8. **Focus on the merits, with no "but"** - Focusing on merits as well as demerits helps you perceive the recipient more positively. Offer sincere positives with your criticism and clarify areas that need improvement. Many people say something positive and then add a "but" and follow with more criticism. This is a mistake, because the "but" negates the positives you stated. This is a subtle but powerful technique.
9. **Tell them what you want** - Give the recipient a clear direction for addressing your criticism. If you don't have a solution, say so and work together to find one.
10. **Be timing-oriented** - Carefully chose the time and place to criticize someone. Never criticize when you or the recipient is angry.
11. **Use questions like Socrates** - Ask questions that will guide the recipients to discover solutions for themselves. When they come up with their own solutions, their self-esteem is enhanced. Ask questions whose answers lead to useful information. Don't be condescending. Try "what if" questions. If you hear an unexpected answer, explore it. If you are concerned about appearing manipulative, tell the recipient the structure of the conversation. Say that you're going to ask some questions then share your thoughts.
12. **When words don't work, use actions** - When you repeatedly give the same criticism but nothing changes, you may have to change your own behavior to help a subordinate change. When planning a behavioral intervention, pin down exactly what criticism you have repeatedly given without effect. Pick an intervening behavior that may force change by requiring the recipient to behave differently. Be consistent, and if the problem continues, devise another behavioral intervention.
13. **Use your expectations** - You are bound to have some, so make them work for you. Often criticism arises from unmet, uncommunicated expectations. Examine your own expectations. Are they realistic? Ask others what they think. Communicate your expectations to those you work with and clarify mutual goals.
14. **Acknowledge that criticism is subjective** - Admit that your criticism is really your opinion, even if it is based on objective fact. Different people perceive the same events differently. Offering criticism means sharing your thoughts. You must be willing to take this risk to get the power of positive criticism.
15. **Put motivation in your criticisms** - To have positive power, your criticisms must motivate the recipients to do better. To do this, you must begin to understand your own motivational assumptions and those of each recipient. Offer incentives. Ask yourself

what motivates the recipient and make sure the incentives you offer are enticing to the recipient, not just to you.

16. Use metaphors that the recipient will relate to consistently - This is a powerful way to communicate. Sports fans respond to sports metaphors, and so on. Be sure to choose a metaphor that is appropriate for the person and do your homework, so you use it correctly.
17. Follow up and keep following up - Recognize that criticism is a developmental process. You may not see progress or change right away, but remember that learning new behaviors is difficult and takes time. Be sure to acknowledge any progress directly and immediately. If the recipient is struggling, re-acknowledge the criticism and offer help. This helps the recipient know that your initial offer of help was more than a pep talk.
18. Know your criteria for criticizing - Base your opinions on specific, shared criteria. Be sure you know how you're evaluating people and situations, and let them know, too.
19. Listen to yourself - Take time to learn your automatic thoughts, the messages that run unconsciously in your mind. Set aside five minutes a day to listen to your thoughts. You will discover the brief, habitual, often irrational beliefs that accumulate and trigger other thoughts. These automatic thoughts are often negative. Try counter-punching by responding to those irrational automatic thoughts with a rational comeback.
20. Stay cool, calm and collected - You lose your mental agility when you are upset or angry. Learn how your body feels at rest, so you can anticipate when you're becoming anxious or angry. Try to calm yourself, perhaps by breathing more slowly, or by changing your thoughts. Develop and practice a relaxation response you can use in these situations.

Challenging Criticism

Several difficult situations come up often in the workplace. As you handle these situations, remember that your goal is to change the situation for the better. No single tactic is always right, but research suggests the following approaches:

“Criticism is a learning mechanism.”

Criticizing your boss - Few situations are as stressful as this. Criticism that goes upward in the hierarchy relies on informal relationships, timing, ambiguity and self-restraint. Be sure to only criticize your own immediate supervisor. Be sure you know what you're talking about and work to avoid a power struggle. Try phrasing your criticism as a request for help with a problem. When people become upset, make an effort to understand why they're angry. Don't interrupt. Try to re-state what the person is saying. Stay flexible, and work toward a productive dialogue.

“Change becomes easier when you have a partner.”

Criticizing a personal habit - Sometimes you may have to criticize someone for an embarrassing personal problem, like dental hygiene or body odor. Openly acknowledge your embarrassment. Mention that you know that the recipient is unaware of the problem.

Criticizing someone you don't supervise - To offer criticism to subordinates over whom you have no jurisdiction, ask their supervisor for permission to criticize. If you get it, lay out a common goal and show how your peer's performance affects both of you.

“Blaming subordinates will only suggest to your boss that you are not able to manage them effectively.”

Criticizing in groups - Try to depersonalize the criticism by focusing on the work, not the person. When you encounter excuse makers, remember that they are probably insecure. Acknowledge when their excuses are valid but encourage them to take responsibility for their actions. You may receive unduly negative, unfair or unwarranted criticism.

“Building up a person's self-esteem does not require you to be a psycho-therapist. Simply tune into the daily opportunities in which you can show the individual that he counts.”

Criticizing a customer - Truth be told, the customer is not really always right. Try to present criticism of a customer as a route to better service or as a way to help customers reach their goals.

Criticizing ethics - Ethical criticism of peers is usually considered out of line, because ethics are personal. If you have an ethical problem with the boss or company, you can keep silent and do nothing, quit or voice your criticism. Know that if you speak up, you may be fired.

“Criticism is important because what it tells us is important.”

Secondhand criticism - Criticism through surrogates is common in the workplace, because it is less confrontational than direct criticism. Ask yourself if the messenger is reliable. Encourage the messenger to speak to the source. Ask your supervisor for advice and evaluate the validity of the criticism.

Positive Criticism

When you only hear negative comments about your work, ask for positive suggestions. If you are working with negative personalities, remember that emotions are contagious, including negativity. Immunize yourself against negativity by clarifying your own thoughts and feelings about your work. Negative people usually have low self-esteem. Try to build up their feelings about themselves as you protect your self-esteem.

“The more you experience criticism as a negative, the more apt you are to respond to criticism in a negative manner.”

When you're criticized unfairly, don't blame your subordinates or peers. Often, you are better off in the long run if you show you can accept criticism. Sometimes you can ask your boss to share the criticism with your work group to find a productive solution or you can ask specific questions that help the boss realize you are not responsible.

“Your criticism loses impact and credibility when others think you are speaking out of anger.”

If you are criticized, evaluate the criticism to see if responding to it is in your best interest. Consider the criticism's content, source and emotional context. Are you getting the same criticism from many people? If so, focus on changing. How much energy would it take to respond to the criticism? What would the benefits be?

“You are much more likely to get the power of positive criticism if you remember to acknowledge that your criticism is subjective, not a black and white fact.”

Sometimes, a friend of yours may be promoted and may become your supervisor. You could be surprised at that supervisor's new criticisms of your work. If necessary, use your friendship to facilitate positive criticism. Understand that your new boss is now accountable for your work. Clarify your attitudes about making friends at work.

“When you frequently work with a negative person, you begin to catch her negativity.”

Positive critics take responsibility for their actions. A positive critic serves as a role model for other people because being positive includes self-awareness, empathetic awareness of others, and a real belief that people are in the process of becoming their best.

About the Author

Hendrie Weisinger, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and leading authority on emotional intelligence and anger management. He originated "Criticism Training" and led hundreds of seminars about criticism for Fortune 500 companies, government agencies and professional associations. He teaches in executive education and M.B.A. programs across the United States.
