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DELIVERING CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM IN THE WORKPLACE

It is no secret that one of the essential elements of a well-functioning workplace is for employees to receive regular feedback on their performance. While many employers have in place a formal performance review process, it is sometimes the case that the most effective feedback is that delivered on an informal basis throughout the course of an employee's tenure at an organization. According to a recent survey discussed in a *Harvard Business Review* blog post, employees would rather receive negative feedback (in the form of constructive criticism) than positive feedback, because they believe it will improve their job performance.[1] The survey also revealed—perhaps unsurprisingly—that those in leadership positions strongly dislike giving negative feedback to employees. It is clear that negative feedback, as long as it is delivered appropriately, can be very helpful for, and even desired by, employees. This article offers tips for how those responsible for giving negative feedback (referred to herein as "managers") can more effectively do so.[2]

When discussing how to deliver negative feedback, it is important to distinguish between outright criticism and "constructive" criticism. The goal in delivering negative feedback should always be to help the recipients of the feedback (referred to herein as "employees") correct problematic behaviors. Generalized or mean-spirited comments will never be useful or constructive for an employee and should thus be avoided. Other suggestions for delivering constructive criticism include:

1. <u>Give feedback based on actual behavior vs. perceived characteristics</u>. When a manager is dealing with an underperforming employee, it is easy for the manager to frame the employee's performance in terms of what he or she perceives to be the employee's negative characteristics, <u>e.g.</u>, "[Employee A] isn't hardworking," or "[Employee B] is a procrastinator." However, feedback provided on this basis is unlikely to be constructive and could very well backfire. Instead, managers should focus on actual, observable behaviors that the employee can correct, <u>e.g.</u>, missed deadlines or a lack of attention to detail.

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[1] Zenger, Jack and Folkman, Joseph, "Your Employees Want the Negative Feedback You Hate to Give," *available at* http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/01/your-employees-want-the-negative-feedback-you-hate-to-give, January 15, 2014.

[2] Sources: Murad, Andrea, "How to Deliver Feedback to Employees Without Squashing Morale," *available at* http://www.foxbusiness.com/personal-finance/2013/05/24/how-to-deliver-feedback-to-employees-without-squashing-morale, May 24, 2013; Brounstein, Marty, "Giving Constructive Feedback," *available at* http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/giving-constructive-feedback.html; James, Geoffrey, "10 Smart Rules for Giving Negative Feedback," *available at* http://www.inc.com/geoffrey-james/how-to-give-negative-feedback-10-rules.html, August 21, 2012.

2. <u>Be specific and straightforward</u>. It is important for the person delivering the constructive criticism to get straight to the point and deliver the feedback clearly and succinctly. Otherwise the employee may be confused by the message, defeating the purpose of the conversation. In addition, the manager should be prepared with specific examples of the employee's problematic behavior. This will serve to better illustrate the issue for the employee and make it easier for him or her to do better in the future.

3. <u>Provide examples and solutions for how to improve</u>. When it comes to helping an employee improve his or her performance, explaining to the employee what he or she did wrong is only half of the equation. It is crucial for the manager to be prepared with concrete examples of how the employee could have handled past problems better, as well as solutions for how the employee can deal with similar situations in the future.

4. <u>Use an appropriate tone and don't forget the positive</u>. In order to be effective, constructive criticism should be delivered with an appropriate tone. Even if a manager is feeling angry at or frustrated with an employee, the employee will likely be more receptive to the negative feedback if the manager comes across as concerned and understanding when delivering it. If the manager is uncomfortable delivering negative feedback, he or she may also have the tendency to be overly lighthearted or "jokey"—this is to be avoided as well, as it may belie the seriousness of the situation and can come across as patronizing. At the same time constructive criticism is delivered, managers should also consider highlighting the employee's strengths. This will help the employee to keep the criticism in perspective as well as encourage him or her to "keep up the good work" in the areas in which he or she excels.

5. <u>Consider the timing (and the medium)</u>. Constructive criticism is most effective when it is delivered on a timely basis and in person. It can be tempting to avoid a difficult face-to-face conversation and deliver negative feedback in an email or over the phone. However, feedback delivered over email is likely to be misconstrued, and a phone call is too impersonal. When a manager delivers negative feedback in person it demonstrates respect for the employee. Managers should do their best to listen to the employee's reaction to the feedback and allow for a true conversation (versus having the discussion only go in one direction). Finally, managers should not delay in delivering constructive criticism relating to specific incidents or projects, so that the issue in question is fresh in the manager's—and the employee's—mind.

By following these tips, managers can make delivering constructive criticism to employees a more pleasant—and meaningful—experience for everyone involved.

Article by Katie Calabrese, Manager – Legal Personnel at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind Wharton & Garrison. Katie is a member of the City Bar's Career Advancement and Management Committee. March 2014.