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## **ProSeminar Top Tips Series**

# **Giving Constructive Criticism**

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It has been said that the ability to give and take criticism constructively are amongst the most important skill sets for anybody working in any organisation. It might even be added that they are amongst the most important skill sets for anybody managing any kind of relationship - at work, at home or at play!

Here are a few tips for giving constructive criticism:

### **1. Don't bottle up your criticism**

While it's important to choose your moment and while upon occasion there may be a good reason for 'letting something go', it's important not to bottle up your criticism. Doing so would mean a) that you're tolerating poor service and delaying what might be done to correct it and b) that you may grow increasingly resentful so that you finally explode and criticise in an emotional and unhelpful way.

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## **2. Use praise to allow scope for criticism**

People are more likely to be receptive to criticism if they know that the critic is aware of not only what they do badly but also of what they do well. This doesn't mean, though, that every piece of critical feedback has to be inserted into a 'praise-criticism-praise sandwich'. Praise should be a natural and on-going part of the relationship.

It's important to make praise specific and detailed – so that you show you've really noticed what's been done well. Unfortunately, too often people rely on bland generalised praise to balance their criticisms – *'On the whole I think you're doing a very good job, but . . .'*

## **3. Test your evidence and explore your own responsibility**

If you're not happy with someone's performance or you're blaming them for something that's gone wrong, make sure of your facts before you begin to criticise and make sure that you have the evidence to back up your criticism in case you're challenged by the person you're criticising.

Whenever something goes wrong, it's a good idea to start by questioning oneself *'Could I be to blame for this?' or 'How far is this my fault?'*

## **4. Don't make the criticism personal and be specific**

It's an old adage: *'Don't criticise the person; criticise the behaviour'*. This means, amongst other things that we've got to be careful in the language we use when opening the criticism. *'You're a lousy presenter'* is likely to produce a defensive or hostile reaction, whereas *'I'm not*

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*happy with your presentations'* is about the presentations and not the presenter. It's also presented as an opinion rather than as a fact which somehow makes it less threatening for the recipient.

Nonetheless such an opening remark needs to be followed quickly by moving the discussion on to the specifics of the issue: *'I'm particularly concerned about your use of PowerPoint. In this morning's presentation I noticed that . . .'*

### **5. Look for a joint solution**

If the purpose of criticism is improvement, the focus of discussion needs to be on finding solutions. Work with the recipient to understand how and why the problem has occurred and how an alternative approach might overcome it in the future. Don't impose your view – *'I'll tell you what you need to do'*. Go instead for inclusive language: *'Now how do you think we can tackle this . . .'*

### **6. Choose the right time and place**

Don't criticise at a time when either you or the recipient is likely to be tired, emotional or feeling vulnerable

Choose the territory tactically. If you summons someone into your office, it's likely to make the criticism appear to be formal and heavy in a way which could be out of proportion. If you want to keep the criticism light, go on to their territory and, if appropriate, perch casually on the edge of their desk.

### **7. Vary your style to the needs/ likely reactions of the individual**

Notwithstanding these guidelines, you need to vary your approach depending upon how you think you are going to get the most positive response from the recipient.

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Some people may respond to hints; some may be able to recognise themselves when generalised criticisms are made. Others need, or prefer, to be told directly and unambiguously about any problems there are.

### **8. Don't be afraid to criticise – be assertive**

Some people are afraid to criticise because they are fearful of the reaction they might provoke – they prefer to avoid conflict by taking the line of least resistance. Sometimes the critic fears they may be criticised back and that they might not have the skills to handle this. As well as developing your criticism skills you need also, perhaps, to develop your skills and techniques in receiving criticism in a positive way.

Whatever the situation, you need to be assertive. Remember you have a right and a responsibility to criticise. Remember also that the recipient has a right to be heard and an opinion and perspective which should be listened to and which may even be more valid than your own.