



Providing Negative Feedback, Constructively

Critiquing is a large part of managerial work. It can help guide workers to better performance and ultimately benefit the whole team. However, when managers give negative feedback, it means identifying other people’s weaknesses and mistakes, and consequently risks making workers defensive and unmotivated. This can be difficult both for the person giving the feedback, and the person receiving it.

There are a number of strategies that can help managers provide negative feedback in a respectful, helpful and effective manner. When providing negative feedback, focus on the overarching aim of the feedback as being **constructive**, **specific** and geared toward **behavioural change**. Doing the following can be helpful:

- Begin with a clear articulation of the preferred outcome. This can sometimes eliminate the need for negative criticism altogether, as you work toward how the preferred outcome might be achieved.
- acknowledge the worker’s efforts, and emphasize that they are a valued member of your team/organization
- acknowledge an individual’s strengths (as there are always strengths) as well as providing performance feedback
- make feedback specific to behaviours (not to the individual’s characteristics or personality)
- provide clear, concrete examples of behaviours
- give the worker a chance to respond to your feedback
- where appropriate, frame the feedback process as an opportunity for professional growth
- keep in mind that most, if not all, workers will be emotionally triggered by some types of criticism; don’t take this personally

Here are examples of less effective versus more effective ways of giving feedback:

Situation	Less Effective	More Effective
A worker leaves an important part out of a proposal. You are surprised, as you had talked about the importance of following a set template for proposals with him.	You blame the worker for mistakes made, assuming he was being lazy or oppositional. <i>“Take it back and do it in the way we discussed. When I said we needed to include this part, I meant it.”</i>	Give the worker the benefit of the doubt and don’t assume negative intentions. <i>“I want all proposals to consistently use this template. I’ve noticed that you tend to prepare the proposals in a different template. Is there a reason for this?”</i>



Situation	Less Effective	More Effective
You're asking a worker to stop making irrelevant comments during meetings.	You show that you're frustrated and tell the worker to stop their behavior, but you don't explain why. You provide no opportunity for the person to understand exactly what's wrong. <i>"Could you not ask these kinds of questions during our meetings? It's annoying."</i>	<i>"I need our meetings to stay focused on the agenda and to be productive. When a comment like that is made in meetings [be specific], it can sometimes lead to unproductive conversations [state consequence], which we want to avoid because we only get one hour for every meeting [explain why]."</i>
You are critiquing a worker's written work.	Your feedback is vague. You assume that the worker can guess what you want. <i>"This isn't really what I was after. Please change it."</i>	Feedback should clearly convey your desired outcomes. <i>"I'd like you to emphasize x and y and take out z, because it's not the focus of this report."</i>
A member of your team misunderstands what she was supposed to do for her part of the project, and does something different.	Your criticisms are harsh and inconsiderate. <i>"What were you thinking, doing this task using this method? You should know better!"</i>	Try to be understanding of the worker. <i>"I can see why you might think that this method applies to this problem, but actually...."</i>
A worker has been on the job for three months, and you've noticed that she does some things poorly. You'd like her to improve her performance.	You want to tell her just how incompetent you think she is, so you criticize her the moment you see her next. <i>"You know, you've been here for three months already. You should be able to do x,y,z by now."</i>	Set up a meeting. Talk in privacy to demonstrate respect. Frame the feedback as an opportunity for growth. <i>"As your manager, I have the responsibility to help all my staff meet their performance standards which are xyz. I've noticed that you do x very well, so I'd like you to keep up the good work. Where you need some improvement is doing y more...."</i>
A worker is often late for work. You initially give him the benefit of the doubt, but you are becoming concerned and frustrated. You are beginning to think he's an irresponsible person.	You criticize the worker's character. <i>"I thought that since you're a father of two, you'd be more responsible, seeing as how you have to set a good example for your kids."</i>	You criticize the behaviour and give specifics. <i>"I noticed you're arriving late about three days out of the week. I know you stay late to make up the time, but that's a problem because we need you to open the counter."</i>



As you might notice, constructive feedback sounds considerably more positive to the listener. It generally can make workers more motivated to accept feedback. When comments are negative in tone and sound more like scolding than guiding, workers can feel disrespected and may be more likely to refrain from changing their behaviour. Always maintaining a constructive approach with workers can help you build mutually respectful working relationships.