

# How to deliver critical feedback that sticks



Effective leaders often say they prefer to earn employees' respect than to befriend them. The test comes when these bosses need to dish out criticism.

If you want to be liked by employees, you may muzzle your critical feedback for fear that they will take it the wrong way. It's easier to keep quiet or drop indirect hints rather than come right out and say, "Let's discuss how your performance needs to improve."

To express criticism that sinks in, take these steps:

**1. Share your sensory perceptions.** The best words to begin a critical comment are "I see," "I feel" or "I hear." The worst words are, "I think." When you share your thoughts, you're giving an interpretation that's easy for defensive listeners to rebut.

If you report what you see or hear—and how it makes you feel—you disarm your people. They're less apt to pick a fight or deny your sensory perceptions. And they're more likely to take your criticism to heart.

**2. Focus on details,** not generalities. Leveling vague criticism at a staffer can sting ("I don't like how you relate to people."). Cite specifics that pinpoint the behavior that needs to change ("I saw you roll your eyes and I heard you cluck your tongue when the customer asked for a special order.").

Before you criticize, prepare by confirming that you're describing observable action—the more concrete, the better. Avoid sweeping judgments. If the employee asks for an example of his or her undesirable behavior, be ready to cite specifics.

**3. Know your motivation.** The best criticism is supportive: You want to raise awareness so that someone can take steps to improve. If you're driven by competing motivations, think twice about speaking up.

Some leaders use criticism as a weapon to vent their frustration or play know-it-all. Ask yourself whether your goal is to help your people perform better or serve another, less constructive purpose.

— Adapted from *The Winning Factor*, Peter Jensen, AMACOM.