

No more 'constructive criticism,' says leadership expert

"We must declare a worldwide ban on the phrase 'constructive criticism'; it's a true oxymoron," argues Dr. Tim Irwin, author of *EXTRAORDINARY INFLUENCE: How Great Leaders Bring Out the Best in Others*. A leading authority on leadership development, he points to recent research showing that the right kind of positive affirmation sets in motion huge positive changes in the brain. On the other hand, he says, criticism creates just the opposite neural reaction.

Business Management Daily: Could you talk a little about the research into the brain's self-defense reactions when we're criticized, and why they overwhelm the praise that might follow?

Dr. Irwin: Even the brains of the most confident among us are constantly scanning the environment and asking, "Am I safe?" We do not typically face physical threats in our work settings, but we constantly face "emotional threats"—criticism from our boss, sniping from our rivals and the ever-present political maneuvering that goes on even in healthy organizations. The workplace is filled with "Words of Death"—those expressions that say, "No, I'm not safe." Favorite unthinking phrases of some leaders employ even "violent" language to convey they are in control, such as "I'm going to hold your feet to the fire"—a favorite torture method in the middle ages, designed to get heretics to convert. Our brains are hypersensitive to criticism or anything else that feeds our brain's "negativity bias"—the tendency to react defensively to anything we view as a threat, physical or emotional. Our amygdala engages and tends to shut down the prefrontal cortex and other parts of our brains responsible for innovation and problem-solving.

To drive this home, I've started a [petition on my website](#) to ban the phrase "constructive criticism." Please join this movement!

Let's say a very good employee has one critical flaw. How should you go about starting the conversation to fix it if he or she is primed to go on the defensive?

The need for "contrary feedback" is ever present. We all make mistakes and are in need of improvements in how we handle tasks and the relationships in our work life. The question that should be on the forefront of every leader's mind—how do we bring out the best in an employee? Brain research indicates that contrary feedback best engages the receptive parts of the brain by linking the needed "course correction" to the hopes, dreams and aspirations of the recipient and/or the mission, strategy, goals and values of our organization.

Another key is a leader's attitude. For this book, I interviewed a large number of CEOs of large and highly successful companies. Almost every CEO I interviewed described a former boss instrumental in their development who was very tough on them. The bosses they described were hard-nosed, exacting and had unrelenting expectations of excellent in their performance. Regardless of how these expectations were conveyed, the common denominator of everyone I interviewed was the constantly reinforced underpinning that, "I'm for you." The clear indication, in every case, was that, "I want you to be and expect you to be successful, and I have great confidence in your abilities and your character."

It seems that performance appraisal systems are usually taken by employees as fishing expeditions for their flaws—that's the nature of the beast; they're perceived as performance criticism. What's the secret to getting employees to see these systems less cynically?

The typical performance appraisal session is the most the most hated event in corporate life, by the recipients and the givers. We typically go into these sessions with our negativity bias fully operational. The interpersonal clumsiness with which most performance appraisals are administered justifies this wariness.

Our brains thrive on affirmation—it is the clear pathway to the parts of our brain that provide creativity, innovation and problem solving. Numerical rating systems belie what brain science tells us about how we hear feedback. Rather than arguing about whether I'm a 3 or a 4 on a rating scale, a boss and a subordinate should form an alliance to reach goals and accomplish the mission. Performance management becomes an affirmation of my strengths and also a discussion about what I can change to be more likely to achieve our team's goals and my personal goals.

Another problem with most performance appraisal systems is the time lag between an employee's work and the time of the feedback—an *annual* performance appraisal is absurd on its face. How can a stellar performance in January be adequately recounted in December? Performance feedback should be frequent. One grizzled veteran corporate officer told me it should be daily. While that's not likely, it should be a normal and frequent part of conversation in work relationships.

Tim Irwin, Ph.D., is an author, speaker, and leading authority on leadership development, organizational effectiveness, and executive selection. For more than twenty years, he has consulted with many of America's most well-respected organizations and top Fortune 500 companies. Tim's past work has been featured on Fox News, Fox Business, Investor's Business Daily, Wall Street Journal, and others. He has served in a senior management post for a US-based company with more than three hundred offices worldwide. Presently, he is managing partner of Irwin Inc., based in Atlanta, GA. His new book is **EXTRAORDINARY INFLUENCE: How Great Leaders Bring Out the Best in Others.**