



Effective Communication: Managing Criticism

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. Define criticism and its purpose in the communication process.
2. Identify three benefits of criticism.
3. Discuss guidelines for using criticism effectively.

Amy, a home health aide, was fuming after she met with her supervisor. In addition to praising Amy for several things she did well, the supervisor had talked with her about some areas for improvement—like being less abrasive in some of her interactions, and organizing her work more effectively for better time management. Amy thought of 100 reasons why this criticism was unfair and unjustified—she worked hard, did an excellent job, and there was nothing that needed improvement! She even thought, “Since they don’t appreciate my hard work, I’m going to look for another job.” Later that night, after Amy had calmed down, she thought more clearly about her supervisor’s comments, and realized there was truth in them. Amy thought about the situations her supervisor mentioned, why they occurred, and how to prevent them in the future. She felt better after making a mental plan to deal with those situations more effectively in the future.



Amy received criticism about her job performance from her supervisor, and reacted strongly to it. This newsletter will discuss criticism in the workplace, including what it is, why it is used, and common reactions to it. Effective use of criticism to improve job performance will also be covered.

What Is Criticism?

Criticism can be defined as expressing disapproval at the perceived faults or mistakes of another. It can occur whenever two or more people interact, in any setting, and in any type of relationships, such as family, friends, co-workers and supervisors. Criticism is an important part of communication and personal growth, particularly in the work setting. It provides feedback on job skills, helps us to identify areas for improvement, and assists in setting goals to accomplish this.

Criticism can be constructive (helpful and positive) or destructive (hurtful and negative). A major difference in these is the intent of the person providing the criticism. For example, your supervisor may suggest ways to improve your job skills before your upcoming performance review, in an attempt to get these corrected before having to address them formally in the review. This is an example of helpful, constructive criticism. Destructive criticism typically involves someone criticizing you simply to make you look bad, make themselves look better, or simply to lash out at someone because they are angry or frustrated. An example might be a coworker who loudly announces your shortcomings or errors in a meeting or other setting when many people



are around. Constructive criticism provides helpful suggestions, while destructive criticism mainly just serves to attack the person.

Using Criticism Effectively

How does criticism usually make you feel? Angry? Anxious? Depressed? Defensive? The truth is, very few people enjoy or welcome criticism. But it serves an extremely important purpose. It lets us know what needs to change as we strive to grow and improve. You may not ever like or welcome criticism, but you can learn to value it and learn from it. A key point in using criticism to your advantage is by having an appropriate reaction to it. You cannot control the criticism that may come your way, but you can control your reaction to it.

So, you've received harsh criticism, perhaps from someone who already pushes your buttons. This can trigger intense, irrational feelings and behavior. You can feel your face flush, your blood pressure skyrocket, and you want to yell, scream and tell this waste of human breath how wrong he/she is. But you won't. Instead, you'll take a deep breath and behave in a calm and courteous manner. This serves three purposes—it will prevent you from saying something you'll later regret, and your critic won't be able to add "inappropriate behavior" to his/her list of criticisms. Also, you'll be able to hear what the person is saying and process it, to determine if the criticism is valid and requires action.

Rather than immediately feeling defensive when confronted with criticism, focus on developing a sense of curiosity about it. Where is this coming from? What, exactly, is the person's concern? When receiving criticism, your first response should be to ensure that you heard what the person intended. Repeat back or paraphrase the criticism, such as, "So you're saying that I should...". Once you've clarified the issue, if you feel upset or rattled, or need time to formulate a response, it's best not to engage in further discussion right then. "I'd like to think about what you've said, then we could meet again to talk."



In evaluating criticism directed at you, first verify the accuracy—is the criticism based on accurate information? If more, or different, information is needed to clarify the situation, let the person know. Also think about the source of the criticism and how valid it is. Criticism from your supervisor regarding how you handled a particular situation is likely to be much more valid than from a coworker who offers criticism because you're not doing a task the way he/she prefers.

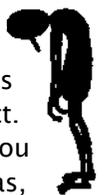
When you meet again, remain courteous and open-minded, yet assertive. Acknowledge those parts of the criticism that are valid, and offer a plan for correction. If there are parts you feel are unjustified, offer clarification for those areas and be open to further discussion.

Realize that many people are not great at providing criticism in a helpful, engaging manner. The danger there is that some really helpful criticism may be disregarded, simply because of the person's awkward or unpleasant approach. It helps to separate the tone, or feel, of the criticism from the actual message. It may be useful to write down the intent and message of the criticism, to help separate it from the person's tone.

Even though criticism is not pleasant to receive, view it with an open mind, rather than an immediate knee-jerk, defensive reaction. Be honest with yourself, and take responsibility for your actions and performance, both the good and the not-so-good. Even destructive criticism can be helpful to your personal growth. It can help to strengthen your coping skills, restraint and decision-making abilities, as you examine whether the criticism is valid and how you will, or won't, respond to it.

Another helpful tactic is to frequently assess your own performance, noting each day the things that go well, and those that don't. You can strengthen this self-assessment by asking your supervisor or trusted coworkers to provide some feedback periodically. By having a clear idea of your own strengths and limitations, you're less likely to be blind-sided or upset by criticism of specific areas, as you will have already identified these and been working to improve them.

And finally, don't allow criticism to lower your self-esteem and make you feel terrible about yourself. Everyone receives criticism at some time, and no one is perfect. Avoid the common trap of letting it put you into a downward spiral of negativity, such as, "I always mess up, I'll never amount to anything, I'm so stupid... etc." First of all, this is not true, and second, it has nothing to do with the actual criticism that was received. Instead, focus on the many parts of your job that you do well, and realize that everyone makes mistakes and has room for improvement



Criticism can be a very effective tool for self-growth. When used effectively, it can foster improved performance, work practices and relationships in your facility.



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____ UNIT: _____

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- ____ 1. Criticism is best defined as:
 - A. becoming angry and yelling at someone
 - B. offering assistance to help someone perform a task
 - C. expressing disapproval at the perceived faults of others
 - D. a process that is used annually in a job performance review

- ____ 2. Benefits of criticism include that it can help to:
 - A. provide feedback on job skills
 - B. identify areas for improvement
 - C. set goals for future performance
 - D. all of the above

- ____ 3. Which of the following situations is an example of constructive criticism?
 - A. a supervisor criticizes a staff member to serve as an example to others
 - B. a co-worker notices someone make an error and suggests how to fix it
 - C. a staff member arrives at work angry and blows up when someone makes a mistake
 - D. all of the above

- ____ 4. The major difference between constructive and destructive criticism is the:
 - A. setting in which it occurs, such as home or work
 - B. intent of the person providing the criticism
 - C. response of the person receiving the criticism
 - D. importance of the situation involved

- ____ 5. It is possible to value criticism, without liking or enjoying it.
 - A. True
 - B. False

- ___6. Which of the following can you control regarding criticism that you may receive?
- A. whether or not criticism is given
 - B. the manner and tone in which criticism is given
 - C. the consequences of the criticism
 - D. your reaction to the criticism
- ___7. Which of the following is the most helpful first response when receiving criticism?
- A. clarify what the person is saying
 - B. walk away without comment, to think on it further
 - C. explain to the person why the criticism is unjustified
 - D. defend yourself strongly, to avoid appearing like a “doormat”
- ___8. When receiving criticism, it is most helpful to view it with a sense of:
- A. embarrassment
 - B. defensiveness
 - C. curiosity
 - D. indifference
- ___9. Both constructive and destructive criticism can be helpful to personal growth.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ___10. Which of the following is most effective in helping to reduce the negative impact that receiving criticism may have on you?
- A. provide criticism to others on a regular basis
 - B. maintain an ongoing list of your faults that others have mentioned
 - C. assess your own performance and identify ways to improve
 - D. avoid taking any criticism seriously

