



Five Critical Skills for Team Leadership – Part 3

Giving Praise and Handling Criticism are Critical Skills for Leading Project Teams

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This article is Part 3 in a four-part series that covers five critical skills needed for effectively leading teams: understanding behavioral styles, listening effectively, giving praise, accepting criticism, and using problem-solving and persuasion instead of criticism. Read on to find out more about how giving praise and handling criticism can help you effectively lead a project team.

Giving Praise

Sometimes the simplest positive actions toward your team members can have a powerful impact on individuals as well as team cohesiveness. Giving praise to your team members is one of those simple positive actions.

Praise draws people together through an exchange of appreciation and can motivate people to greater achievement. Praise tells people that they have performed well and/or improved over previous performance. Praise also calls attention to examples of excellence that others may choose to follow.

*A pat on the back is only
a few vertebrae removed
from a kick in the pants,
but it is miles ahead in
results.*

~Ella Wheeler Wilcox

Five Tips for Giving Effective Praise

1. Be Specific

Praise must be specific. Blanket praise or general praise is ineffective for two reasons. First, it does not communicate what action or behavior deserved the compliment. Second, blanket praise can come across as insincere. Praise the behavior, not the person.

2. Be Genuine and Share Your Feelings

Express your personal appreciation to team members and co-workers. Communicate that you both notice and appreciate what is being done on the job. Tell people about what they did that was right and how it helped you, the organization, and the other people who work on the team. Stop for a moment of silence to let them enjoy the “feeling” of a job well done.



3. Be Immediate and Timely

Praise given six months after the behavior or situation might as well not be given. Praise loses its importance and effectiveness if the giver delays too long.

Praise should be given immediately, if possible. The conversation need not take place in your office. It can occur anywhere the two of you meet.

4. Don't Mix with Criticism

Don't mix praise with criticism. Leave criticism for a separate discussion. Criticism has a tendency to generate criticism, which will destroy the positive effects of praise. If praise is usually mixed with criticism, the praise that is being given is not heard because the employee is waiting for the "punch line."

Often called the sandwich approach, giving praise, then giving criticism, and then more praise just confuses the receiver.

5. Don't Over-Use It

If praise is used too often, it becomes meaningless and loses its effectiveness. Vary how you recognize and praise others.

Praise Matters

According to a Gallup survey outlined in the book, “How Full is Your Bucket?,” 60% of American workers received no praise at work. The number one reason people leave their jobs is because they feel unappreciated. This alone tells us that praise matters. Following are some additional points about praise:



- **Everyone needs recognition and reassurance.**
- **Praise gives us pride in our jobs.** When team members feel pride in their jobs, they are more engaged and more likely to go out of their way to accomplish goals.
- **Praise generates enthusiasm and commitment.** Committed people often find a way to work miracles, so it pays to build commitment.
- **Praise builds loyalty.** Loyalty can help reduce turnover. This is especially helpful to your organization when you consider the real and hidden costs of employee turnover.

- **Praise prevents people from feeling taken for granted.** When people feel taken for granted they are less committed and loyal, which can lead to poor workmanship.
- **Praise motivates us to "go the extra mile."** The extra mile is often where we find satisfied customers, greater success, and more.
- **Praise improves our relationships.** Having better relationships with those you lead and work with can improve your job satisfaction as well.
- **Praise takes hardly any time and costs nothing.** Few things in life produce such great returns for such a small investment.

Handling Criticism

The natural reaction to criticism by others is to become defensive or get angry. As a result, we often do not hear what people say because we are too busy thinking about how we're going to respond to their criticism. Sometimes, we feel as though our head is spinning when we are criticized by others, and we find it difficult to keep calm and composed.

This reaction, though normal, can be extremely detrimental to building effective relationships with team members. By calmly listening to criticism and rationally evaluating it, we demonstrate respect and help ourselves to avoid taking it so personally and learn something from it. Sometimes, there is an element of truth in criticism that could help us grow as individuals if we were not so defensive. In addition, our image would improve if we could be in control during times of conflict and confrontation that often comes with criticism.

Honest criticism is hard to take, particularly from a relative, a friend, an acquaintance, or a stranger.
~FRANKLIN P. JONES

Two skills can be used to help leaders and team members cope with criticism. These skills are taken from a book on assertiveness by Dr. Manuel J. Smith entitled, "When I Say No I Feel Guilty."

Skill #1 - Absorbing Criticism

The basic technique for handling conflict and criticism is the ability to absorb criticism without becoming defensive or angry. This technique involves using words that acknowledge the other person's point of view, and accepting that their criticism might be true under circumstances, but without necessarily accepting it is true of you.

Skill #2 - Clarifying Criticism

One of the best techniques for coping with criticism involves asking questions that put the burden on the criticizer to clarify what he/she means. This is the most difficult, and yet most powerful tool for dealing with criticism.

Absorb Criticism by Fogging

Imagine that one day, when you were out walking, a thick fog descended and left you unsure of which way to turn. You might feel frustrated or angry, but there would be nothing you could do to the fog to relieve the frustration. Punching the fog, throwing missiles at it or cursing it would leave it unaffected. This explains the name of one of the key techniques taught in assertiveness training – fogging.



Fogging is an acknowledgment that what the critic is saying—or, in some cases, part of what the critic is saying—may have some validity. It is not used to end a discussion by crying "Uncle," but to carry the conversation forward, by validating the other person's view and thus making it easier for him or her to keep talking.

Fogging is the first step in effectively handling criticism and involves three primary methods. Following is an example of fogging.

Criticism: <i>That was really an inappropriate thing you said in the meeting this morning.</i>	
1. If you agree with the criticism, then Admit it.	<i>You're right, what I said was inappropriate.</i>
2. If you don't agree with the criticism, then you can Admit the Possibility that the person could be right.	<i>Sometimes I do say things before I think about them.</i>
3. If you don't agree with the criticism, you could also simply Admit to the Principle of the criticism.	<i>Sometimes team members do say things that may come across inappropriate.</i>

Clarify the Criticism by Using Negative Inquiry

Negative inquiry is an assertiveness skill that has you do exactly the opposite of what you naturally feel like doing in the face of criticism... you ask for more negatives!

This skill is great for finding out the real issue that is bothering the person who is criticizing. So when using negative inquiry, you ask for more negatives and listen (not agree). Try to define and agree on a problem as a result of your listening.

Dealing with vague criticism is sometimes the most difficult and frustrating. In these cases, it is even more important to request specific feedback. You want to prompt criticism by listening to your critic and asking questions like the following:

- *What specifically did I do?*
- *Tell me more.*
- *Help me understand your view of the problem.*
- *Could you give me an example?*

See the following for examples of the sequence: Criticism – absorbing it – clarifying it.

Example 1: You agree with the criticism.	
Criticism: Your report was not as comprehensive as I would have hoped.	Response: Actually I wasn't entirely satisfied myself (<i>absorbing the criticism - agreeing</i>). Where are some of the areas in this report that could be improved? (<i>clarifying the criticism without getting angry or defensive</i>).
Example 2: You don't agree with the criticism.	
Criticism: That's the worse job of supervising I've ever seen!	Response: It's true that supervisors can make mistakes from time to time (<i>absorbing the criticism – agreeing to a principle</i>). What in particular is bothering you? (<i>clarifying the criticism without getting angry or defensive</i>)

Practice, Practice, Practice

As with all leadership and interpersonal skills, they must be learned and improved through practice. Giving praise can be uncomfortable for a variety of reasons – we do not know how, we are afraid of the other person's reaction, or maybe we think the behavior is just part of the person's job.

Receiving criticism is never easy. Only through practice can leaders learn to absorb the criticism through fogging and then clarify the criticism through asking questions. Once these skills are mastered, leaders are able to accept and learn from criticism. The [Handling Criticism Tool](#) can help you practice these skills.

Using the advice and tools in this article will help you become a more effective leader and improve your abilities when it comes to managing a team. Look for Part 4 in our series that will focus on problem solving and persuasion with your team members.

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