



Five Critical Skills for Team Leadership – Part 4 Using Problem Solving and Persuasion Skills Instead of Criticism When Leading Teams

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This article is the final segment 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 to effectively use problem solving and persuasion skills as you lead your teams.

I like criticism,
but it must be
my way.

—Mark Twain

Three Typical Reactions to Criticism

No one likes to hear criticism. In fact, typical reactions to criticism fall into three categories: defensive reactions, angry reactions, and withdrawal.

Defensive Reactions to Criticism

A typical reaction to criticism is to respond defensively; that is to act hurt, to blame others, to make excuses, and to deny the need for change.



Angry Reactions to Criticism



Another reaction to criticism is to get angry. Many people become aggressive and start arguments. Often, they simply do the opposite of what is desired.

Withdrawal

A final reaction to criticism is to psychologically "withdraw." During withdrawal, people become quiet and appear unconcerned and uninvolved. Sometimes they appear as though they aren't listening. Sometimes they even walk away from the person who is criticizing them (physical withdrawal).

Constructive vs. Destructive Criticism

Criticism comes in two forms: destructive and constructive. Destructive criticism is not meant to help a person. Rather, it is given to hurt or put down another person.



By contrast, constructive criticism is meant to help another person. This type of criticism is an attempt to influence others to change their behavior for positive outcomes.

Constructive criticism is meant to do the following:

- Provide feedback that enhances job results
- Lead to ongoing personal and professional development
- Reduce stress and create psychological security
- Help improve interpersonal relationships
- Help develop the ideal organizational climate

Two Approaches to Constructive Criticism

We have found two extremely effective approaches to delivering constructive criticism to gain positive results within teams: the problem solving approach and the persuasion approach.

The problem solving approach places emphasis on getting a team member involved in solving the problem. The approach emphasizes listening, focuses on the specific problem, and depersonalizes the criticism. Problem solving is the preferred approach to dealing with team issues and negative behaviors.

However, when problem solving does not work, the persuasion approach is still constructive; but it also creates a sense of urgency to make the desired behavioral change or to fix the problem. In using the persuasion approach, you do more talking than listening. You show the other person understanding, you stress the positive, and you become a "salesperson" for the change you desire.

10 Golden Rules of Giving Criticism

- 1.** Give criticism in private.
- 2.** Do not sound threatening.
- 3.** Keep the criticism balanced.
- 4.** Focus on the problem not on the person's personality.
- 5.** Don't overstate the problem by using words such as "always," "never" or "worst".
- 6.** Give criticism soon after the event.
- 7.** Pose questions that let the person do the work for you.
- 8.** Stick to one subject. Don't string together criticisms at one sitting.
- 9.** Don't remind people of previous instances that have already been resolved.
- 10.** Use the "I" mode.

The Problem Solving Approach

The problem solving approach has four primary steps: stating the performance discrepancy or problem, getting the team member involved, coming to an agreement, and following up.

Step 1: State the Performance Discrepancy and listen

When using the problem solving approach, simply state the difference between what you expected and what happened. Focus on the action or behavior, not the person.

Do not criticize; do not focus on personalities; do not lecture; and do not beat around the bush. Get right to the point.

State the discrepancy in such a way that you are not accusing your teammate of anything, and you are not looking for someone to be "at fault." You are interested only in solving the problem so that it doesn't happen again. Psychologically, give your teammate the benefit of the doubt. Do not assume that he/she acted deliberately. Again, leave the impression that you are interested only in solving the problem.

*A problem well-stated is a
problem half-solved.*
- Charles Kettering

For example: *"I had expected to receive the project status report from you yesterday. I didn't get it until this afternoon."*

Step 2: Get the Team Member Involved and Listen

Focus on the problem (not personality) and ask for your teammate's help and ideas. Focusing on the problem helps reduce resistance to change. If your teammate gives excuses, resist the temptation to "lecture." Comment briefly on the excuse and then continue to insist on getting some ideas that will solve the problem. Also, resist the temptation to solve the problem yourself. Instead, work to get your teammate involved in solving the problem with you.

*Focus on remedies, not
faults.*

- Jack Nicklaus

Use active listening skills. Do not interrupt. Do not argue. Show that you are genuinely interested in what your teammate has to say.

For example: *"Not having seen the report, I was caught unaware when the issue concerning the project schedules came up today in our meeting. What happened?"*

Step 3: Come to an Agreement

Come to an agreement on steps to be taken by both of you. This step is critical. It not only ensures the setting of specific goals, but also ensures clarity and understanding on the part of both of you.

Step 4: Follow up

Make a specific plan to follow up to ensure that the problem gets solved according to your agreement.

We have created a tool to help you prepare for and practice a problem solving session. See [The Problem Solving and Persuasion Planning Worksheets](#). We have also included some tips to help you prepare for possible responses.

The Persuasion Approach

Persuasion is a form of influence. It guides people toward the adoption of an idea, attitude, or action by rational means. It relies on "appeals" rather than force.

Persuasion is often confused with manipulation, which is the act of guiding another towards something that is not in their best interest by subverting their thought processes. Unlike manipulation, persuasion is meant to benefit one or more parties in the end.

With the problem solving approach, the emphasis is to take a problem-oriented approach, rather than a personal-attack approach to criticism. It uses listening and participative skills to get the other person involved in solving the problem him or herself.

With the persuasion approach, there is less emphasis on listening and involvement and more emphasis on telling the person what you want them to do. There is, however, a good deal of showing empathy and showing the positive aspects of the change. This approach is more direct than the problem solving approach.

The persuasion approach also involves four primary steps: getting the person's attention, making a specific positive suggestion, showing understanding, and then selling your idea.

Step 1. Get the Person's Attention

Improve the forcefulness of your suggestion by saying something that will get the attention of your team member. Two ways of doing this are to either (a) make an offer that can't be refused, or (b) appeal to a "pet peeve" of the team member.

For example: *"I know our team meetings have been running longer than normal recently, and you have a whole lot of other things you need to be doing."*

This statement could appeal to someone who is frustrated in your team meetings, exhibits negative behaviors, and belabors topics. Instead of focusing on the behavior, you first appeal to their desire to not spend so much time in meetings. Then you focus on the behavior you would like to see in step 2.

Step 2. Make a Specific Positive Suggestion

Be specific about what you want to change. In other words, don't communicate things like "You must improve your attitude" or "You must be more safety conscious". These messages are too broad and general to be helpful.

For example: *"To help us get out of our meetings quicker, I would like to try using a parking lot to capture ideas that will take longer to cover during the current meeting. That way we can make sure we do not lose important points, and we will also ensure we have enough time to adequately discuss them. I would like your help in managing a parking lot in our next team meeting."*

Step 3. Show Understanding

Team members are more likely to listen to your suggestion if they feel you understand their problems. Take time to show understanding. Imagine what problems your team member might have with your suggestion and then communicate this understanding. When you show understanding, you are appealing to the emotions of your team member.

For example: *"I know that when we are working on one problem in our meetings, many ideas come to mind; and sometimes we like to make sure we don't miss some good ideas. But when we get in those discussions, the meetings tend to run over."*

4. Sell the Idea

Point out the positive things that will happen if the team member does what you ask him/her to do. Be sure to stress the positive results or outcomes for your team member, not for you or for the company. When you sell the idea, you are appealing to the logic of your team member.

Be sure to gain commitment for next steps and a follow up action plan.

For example: *"I think if we start formally using a parking lot, we can make sure to not lose important information AND get out of our meetings on time."*



We have created a tool to help you prepare for and practice a problem solving session. See [The Problem Solving and Persuasion Planning Worksheets](#).

Use Constructive, not Destructive, Criticism

Using the problem solving and the persuasion approaches to delivering criticism allows you to provide constructive criticism to your team members. These approaches use all of the skills discussed in the previous installments and the help you demonstrate and earn respect from your team members.

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