

CSP E-Lesson 13, Fall 2008

Words of Wisdom: "I used to get defensive when people tried to give me helpful advice. Learning how to give and take constructive criticism has helped me get along better with my co-workers and my friends."

Troy Cleaver, 24, Physician's Assistant, Tulsa, OK



"Don't Take This the Wrong Way."

Rene watches the line of customers grow as she fumbles with the espresso machine. She has been working at The Espresso Bean for over a month, and she still can't fit the portable filter that contains the ground espresso beans into the machine quickly.

Suddenly, Carmine, a new employee, swoops in, grabs the filter from her hands and begins to rapidly pump out the orders for espresso that are piling up.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Carmine grins at her. "I just want to help you catch up with these orders. When business slows down, I'll show you a trick to working with this machine."

Rene sees her manager give Carmine the thumbs up sign. Her face flushes, and she feels like Carmine has just made her look bad in front of the manager. She turns from the espresso machine without saying a word to Carmine and begins to fill the display case with pastries.

How would you react to Carmine's unsolicited help and his offer to give Rene a tip that will help her master the espresso machine? Check the best description of your personal reaction.

1. ____ I'm being judged. They think I'm incompetent.
2. ____ I hope Carmine's not trying to make himself look good at my expense.
3. ____ I can't wait to learn how to get a handle on this machine!
4. ____ I'll look stupid if a new employee has to show me what to do.

“I Can't Hear You”

Sometimes when we are offered advice or criticism, we tune it out immediately. Although we may not show it on the outside, inside we act like children with our fingers in our ears chanting, “I can't hear you. I can't hear you.”

It's not unusual to react defensively when someone offers their unsolicited opinion. If they point out that we are doing a job incorrectly or could do it better in a different way, our ego and our self-esteem can suffer. Even when advice or help is offered in a friendly way, we still often react defensively.

A defensive reaction, like putting your fingers in your ears, keeps you from listening to what is being said. Not only do you lose the opportunity to benefit from the other person's advice, but your defensiveness can lead to conflict or damaged relationships.

Here are some ways to judge whether you are being defensive when someone offers advice or help. You know you're acting defensively if you:

- feel a surge of anger or embarrassment
- strike back verbally at the person who offered advice or criticism
- try to prove the other person wrong immediately
- tune out the entire situation with a “whatever” attitude

How can you overcome your defensive reactions? Try these four steps. They can help you control your first emotional reaction so that you listen completely to messages that threaten your self-esteem.

1. Forget about “Me” — Put your ego aside. Criticism or advice is not a judgment of your worth as a human being. *The information you hear may or may not be valuable to you, but you won't know if you don't listen.*
2. Focus on the information — Pay full attention to what the person is saying. *Concentrate on the information given in the advice.*

"I Can't Hear You" (Continued)

3. Cool off, and don't jump to conclusions — Give yourself time to calmly decide whether the other person is right or wrong. *Don't jump to conclusions about the other person's motives and attitude toward you.*
4. Learn how to do active listening —Active listening is more than just hearing. *Make sure you understand what is really being said.*

Active Listening

Active listening isn't as easy as it sounds. It means you (1) focus on the other person instead of yourself, (2) understand clearly what the person is saying, (3) interpret what the person means and (4) evaluate the importance of the person's message. A good active listener can gain the speaker's respect and cooperation, reduce stress and tension, and open the door for sharing ideas and information.

Practice your active listening by learning the following techniques and completing the exercises.

Technique No. 1 Pay attention

Here are two ways to practice paying attention. List two more examples that will help you focus closely on the other person.

1. Look directly at the person who is speaking.
2. Nod or use short phrases such as "Mn, hmm," "Uh-huh," or "I see" to encourage the speaker and let the person know you are paying attention.

3. _____

4. _____

"I Can't Hear You" (Continued)

Technique No. 2 Interpret and Paraphrase

Repeat *in your own words* what the other person has said to make sure you understand both the person's ideas and feelings. You don't have to agree with the speaker, but you want to avoid misunderstandings. By repeating in a different way what was said, you give the speaker a chance to clarify what he or she meant. Sharon, below, avoids a conflict with her boss by restating what she *thought* she heard.

Sharon's boss calls her into his office and says, "Sharon, I received a complaint from an important client. A letter refusing to make good on a damaged product was sent to him from your desk without authorization. I had to make a lot of promises to keep the client happy. We can't have this happen again."

Sharon paraphrased her boss's words and interpreted his feelings by saying "It sounds like you want me to always check with you before I send letters to clients. Is that right?"

How would you interpret and paraphrase the advice or criticism in the following situation?

Alex Hamilton, owner of Scientific Solutions Inc., steps into his employee's office and takes a seat. "Mitch, I've come from a meeting with your team leader, and it seems the team project is not going as smoothly as expected. We try to match team members who are cooperative and share information freely. Some of the younger, less-experienced team members say they feel intimidated around you. We know that you have superior skills and experience. That's why we put you on the team. But we need you to be able to mentor newer and younger employees."

If you were Mitch, how would you interpret and paraphrase the boss's criticism?

"I Can't Hear You" (Continued)

Technique No. 3 Ask questions

If you don't clearly understand what a speaker is saying, or if you need more information, ask additional questions until the message is clear. This is called "probing" and it allows you to clarify the speaker's real meaning. Make sure your questions are non-threatening and that you are not being emotional or judgmental. Look at the following example:

Michael says to his boss, "You never give me enough time to finish a job." The boss responds, "Are you saying that the jobs are too big to finish in the time allowed, or are you saying that being on a deadline makes you feel pressured?"

Respond to the following advice or criticisms by writing probing or clarifying questions.

- A. Tom writes a popular sports blog. He receives e-mails from both fans and critics. Recently a critic wrote, "Your blog is getting boring. Don't you have anything new to say?"

Tom's Response: _____

- B. As a graphic artist, Xavier's job is to turn a client's mental picture into a real picture. Recently the owner of a garden center complained, "I told you I want a drawing of a cornflower on our logo, but this one isn't right at all. I don't think it's even a cornflower."

Xavier's response: _____

- C. On Toni's first day of work at a hair styling salon, her new boss squealed "Toni-i-i-i, I told you to look hip, but that outfit and makeup is over the top! It's just so-o not our style."

Toni's response: _____

- D. Climbing out of the car after a driving lesson together, Jerri's father says, "You may pass your driving test, but you're not driving without an adult present until you learn to drive defensively."

Jerri's response: _____

Ouch! That Stings!

Criticism can help us improve ourselves, but it almost always hurts. Whether you are giving or receiving criticism, it's important to be able to distinguish between "constructive" and "destructive" criticism.

Friends, family, co-workers and bosses all give constructive criticism when they feel we need advice. Constructive criticism includes suggestions that help us improve our behavior or perform a task better or more efficiently. Without constructive criticism, we might make the same mistakes over and over, and we might lose friends and jobs because we're blind to our own shortcomings. A key component of constructive criticism, however, is your willingness to accept it without becoming defensive.

The opposite of constructive criticism is destructive criticism, which is intended to put people down and make them feel inferior. Destructive criticism can be caused by envy or cruelty and, usually, is done to make the critic feel superior or powerful.

Criticism can contain both constructive and destructive elements. For example, when a competitive co-worker criticizes a mistake you made, the criticism may be true, and even helpful or necessary, but it can also be mean-spirited.

Write a C beside the words or phrases that describe constructive criticism and a D beside the words that describe destructive criticism

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| 1. ____ Makes a judgment about an action | 11. ____ Shows sarcasm |
| 2. ____ Focuses on a solution | 12. ____ Blames |
| 3. ____ Is meant sincerely | 13. ____ Offered as a suggestion |
| 4. ____ Uses name calling | 14. ____ Offered as a demand |
| 5. ____ Focuses on issues that can be changed | 15. ____ Ridicules |
| 6. ____ Focuses on issues that can't be changed | 16. ____ Doesn't allow a response |
| 7. ____ Includes sneering-type behavior | 17. ____ Invites open discussion |
| 8. ____ Is delivered respectfully | 18. ____ Contains a put down |
| 9. ____ Offers encouragement | 19. ____ Delivered in private |
| 10. ____ Contains an embarrassing personal remark | 20. ____ Delivered publicly |

This Won't Hurt a Bit

Nobody welcomes criticism, but, by controlling your emotional reactions and being an active listener, you can benefit from it. When criticizing others, you can offer your criticism in a way that allows them to benefit without becoming defensive.

At times, for example, you may want to offer advice to a friend, help a co-worker, or give guidance to your children. You might become a supervisor, and giving constructive criticism will be a responsibility of your job.

To help people hear your constructive criticism without becoming defensive, you need to frame your advice in a way that allows them to maintain their self-esteem. It's important to support others' opinions of themselves as decent human beings and valuable employees.

Here are some tips that will help you deliver your advice or criticism in a constructive way.

Don't be judgmental. Constructive advice doesn't judge the other person. Using words like "you're wrong," or "you're stupid" will make people feel like they are being attacked.

Focus on the issue, not the person. If someone is always late, focus on the problem caused by the tardiness, not on the late-arriver's personality. Saying, "I held up dinner until you arrived, but I'm afraid the potatoes won't taste good reheated," is more constructive than, "You're always so inconsiderate. You've spoiled the dinner."

Use a praise sandwich A praise sandwich balances the positive with the negative. Think of it as two pieces of praise wrapped around a criticism. "Mary, you have the best backstroke I've seen in a long time. When you master your turns, you'll really be outstanding. You're bound to be a top competitor at this year's swim meets."

Make it a mutual problem. Let people know that they don't have to solve a problem alone. For example, "Let's go over this together to make sure we understand each other."

Focus on the present. Deal with today's problem, but don't drag up the past. Don't say, "It's just like you to make this mistake. Last year, you had the same problem."

This Won't Hurt a Bit (Continued)

Avoid the words "but", "never," and "always". These words invite defensiveness. For example, "I know you're trying but..."; "You never follow instructions..." and "You always take the easy way out..."

Invite discussion. Let people know that you realize they may have a different opinion. "How do you feel about your performance on this project?" or "What do you think needs to be done to correct this situation?"

Use what you've learned to change the following negative destructive criticisms into constructive criticisms.

1. "You're so polite to the customers. Why are you always so rude to the rest of us?"

2. "Whatever made you think this plan would work?"

3. "You've made a disorganized mess of things as usual. How am I supposed to understand what's going on?"

4. "The boss will laugh at your idea. You'll have to do better than that."

5. "That's all wrong. You never listen."

6. "You're supposed to be smart. Is this problem too hard for you to understand?"

Me, Myself and I

Another method that will help you deliver constructive criticisms gently is the use of "I" messages. An "I" message puts the emphasis on the speaker. "I" messages don't accuse or blame the other person. They are created by using first-person words such as "I", "Me," or "Myself."

The opposite of an "I" message is a "You" message. This type of message places the responsibility on other people and often makes them feel defensive.

"I" message: "I don't understand how this slipped through the cracks. I'm frustrated because I thought we both recognized the problem."

"You" message: "You dropped the ball on this one. Didn't you understand the problem?"

Create "I" messages in the following situations:

1. One of your co-workers keeps taking office supplies like staplers and pens off your desk without returning them.

2. You recommended a friend for a job where you work and he arrives late, leaves early, and plays computer games on work time.

3. One of your friends is starting to hang out with a crowd that drinks a lot, and she asks you to join in.

Watch and Learn

Frank is a food server at a neighborhood restaurant. He's popular with the regular customers, and many ask to be seated at a table he serves. One week, while Frank is on vacation, his friend Walt serves Frank's customers. Walt is horrified to find that many of these customers are terrible complainers. They criticize Walt's service and the food. He can't bring himself to be pleasant and has to bite his tongue to keep from snapping at them. He goes home deflated and miserable every night.

When Frank returns from vacation, Walt notices that the same critical customers treat Frank like gold and leave him much bigger tips than they left Walt while Frank was gone. Walt wants to find out Frank's secret for dealing with such critical customers.

When the two friends sit down for a cup of coffee after work, Walt tells Frank about his week. Frank listens and asks, "Walt, would you like some constructive criticism? Don't take things personally. The job is not about us; it's about the customers."

Frank continues, "Critical customers come with the job. We just need to try to please them, no matter what they say or how they say it. I listen to them and let them know that I'm happy to see them. Then I show that I care if their soup isn't hot enough or if they're allergic to some food. That's all they want, and that's why the tips are good! I leave my ego at home, treat the critics with respect, and make a good living."

Walt takes Frank's advice and begins to make more money while he builds a loyal clientele. Why was Walt able to learn from Frank? Why was he not defensive? Here are some reasons why Walt listened to Frank and "heard" the full message.

- Walt liked Frank and believed his advice was sincere.
- Walt respected Frank's abilities on the job.
- Walt recognized that Frank knew how to earn better tips.
- Frank used "I" messages.
- Frank stressed the positive rather than the negative.

Watch and Learn (Continued)

Think about a time when you received and benefited from constructive criticism. Who gave you the criticism or advice and why did you listen?

List three characteristics of the advice-giver that allowed you to listen without getting defensive.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Recall a time when you received unsolicited advice, became defensive, and rejected the criticism without evaluating it carefully. Describe why you reacted that way.

Look back on a time when you gave someone advice or constructive criticism. How did the person react?

List two things you believe you did well when you gave the advice or constructive criticism.

1. _____
2. _____

List two things you would do differently if you were giving the same advice or constructive criticism again.

1. _____
2. _____

Make It Real

Now that you've learned about receiving and giving criticism, how would you feel about or respond to each of the following situations. Do you need to adjust your actions in any way?

1. When a classmate criticizes me in public, this is how I react: _____

If I followed the guidelines for giving and receiving criticism, this is how I would react: _____

2. When I make a mistake during an athletic game and the coach calls me out about it, this is how I react: _____

If I followed the guidelines for giving and receiving criticism, this is how I would react: _____

3. When I get a bad grade on a paper and the teacher writes a note about how I did, this is how I react: _____

If I followed the guidelines for giving and receiving criticism, this is how I would react: _____

4. When my parents bring up one of my behaviors or actions they don't like, this is how I react: _____

If I followed the guidelines for giving and receiving criticism, this is how I would react: _____

Check the answer below that fits you best and complete the statement at the end.

After reviewing my answers above, I am good _____ or need to improve _____ at receiving criticism.

If I need to improve, here is what I should do: _____
