8 Ways to Make Sure Your Leadership Style Isn’t Offensive



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Giving feedback is an essential part of a leader’s role. It shouldn’t be overlooked, but it can be a complex task, as it’s not always well-received. Sometimes people want to improve, but they can’t handle the constructive feedback required.

Feedback can improve performance, enhance trust and respect, and advance the achievement of mutual goals. Misused, it can be toxic to relationships, teams and culture. Criticism can embody fear, create environments where people feel like they are being attacked and rock people’s confidence and self-

esteem. It can carry an intent of belittlement, embarrassment and harm.

At times, delivering constructive feedback can be difficult: There's a fine line between feedback and criticism. Yet one Harvard Business Review study found that employees preferred constructive feedback (57 percent) to praise or recognition (43 percent).

As a leader, giving and receiving feedback when things are going well is often easier. It can be tricky when an employee grates on you or is under-performing. Feedback requires artistry. Here are eight ways to offer helpful and well-intended feedback.

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Ask permission

Before offering feedback, ask your employee if it's okay for you to do so. Prefacing the interaction with courtesy, respect and transparency sets the right tone, allowing you to deliver your feedback freely. When you lead the conversation with an intent to be kind and compassionate, you set the stage for growth and conversation.

Feedback isn't indicative of anyone's value as a person

When workplace conflict has arisen, or processes go haywire, considerate leaders confront the problem, not the person. Focusing in isolation on the person creates a defensive dynamic, where people perceive a personal attack, often distracting from the real issue.

Feedback must involve suggestions for improvement within the context of the challenge. For instance, if a staff employee

presented an unmotivating presentation that did not engage the team, rather than providing feedback that the production was “boring,” focus on how using a picture and story to highlight the key message within the presentation may be more engaging.

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Approach with tact and humility

HBR research reported that 69 percent of managers were not comfortable giving feedback, and 37 percent would not give critical feedback at all. When delivering unfortunate news to an individual, especially to someone you are frustrated with, imagine speaking to someone you respect. When you are conscious of how another person may feel upon hearing feedback, you will approach him or her with honesty, kindness and respect. If you overhear one of your employees delivering some terrible advice, you don’t come out and say, “Your advice was crap.” You guide them in the right direction.

Place your employee in the driver’s seat

When you want to turn the tables, give your employee a chance to stand in your shoes. For example, if a team leader is giving feedback to a staff member about a complaint from a customer, ask your employees how they would suggest a situation be managed if they were leading the group. Opening a discussion and exploring how all parties might react creates fruitful dialogue without throwing anyone under the bus.

Avoid the feedback-sandwich approach

Can you remember a time when you received praise at the start and end of the conversation and, in between, a barrage of

criticism? The feedback sandwich is a lousy technique that reeks of insincerity and sets a precedent for people to brace for criticism every time you praise them, diluting the real message in the middle of a conversation.

Leaders must separate feedback into different conversations – deliver all the praise in one exchange and in another, focus on corrective feedback and how improvements can be made. Ongoing, casual check-ins and consistent one-on-one meetings combat the tendency to sugarcoat, provide platforms for frequent feedback and prevent future awkward disagreements.

Assist your team in creating a definition of feedback interactions

As a team, breaking down the critical elements of a constructive-feedback interaction could establish a safe and inviting environment and build trust. Leaders can explore helpful questions: What are examples of behaviors you would like to see when giving feedback? Can you share some of the ways you can bring solutions to feedback conversations? What has not worked in the past when giving and receiving feedback? What would the ideal feedback interactions look, hear and feel like for both parties?

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Every piece of feedback offers an opportunity to improve

Leaders create pathways and build cultures for learning to reinvent, renew and pivot consistently. Officevibe's research reveals that when managers nurture a culture of feedback, there is a higher chance of cultivating an environment where people feel that they can express their views and innovate.

How you deliver and receive feedback determines whether your employees will follow suit. As a leader, demonstrating composure, patience and executive presence sets the tone of the culture, reflects your character and creates the expectation that feedback can be shared without fear of retribution. When feedback is viewed as neither good nor bad, it serves as a bridge, allowing employees to get where they'd like to go.

Create a culture of action

Insights are one thing, but most successful people take the next step and translate feedback into actions and tangible change. In a leadership role, be specific to enable your employees to build upon what they are doing right and measure progress. When your feedback is non-specific or focuses on ultimatums rather than coachable behaviours, frustration builds and toxic behaviors infect the team and culture.

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