

Criticism is useful, if it's handled the right way. Learn how to put a positive spin on negative feedback

Winston Churchill once observed that criticism was similar to pain in the body; without it, you wouldn't be aware something was wrong. But he also noted it's not a pleasant experience, and anyone who has ever felt the tears pricking over a reprimand from the boss would no doubt agree. Learning to handle criticism at work – genuine feedback that is, not abuse – is an important skill. For managers, knowing how to give criticism is just as crucial. Given the odd slip-up is inevitable, it's wise to prepare your reaction now, before the tears take over. We asked Frances and Max Harré of career consultancy website [www.findmyforte.co.nz](http://www.findmyforte.co.nz) for some tips:

## GIVING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

Managers have a responsibility to set the scene in the workplace, Max Harré says. Teaching by example and coaching people on what is expected, including discussing likely issues before they arise, will smooth the process of giving feedback. "Don't assume you are dealing with a tolerant, aware, considerate group of people – we are all five-year-olds at heart!" Harré says. A good manager will have created an environment where everyone feels valued, he adds. "This includes acknowledging people, and never talking about someone's behaviour behind their back." Assuming this basis of respect in the workplace, he recommends the following when giving negative feedback:

- **Don't generalise.** You should name the offence or error specifically. "This is probably the biggest overall mistake people make in giving and receiving feedback," Harré says.
- **Give the benefit of the doubt.** "Assume people are doing the best they can. If it's obvious they are not, ask if there is something else going on that is affecting their work."



“A good manager will have created an environment where everyone feels valued”

- **Commend, Recommend, Commend.** This means opening with a positive statement about what the person has done well, making a suggestion about what needs to be done differently, and finishing with another positive statement.
- **Show respect.** Listen to your employee and acknowledge what they're saying. Also, never give negative feedback in public.
- **Be compassionate.** "We all make mistakes, lack awareness or misunderstand from time to time," Harré says.

## RECEIVING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

Frances Harré believes you can choose your attitude and your response to feedback. "Some people say 'I'm so sensitive', but you don't have to be over-sensitive; you can decide to take a broader view of what is said about your work. That often helps shift that immediate hurt or defensiveness." Harré says getting this perspective can be hard for people who are too wrapped up in their job, so it's important to have more going on in your life than just work, and a vision for your career that goes beyond your current role. "This lifts people out of so many things that otherwise become major. I can't stress that enough; we all need a bigger picture." If you are about to be critiqued, her advice is:

- **Understand** what specific behaviour is being criticised.
- **Don't react immediately.** "This is so important – you need to buy some time," Harré advises. "Try saying 'thanks for the feedback; I'll think it over and get back to you,' which gives you a chance to cool off if you are upset, and to prepare a response."
- **Get support** from another colleague and do an objective assessment: What can I change? What can't I change? Then brainstorm for simple solutions so you won't repeat the mistake.
- **Treat it as a learning situation.** "All feedback – positive, negative and neutral – is a chance for professional development," Harré says.
- **Don't be too hard on yourself.** Everybody makes mistakes from time to time.
- **Have a ready apology.** If you have been justifiably criticised and you know it, acknowledge that you slipped up and apologise immediately. □