

Criticize by Creating

"Criticize by creating" is a quote attributed to Michelangelo. What a thought for organizations needing to see changes in the performance of their team members!

Performance evaluations are always a challenging issue - in terms of time, resources, skill. Human resources departments around the world provide a variety of methodologies for those involved in performance conversations to help them do a better job. Yet, the actual conversations continue to be a challenge.

And it's the 'difficult conversations' that are the hardest (I know that's not a particularly profound statement, but the fact that it's a 'given' does not mean it should be ignored). Having been involved in facilitating training sessions for supervisors and managers to enhance their skills in giving feedback, I'm always looking for ways to help others have an easier time conducting these 'difficult conversations'.

I remember growing up that in school, teachers talked about and provided 'constructive criticism' to 'help' students improve. Even as a child that seemed like a contradiction in terms to me. Being on the receiving end of 'constructive criticism' always left me feeling much more 'criticized' in a negative way than being helped in a positive way. Yet, that was the accepted term, even when I entered the business world years later.

During my professional career, I remember when we began to use 'developmental feedback' as a term to replace 'constructive criticism'. It sounded more positive, but the reality was in the delivery, and folks still came away feeling much more negative and the conversations were often more adversarial than developmental. And it didn't matter how the workshops were designed to assist folks in feeling more positive, thereby presenting a more positive message during the conversation - most of the feedback was still perceived as negative and critical.

In my experience most folks don't plan to go to work to see how many things they can do wrong, how bad a day they can have, or how unhappy they can be or make others feel. Most folks want to contribute positively to the ongoing efforts of the organization and feel good about themselves, their co-workers, and what they are doing in the process. Yet, mistakes will continue to be made (and hopefully learned from) and 'difficult conversations' will continue to be necessary, especially at performance review time.

I don't know if you played 'what if' games as you were growing up or not, but 'what if' you used that experience to reframe the 'difficult conversation' concept? 'What if' instead of 'constructive criticism' or 'developmental feedback' you used the opportunity to say something like, "Instead of criticizing _____ today, how can we (together) create something better than what is currently happening?" 'What if' you didn't even wait for a 'difficult conversation' time and had that kind of conversation every time you felt the need to 'criticize'?

Often it's all in how you frame a suggestion or a question that determines how the message will be received. What we know from both experience and research is that most folks welcome the chance to 'create' something different (although sometimes you may want to use the word 'build' instead of 'create' - amazing to me how folks shy away from that word because it's not something they 'know how' to do). Often in the act of 'creating', their paradigm shifts from 'do it the right way instead of the wrong way' (an obviously adversarial approach) to 'creating a different way' (encouraging buy-in and commitment).

Share an experience illustrating how that can be done. Pretty much everyone who has stayed in business over the years has taken a risk now and then - whether changing a process, a procedure, questioning values, rethinking the vision, restructuring the team, hiring the right people even if the appropriate job wasn't available, and the list goes on and on. Every time those kinds of risks are taken, there is an opening for someone else to criticize. But by doing your homework, taking an

educated/calculated risk, you are creating something different. One has only to read the stories behind Apple, Starbucks, and even Wal-Mart to understand how creating something different can result in an amazing journey for the organization.

Have you created something new in your organization, your team, your family, your life? Was there a risk you'd be criticized? 'What if' we all started to create instead of criticizing? Creativity seemed to work pretty well for Michelangelo. What about for you and your team?

Aloha,