Interpersonal

Lesson

For Every Action There Is An Equal Reaction: Giving and Receiving Negative Criticism
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Overview

Purpose

To teach students the importance of accepting negative criticism from customers, peers, and employers, and use such criticism as motivation for positive actions.

National Career Development Standards

Standard 1: Understanding the influence of a positive self-concept.

Standard 2: Skills to interact positively with others.

National Career Development Benchmarks

Students will be able to.

Benchmark 1.b: Demonstrate the ability to use peer feedback.
Benchmark 1.d: Demonstrate an understanding of environmental influences on one’s behaviors.
Benchmark 2.b: Demonstrate interpersonal skills required for working with and for others.
Benchmark 2.c: Describe appropriate employer and employee interactions in various situations.
Benchmark 2.d: Demonstrate how to express feelings, reactions, and ideas in an appropriate manner.

Think and Discuss

1. List the ways we should handle negative criticism when we are at work or at school.

2. Why is negative criticism a reality at work and at school?
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Teacher Preparation

Class Materials

Copy the following exercises for distribution to students

- Exercise 1: Negative Criticism Pre-Quiz p. 7
- Exercise 4: DOs and DON'Ts of Giving and Receiving Negative Criticism pp. 12-13
- Exercise 7: The Gauntlet Negative Comment Sheet p. 23

Overhead templates for teacher use

- Exercise 1: Negative Criticism Pre-Quiz p. 7
- Exercise 2: Quote and Anecdote of the Day p. 9
- Exercise 4: DOs and DON'Ts of Giving and Receiving Negative Criticism pp.12-13
- Exercise 6: Negative Criticism Role-Play p.18
- Exercise 7: The Gauntlet Negative Comment Sheet p 23

Key Words

1. Criticism
2. Constructive Criticism
3. Feedback
4. Sensitivity
5. Productivity
Exercise 1: Pre-Quiz Directions & Answer Key

Teacher Directions

This exercise should take 5 minutes with some discussion after each question. A teacher copy is provided with the answers.

Step 1: Have students take the 5-question “Giving and Receiving Negative Criticism” quiz to check for understanding.

Step 2: Review the questions with students to correct misconceptions they may have with accepting negative criticism.

Step 3: Transition to the quote and anecdote of the day.

Answer Key

1. E
2. False
3. F
4. E
5. True
Exercise 1: Giving and Accepting Negative Criticism

Pre-Quiz

1. The best way to give someone negative feedback is to:
   a. Write it in a note and leave it on his/her desk
   b. Blurt it out in front of as many witnesses as you can find
   c. Call him or her on the telephone so he/she can't hurt you
   d. Be as mean and as tough as you can because he/she will become defensive
   e. None of the above

2. When someone gives you negative feedback, the best thing to do is “fight back” and give him/her some negative feedback to his/her face
   True
   False

3. Which are appropriate negative feedback phrases?
   a. “When you are late for work everyday, it hurts our group’s productivity.”
   b. “You can’t do anything right!”
   c. “When Sally hears you talk like that she gets offended. I suggest you stop.”
   d. “You are a horrible writer.”
   e. All of the above
   f. Only A and C

4. While accepting Constructive Criticism from someone, you should NEVER:
   a. Cry
   b. Get mad and lose your temper
   c. Defend yourself before the person has finished talking
   d. Punch the speaker in the mouth
   e. All of the above

5. Giving someone negative feedback is a very difficult task which takes a lot of practice and sensitivity.
   True
   False
Exercise 2: Quote and Anecdote of the Day

Teacher Directions

Read the quotes aloud. You may want to write the quotes on the board to focus your student’s thoughts on the “Giving and Receiving Negative Criticism” lesson. Process the quote and anecdote with your students to check for understanding. This exercise should take 5 minutes with some discussion.

Step 1: Have selected students read aloud the quote and anecdote. Ask students the following questions:

What in reality does this quote mean when it comes to negative criticism?

Will all of us experience negative criticism as we journey through work and life?

How should we give negative criticism when we are in a position of leadership in the workplace? (Should we be dictatorial and hurtful or should we be constructive?)

Step 2: Proceed to Exercise 3: Video Vignette: “For Every Action there is an Equal Reaction: Giving and Receiving Negative Criticism.”
Quote

“To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing!”

- Elbert Hubbard

Anecdote

“There was a time when I worked at a hamburger restaurant that my boss wasn’t too happy with my productivity. Instead of taking me aside to talk to me about his displeasure with me, he decided to yell at me in front of the rest of the crew and even in front of some customers. He was upset because I was not working quickly enough to keep up with the customers’ orders of french fries. I was new at this particular job, but he didn’t care. He wanted to see more fries coming out of the grease or else I would be fired. I felt embarrassed. Everyone was looking at us. It was horrible for me. Later, I learned from my co-workers that they didn’t think any less of me, they actually lost respect for our boss. They knew what he did was wrong. He was rude to me; he was loud and obnoxious. And he tried to embarrass me in front of everyone. He called me a few names too. But that actually hurt him more than it did me. Many employees had the same thing happen to them and they quit. Employees stopped working hard for this manager and his sales figures dropped. He was eventually fired. The lesson here is this: If you ever have to give someone negative feedback, be respectful of that person’s feelings! Once you lose the respect of your coworkers, you can never regain it.”

- Career Counselor
Exercise 3: Video Vignette: “For Every Action there is an Equal Reaction: Giving and Receiving Negative Criticism”

Teacher Directions

Play the video titled “For Every Action there is an Equal Reaction: How to Act when Giving and Receiving Negative Criticism.” Discussion should follow after the video vignette. This exercise should take 5 minutes to discuss.

Step 1: Review the video vignette before introducing the video to your class.

Step 2: Show the video and discuss with your class the message provided in the video.

Step 3: Transition to Exercise 4: “DOs and DON’Ts of Negative Criticism.”
Exercise 4: DOs and DON’Ts of Negative Criticism

Teacher Directions

*Please review this exercise before introducing the topic to the class. Remember the ABCs of negative feedback: *Always Be Courteous.* The lists below apply to negative feedback and especially to constructive criticism. *This exercise should take 10 minutes to complete.*

**Step 1:** Ask the students in class to draw a line down the center of a piece of notebook paper.

**Step 2:** At the top of the left column, have them write: **DO**; and at the top of the other column, have them write: **DON’T**. Give them 5 minutes to think about the appropriate and inappropriate rules of accepting and saying negative criticism at work. When 5 minutes are up, ask them to read their lists. Discuss similarities or differences in the students’ opinions. Let them know if their lists matched those below.

**Step 3:** Transition to Exercise 5: “Spitting Venom!”
DOs of Giving and Receiving Criticism

- Accept the feedback by listening to what the other person is saying.
- Learn from what you are hearing, no matter how painful it is.
- Change your behaviors that generated the negative feedback.
- Let the speaker finish talking before you try to defend yourself.
- Take the feedback with class and grace.
- Keep your cool, no matter how rude the speaker might be.
- Try to understand why the speaker is upset with your behavior.
- Take the point of view of the person who is upset with you or your behavior.
- Respond by paraphrasing what you heard the speaker say so he/she knows you got the message.
- Sincerely ask the person to give you specific examples of what you need to change.
- Give negative feedback with sensitivity for the other person’s feelings.
- Give negative feedback in person, directly to the person at issue.
- Give negative feedback discretely so the receiver is not embarrassed.
- Give negative feedback based on facts, not opinion or feelings.
- Make certain your negative feedback is honest and truthful with the intention of helping.
DON’Ts of Giving and Receiving Criticism

DON’T . . .

. . . Use criticism to hurt someone’s feelings.

. . . Give negative feedback because you are in a bad mood and want to hurt someone else.

. . . Give negative feedback to someone in front of a large group.

. . . Leave a note, a voicemail, or an email regarding negative feedback.

. . . Be rude or act like a tough-guy when giving negative feedback.

. . . Argue with the person who is giving you negative feedback.

. . . Argue with the person to whom you are giving negative feedback.

. . . Minimize what the other person is saying to you.

. . . Tune the speaker out.

. . . Think the entire conversation is about you.

. . . Lose your temper.

. . . Swear.

. . . Fight.

. . . Cry.

. . . Yell or scream.

. . . Interrupt the speaker just so you can defend yourself.

. . . Repeat the behavior that prompted the negative feedback.

. . . Miss this as a chance to learn something about yourself and about those around you at work.
Exercise 5: Spitting Venom!

Teacher Directions

*Please review this exercise before introducing the topic in class. This exercise should take 10 minutes to complete.*

**Step 1:** Ask the students to sit in a large circle, either on the floor or by moving their desks/chairs.

**Step 2:** Ask each student to share a time he/she said something negative about or to another person.
- Was it constructive criticism, negative feedback, or spitting venom?
- Do students know the differences between the three?

**Step 3:** Go around the circle and find out. The teacher should define the three as they are presented.

**Step 4:** Demonstrate Constructive Criticism, Negative Criticism, and Spitting Venom. The teacher should get in the middle of the circle with 3 pieces of notebook paper.

**Step 5:** Crumple the three pieces of paper into compact wads or balls of paper.

**Scenario:** Tell the students that you are an employee and that they are your coworkers. *Your boss has just asked you to demonstrate the fine art of juggling for the rest of the company. The boss says that if the rest of the company cannot learn how to juggle from you, then they won’t get their year-end bonuses.*

**Step 6:** Now the teacher should attempt to juggle. Ideally, the teacher will not know how. Even if the teacher can juggle, it will be difficult with the wads of paper and mistakes will occur. The more mistakes that are made, the better. The teacher is trying to elicit Constructive Criticism, Negative Feedback, and Spitting Venom.

**Step 7:** Now, ask the “employees” and “your coworkers” what they thought of your demonstration on juggling. Ask them to give you feedback by writing it down on a sheet of paper. Give them one minute to do so.
**Step 8:** Go around the circle, one person at a time until everyone has had a chance to read what was written about your job.

**Teacher Note:** How many students used **Constructive Criticism**? Meaning, how many of your students identified what was wrong with your technique and tried to help you with some advice or with an offer of assistance? For example, “I noticed you were trying to juggle there. It seemed like you were having a difficult time. I used to juggle when I was a kid. Can I help you teach the rest of the group?”

How many students used **Negative Criticism**? Meaning, how many of them told you their OPINION of the job or told you they simply didn’t like it. For example, “I think the boss is crazy for choosing you to teach us because you need to practice juggling more than anyone here!”

How many students **Spit Venom**? Since the teacher is generally respected in class, most students won’t be too mean, so the teacher might have to give some examples as to just how mean someone might be. Examples of Spitting Venom are: “You Suck!” “You’re Terrible.” “You looked like an idiot!” Spitting Venom is obviously the worst of the three samples. It does not help; it only hurts.

**Step 9:** Now, compare and contrast how everyone should first think about Constructive Criticism when put into a situation where someone has performed poorly or badly and he/she needs to be told about it.

**Step 10:** Transition to Exercise 6: “It is Better to Give than to Receive.”
Exercise 6: It is Better to Give than to Receive

Teacher Directions

This role-play is for all the students in the room. It is intended to teach students how to give and receive negative feedback. This exercise will help students identify common blunders, severe errors, and personal mistakes that should be recognized when one is confronted with Negative Feedback. It will also help them compare and contrast what will not work with what will be acceptable. Have the students write responses to the questions associated with each role-play. Please review this exercise before introducing the topic to your students. This activity should take 15 minutes to complete.

**GIVING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK:**

**Note:** The first rule in giving negative feedback or constructive criticism is to always be objective and never blame. Always make your feedback factual and tactful. Here is how: Always use a “**WHEN, THINK, FEEL**” statement.

**Step 1:** Ask two students to volunteer to role-play. One student is the boss and the other is a new employee. Let’s say the boss is mad because the new employee takes 2-hour lunches when a 45-minute lunch is the company policy.

**Step 2:** Ask the boss to read this line: “Mr. Jackson, you took another 2-hour lunch! That’s the 4th time this week!! Do you think you’re special? Maybe I should take the extra time out of your next paycheck!! What are you . . . stupid?”

**Step 3:** Ask the boss how he/she felt when delivering this message. Powerful? Mean? Rude? Does taking a tough-guy stance help this awkward situation or ignite a potentially harmful situation?

**Step 4:** Ask the student who is playing the new employee to describe how he/she would feel or did feel as the boss gave this negative feedback. Was it disrespectful? Maybe it was hurtful because the boss called the employee stupid? Maybe it was embarrassing. Maybe it made the new employee mad. Maybe the new employee didn’t know he/she was doing anything wrong. Did the boss’s method of delivering the bad news help or hurt the situation? How?
Step 5: Now ask the boss to read this line: “Mr. Jackson, I want to talk to you. Come into my office, close the door, sit down. Mr. Jackson, when you take 2-hour lunches, it makes me think that you have no respect for our company rules, and it makes me and your coworkers feel angry and disrespected.”

Teacher Note: This is the classic WHEN, THINK, FEEL statement. It focuses on the facts by identifying the problem situation with the WHEN element. It focuses on the repercussions of the negative behavior by indicating what it makes others think of the misbehaving person. Finally, it lets the misbehaver know how it effects the feelings of others. Most rational-thinking adults will respond favorably when they know they have been adversely impacting someone else’s feelings. The best thing about the WHEN, THINK, FEEL statement is that it does not judge, blame, accuse, confront or belittle the person who is receiving the negative feedback. And that leaves room for both sides to solve the problem instead of fighting about it!

Step 6: Have the students respond in writing to the following questions:

1. How did the new employee feel when he/she heard this version of the boss’s story?

2. How did the boss feel when delivering this negative feedback?

3. Compare this method of feedback to the “rude” version. What are the differences for the boss and the new employee?

4. Which method is better? Why?

Step 7: (Provide 3 copies of the next page.)

Ask two new students to volunteer. This time the focus will be on the person who is receiving the negative feedback.

Give each student a copy of the script (the third is for you). Ask the “BOSS” and the new employee, “MS. JACKSON,” to take turns reading their lines:
RECEIVING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK:

**BOSS:** “Ms. Jackson, I need to talk to you …”

**MS. J:** “I know what you are going to say. I didn’t do it! It’s not my fault. I’m new.”

**BOSS:** “You don’t have any excuses this time, I…”

**MS. J:** “I was only doing what Shelly told me to do. I work hard. I work long hours too.”

**BOSS:** “This is the third time I am having to bring this to your…”

**MS. J:** “You are not being fair, this is such unfair treatment. Joe was right, you are horrible!”

**BOSS:** “I’ve had enough of your emotional outbursts and your constant interruptions. Every time I try…”

**MS. J:** “I don’t interrupt, you seem to have it out for me. You just want to see me fail. I hate it here!! I QUIT!!”

(Ms. Jackson storms out and the boss looks puzzled.)
Step 8: Have students write down responses to the following questions.

1. Did Ms. Jackson receive her Negative Feedback well or poorly?

2. Look at the DOs and the DON'Ts exercise from the beginning of this lesson. Which rules did she break?

3. Did her attitude help or hurt this already awkward situation?

4. What could Ms. Jackson have done to help this situation? Stop interrupting? Be less defensive? Hold her emotions? Listen more?

5. What could she have said to help validate her boss’s concerns and let him know that she was listening and willing to work on changing her behavior?

Step 9: Role-play a more ideal situation. Ask the boss to use a WHEN, THINK, FEEL statement and ask the employee to listen first, and respond respectfully second.

Step 10: Transition to Exercise 7: “The Negative Feedback Gauntlet.”
Exercise 7: The Negative Feedback Gauntlet

Teacher Directions

Note: The point of the first part of this exercise is to help the students actually HEAR bad news as a seeming barrage of insults. In the real world, when someone or a few co-workers are upset with us, it really does seem like we are walking through a gauntlet. Please review this exercise before introducing the topic to the class. This exercise should take 15 minutes to complete.

Step 1: Divide the class in half and have the students line up in two lines, single file; half of the class in one line and the other half in another line. They should stand side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder, in straight lines. These two lines of students should face each other, standing 5 feet apart. There should be enough room between the two lines so a person could walk in between.

Step 2: Write negative comments on small pieces of paper and ask the students in the lines to reach into a hat to take one (See the Gauntlet Negative Comment Sheet below). Each student in the “Gauntlet” (lines) should have one of these negative comments. Ask students in each line to memorize or read the comment out loud at the appropriate time.

Step 3: Try to give each student one Constructive Criticism note to read. If this list does not provide enough, feel free to make a few examples so all students have one.

Step 4: Choose one student from the end of one of the lines. He or she must walk through the Constructive Criticism Gauntlet. With each step, as he/she walks between the 2 lines of students, he/she must listen to each person’s piece of constructive criticism. The student who walks through the Gauntlet should not respond at all. He/she should simply listen.

Step 5: After the first student has walked through, ask him/her to repeat as many of the Constructive Criticisms as possible.

How many Constructive Criticisms did he/she recall?

On the first walk through, perhaps only one or two comments from the end of the line will be remembered. Ask the student:
What it was like to simply walk through the Gauntlet and not defend himself/herself. Was it embarrassing? Frustrating?

Step 6: Now ask the students in the 2 lines how they felt simply stating a problem or criticism.

Did they feel the listener received their message?

Did they feel validated in the sense that the listener will change his/her behavior?

Note: It is expected that the listener will be extremely frustrated mainly because neither the speakers nor the listener was able to engage in dialogue.

Step 7: Now ask another student from the line to walk the Gauntlet. This time, he/she can answer in a way that seems appropriate to the Criticism statements. This person should walk the Gauntlet slower than the first to ensure that each speaker has a chance to interact with the Walker.

For example, when the Walker approaches the student with the statement “You really need to shape up around here,” the Walker might respond, “What do you mean?” The students should try to respond based on what he/she has learned about receiving Constructive Criticism thus far.

Step 8: Finally, the teacher should be a scribe for this part. The teacher should write down all of the initial reactions of the Walker as he/she listens to the Constructive Criticisms. At the end of the Gauntlet, ask the student how it felt to try to defend against such Criticisms. It most likely was difficult. Then, the teacher should share with the class each and every response to all of the Criticisms. Discuss the responses with the class.

Was it a positive response?
Was it defensive?
Was it calm or angry?
Would it lead to a rational discussion or blow up into an argument? Etc.

Step 9: Finally, ask the students to be seated. Ask them to take 5 minutes to change their Constructive Criticisms into a WHEN, THINK, FEEL statement.

Example: Students might have to be a little creative with theirs because there might not be many details, but they can make them up. For example, “You need to shape up around here” might become “When people around here tell me you need to shape up around here, it makes me think that you don’t like your job and I feel like I should be doing something to help you.”
Step 10: Now ask the students to read the new WHEN, THINK, FEEL statements. Discuss how using this format of language will take away the feeling of the Gauntlet. Constructive Criticism and Negative Feedback is much easier to deliver in this fashion. It is also much easier to take.

Step 11: Transition to Exercise 8: Wrap-up: “For Every Action There Is An Equal Reaction: Giving and Receiving Negative Criticism.”
The Gauntlet Negative Comment Sheet

“Maybe you should iron your shirts before you come to work.”

“You might want to look into brushing your teeth after lunch.”

“Wearing a striped shirt with a polka-dot tie is not a good fashion statement.”

“Can I help you type your next report?”

“It would do you some good if you went to college to re-learn algebra.”

“I know of a great speech therapist.”

“Try counting to 10 before you speak when you feel like you are getting angry.”

“You should think about what you are going to say before you say it.”

“Not everyone in this group thinks you are as great as you might think.”

“Realizing who your enemies are will help you win support on this project.”

“You would benefit from eating lunch with the department instead of eating at your desk.”

“Do you think that hair color is professional looking?”

“When you park your car in the spot that is reserved for the employee of the month, it is very disrespectful.”

“Coming in late to work everyday makes other people who are punctual jealous and angry.”

“I heard the boss say that he noticed you were taking too many smoking breaks.”

“Do you think your jokes about Phil are really that funny?”

“Gossiping as much as you do can get you in a lot of trouble.”

“You could use some public speaking lessons, because your speeches are boring.”

“People here are losing respect for you because of your immature behavior.”

“You really need to shape up around here.”
Exercise 8: Wrap-Up: “For Every Action There Is An Equal Reaction: Giving and Receiving Negative Criticism”

Teacher Directions

This exercise should take 5 minutes.

Step 1: Have students answer and journal their responses to the following questions:

1. List the ways we should handle negative criticism when we are at work or at school.
2. Why is negative criticism a reality at work and at school?

Final Thoughts on Negative Criticism

It is a fact that all of us will experience negative criticism either as someone who receives criticism or as someone who has to constructively criticize others. We can truly use the golden rule as our guiding principle to giving and receiving criticism: Treat others as you want to be treated. If you use anger or strong emotions to deal with negative criticism, emotions will get you no where. If you are in a supervisory position and you treat others with venom or negativity, sooner or later such negativity will come back to bite you. When in doubt, use the ABC rule of thumb “Always Be Courteous” and the When, Think, Feel method to get your point across when giving criticism to others.