Sometimes Negative Feedback is Best

by Heidi Grant Halvorson

If I see one more article or blog post about how you should never be "critical" or "negative" when giving feedback to an employee or colleague (or, for that matter, your children), I think my head will explode. It's incredibly frustrating. This kind of advice is surely well meant, and it certainly *sounds* good. After all, you probably don't relish the thought of having to tell someone else what they are doing wrong — at minimum, it's a little embarrassing for everyone involved.

But avoiding negative feedback is both wrong-headed and dangerous. *Wrong-headed* because, when delivered the right way, at the right time, criticism is in fact highly motivating. Dangerous because without awareness of the mistakes he or she is making, no one can possibly improve. Staying "positive" when doling out feedback will only get you so far.

Hang on, you say. *Can't negative feedback be discouraging? Demotivating?*

That's perfectly true.

And don't people need encouragement to feel confident? Doesn't that help them stay motivated?

In many cases, yes.

Confusing, isn't it? Thankfully, brilliant new research by Stacey Finkelstein (Columbia University) and Ayelet Fishbach (University of Chicago) sheds light on the seemingly paradoxical nature of feedback, by making it clear why, when, and for whom negative feedback is appropriate.

It's important to begin by understanding the function that positive and negative feedback serve. Positive feedback (e.g., *Here's what you did really well*....) increases *commitment* to the work you do, by enhancing both your experience and your confidence. Negative feedback (e.g., *Here's where you went wrong*....), on the other hand, is *informative* — it tells you where you need to spend your effort, and offers insight into how you might improve.

Given these two different functions, positive and negative feedback should be more effective (and more motivating) for different people at different times. For instance, when you don't really know what you are doing, positive feedback helps you to stay optimistic and feel more at ease with the challenges you are facing — something *novices* tend to need. But when you are an *expert*, and you already more or less know what you are doing, it's negative feedback that can help you do what it takes to get to the top of your game.

As Finkelstein and Fishbach show, novices and experts are indeed looking for, and motivated by, different kinds of information. In one of their studies, American students taking either beginner or advanced-level French classes were asked whether they would prefer an instructor who emphasized what they were doing right (focusing on their strengths) or what they were doing wrong (focusing on their mistakes and how to correct them). Beginners overwhelmingly preferred a cheerleading, strength-focused instructor. Advanced students, on the other hand, preferred a more critical instructor who would help them develop their weaker skills.

In a second study, the researchers looked at a very different behavior: engaging in environmentally friendly actions. Their "experts" were members of environmental organizations (e.g., Greenpeace), while their "novices" were non-members. Each participant in the study made a list of the actions they regularly took that helped the environment — things like recycling, avoiding bottled water, and taking shorter showers. They were offered feedback from an environmental consultant on the effectiveness of their actions, and were given a choice: Would you prefer to know more about the actions you take that *are*

effective, or about the actions you take that are *not*? Experts were much more likely to choose the negative feedback — about ineffective actions — than novices.

Taken together, these studies show that people who are experienced in a given domain — people who already have developed some knowledge and skills — don't actually live in fear of negative feedback. If anything, they seek it out. Intuitively they realize that negative feedback offers the key to getting ahead, while positive feedback merely tells them what they already know.

But what about motivation? What kind of feedback makes you want to take action? When participants in the environmental study were *randomly* given either positive or negative feedback about their actions, and were then asked how much of their $25 study compensation they would like to donate to Greenpeace, the type of feedback they received had a dramatic effect on their motivation to give. When negative feedback was given, experts gave more on average to Greenpeace ($8.53) than novices ($1.24). But when positive feedback was given, novices ($8.31) gave far more than experts ($2.92).

Just to be clear, I'm not suggesting that you never tell the rookie about his mistakes, or that you never praise the seasoned professional for her outstanding work. And of course negative feedback should always be accompanied by good advice, and given with tact.

But I *am* suggesting that piling on praise is a more effective motivator for the rookie than the pro. And I'm saying, point blank, that you shouldn't worry so much when it comes to pointing out mistakes to someone experienced. Negative feedback won't crush their confidence, but it just might give them the information they need to take their performance to the next level.

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