

# Positive Feedback

Positive Feedback is a proven technique for giving criticism in a helpful way. Criticism has come to mean something negative. If somebody makes unhelpful and negative remarks about us we often say something like “Stop being so critical”. This is an abuse of language for it is not what we actually mean. Criticism is a process by which a critic delivers a critique. A critique is their considered view of something, particularly something with which they have been presented, such as an idea, a novel, a picture or a play.

If a film critic goes to see a movie, loves everything about it and produces a report which heaps praise upon the director, the actors and the writer without finding anything to complain about or anywhere where they could suggest improvement, they have none-the-less produced a piece of criticism.

Of course we would be entitled to have some doubt about their critical faculties – those skills and understandings which we use to deconstruct, examine the components of what is before us, analyse motivation, check correctness, feel out emotional reaction and so on. We are likely to believe that the producers have crossed their palms with silver or that their lover has a starring role in the production. It pays any critic who wishes to be believed and who desires a reputation for good and honest work to find some way in which the most sublime production might be improved.

Criticism which fails to find any good is also unhelpful. It makes it difficult for the recipients to accept. Surely all their hard work must have produced something of value? If the critic cannot see that then surely they are unperceptive, or worse, prejudiced.

The art of a constructive critic is to tread the middle course, to recognise both the good and that which needs improvement. It is also good practice to move on to suggest ways in which this improvement might be affected and to do so in a way that makes it most likely that the recipient of this advice is able to use it. In order to take advice people generally need to feel that the advice is well intentioned and that they are able to make good use of it. This will require them to feel good about themselves and positive about the achievability of what is proposed and that the improvements that result will be worth the effort.

The positive feedback process in the case of a presentation which you will later be asked to feed back on looks like this:

## **1. First help them to do their best in the first place – listen well**

Do:

- Maintain attention
- Smile
- Maintain eye contact
- Nod when points are made
- Laugh at the jokes

- Take notes

Do not

- Frown (with most of us this is a symptom of maintaining attention but others in a pressure situation usually interpret this as rejection)
- Look at your watch or the clock EVER (this means “it is time for you to go” in any language)
- Use defensive body language like folding arms
- Interrupt
- Look bored
- Snore

## **2. Clarify**

Ask questions. Ask them in a non-contentious and non-inquisitorial way. Try to find an intro like “I was interested in what you had to say about...” or “Perhaps you could tell us more about...” but not “But what about... (takes an opposing view)” or “Surely you cannot mean...”

## **3. Prepare**

Take a little time to make sure you know what you want to say. Remember the AIM is to help the person / team do better next time. The OBJECTIVES therefore are to help them build on strengths and work on the weaknesses.

## **4. Give the Feedback**

Style: positive, friendly (humorous can be good, use your judgement) with humility. Ego is particularly bad here. The surer you are of your experience, wisdom and knowledge in this area the more you should be able to be generous.

Always start with praise. There has to be something to praise; often there will be a lot. The recipient of advice now has had their worst fears (a completely negative review) allayed. Further they are now convinced that the person giving the feedback has good taste and much wisdom.

Then move on to the areas that could be strengthened. It is particularly important here to own the criticism. Phrases such as “I think that...” or “In my opinion...” indicate moral courage and invite the same response in another human who has, of course, the right to reject that opinion if they choose. If the turn of phrase indicates that something is a well-known fact that the other person has missed it is far too damning for people to except. Always couch the criticism in a positive way, e.g. “One area where you might be able to improve...”, “If you were able to introduce examples here...” or “People would probably respond better to...”

Finish by offering a scenario that is pleasing. The improvements are made and as a result the work is complete, improved, fit for use and likely to bring success.