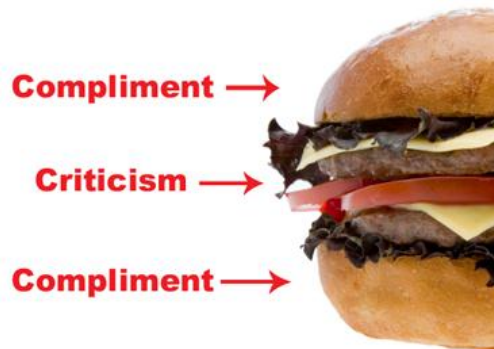


The HAMBURGER METHOD of Constructive Criticism

It's funny what things stick with you in life. Back when I was in college, one of my professors somehow got onto the subject of constructive criticism and decided to teach the class the method he uses for offering "critical" advice to people.

It's called the **HAMBURGER METHOD**, and here's how it works:



When offering a critique, you begin with a constructive compliment (something positive) on something the person does well (Otherwise known as the fluffy bun part). You then get to the meat of the matter, which of course is the constructive or criticism part (or alternative action and or behaviour you would like to see done differently). Finally, you end with another constructive compliment (i.e. the other half of the fluffy bun).

Basically, you're sandwiching the constructive criticism between two constructive compliments. In my experience, it's been an extremely effective technique, largely due to its disarming effective. It helps people let down their guard, and receive the criticism without being as defensive.

Here are a couple of examples:

"Hey Defensive Dave, I noticed you went out of your way to submit your expense report on time every month for the last three months – that's great! I do, however, think it's a bad idea to call Jane in accounting an "ignorant #@%". She may not be familiar with that old 1970's Saturday Night Live Television skit and may be offended by your comment. But overall, your interaction with the team has been great – thanks for making the effort."*

"Good morning Tony, looks like you had everything prepared and set to go for that concrete pour before you left last night, and you had the boys clean up the site before leaving too which was great! One thing I would like you to try and avoid is dumping any leftover concrete and the wash out in an area that we are likely going to use as a lay down area in the future, nor do we want it to be dumped in a highly visible area on this compound. I'm sure you and your team will spot a better place for it later today when you finish. Anyway looks like, as usual, you and the lads have everything sorted. Keep up the brilliant work mate, catch you again later to sign off the paperwork, we might even have time for a coffee then too hey"?!!

Ideally you will also tell them WHY you have singled out the positive and constructive bits of feedback as you deliver each bit. We all like to know the rationale behind the thinking don't we, so tell them step by step what and why it is you like (positive feedback) and what and why you suggest as an alternative when giving your feedback (constructive feedback).

I once suggested the hamburger method to a client who quickly dismissed the technique as "candy coating." Maybe it is, but if it gets a better result, isn't that the whole point?

Medicine manufactures candy coat medicine all the time for two reasons:

1. So people will take it, and
2. Because it tastes like crap if they don't.

If given the choice between cherry or crap flavoured medicine, which would you chose?

Also, I think a 2 to 1 ration of constructive compliments to constructive criticism makes sense because it affirms the desired behaviour or practice.

So here are a few things to consider before offering criticism:

1. **Is the criticism truly constructive?** Here are some synonyms for "constructive": Positive, helpful, productive, useful, beneficial, and practical. Antonym: Destructive.
2. **Why am I offering this criticism in the first place?** Is it because I'm trying to be helpful and actually 'look out for my mate'... or just because I'm a huge pain in the %#@?
3. **Is the criticism necessary and appropriate?** Does it have a big impact on the "greater scheme of things", or am I just being nit-picky. Will focusing on this issue be worth the time and effort in the long run?
4. **Do I have the right, or better yet - have I earned the right to speak into this person's life?** The difference between "management" and "leadership" has a lot to do with the relationship you have with your team. "Managers" tend to focus on control, whereas real leaders take people to the next level.
5. **Finally, by forcing myself to adopt this HAMBURGER METHOD, I have noticed at least two things to compliment them on** before commencing with the constructive criticism (alternative action/behaviour), so I know they will be left feeling good about themselves and I have achieved my objective I had in mind in the first place?

If you've run through the list and are satisfied that the criterion is met, then give the hamburger method a try. I think you'll find it's a great tool for offering truly "constructive" criticism.