

3.5.2: Types of Criticism

Learning Objectives

- Differentiate between different types of criticism in business.

What is the definition of criticism? Webster's defines it as "the act of expressing disapproval and of noting the problems or faults of a person or thing; the act of criticizing someone or something; a remark or comment that expresses disapproval of someone or something." Criticism in the workplace is generally imagined as situations around a manager and a subordinate, but it is not limited to that. Constructive, sometimes negative, thoughts and comments can also be applied to the actions of colleagues, customers, or vendors—basically persons, groups or things that do not meet the expectations of the beholder. We will discuss these topics in more detail in a later section.^[1]

How do you write about issues in the workplace that are negative or need improvement? When putting criticism into writing, the technique will vary based on the situation—who is performing the criticism and who or what is being criticized. Written criticism in the workplace may be approached in a direct versus indirect style, a constructive style, or an active versus passive voice style.

Here are some examples of active voice versus passive voice style:

Active voice: I cannot authorize your entertainment entries on your expense report.

Passive voice: Entertainment entries are no longer covered in our expense policy.

Active voice: Company policy prevents us from offering direct deposit until employees have been on the job for 3 months.

Passive voice: Direct deposit is offered only after employees have been on the job for 3 months.

The goal of constructive criticism is to improve the behavior or the behavioral results of a person while consciously avoiding personal attacks and blaming. This kind of criticism is carefully framed in language acceptable to the target person, often acknowledging that the critics themselves could be wrong. Insulting and hostile language is avoided, and phrases are used such as, "I feel..." and "It's my understanding that..." and so on. Constructive critics try to stand in the shoes of the person being criticized and consider what the situation would look like from their perspective.

Direct versus indirect written criticism style involves the order in which the criticism, the reasons for the criticism, the "buffer" and the close are structured in the message. Using the indirect style is best for reducing resentment and keeping employees open to receiving bad news constructively.

Here is an example of direct-style written criticism:

To: Ned Turner

From: Nancy White

Subject: Your Social Media Use At Work

Dear Ned,

[Criticism] You must cease your social media use during business hours at once.

[Reasons] Company management believes that it is too great a risk to allow employees to use social media while on the job. They worry that you could compromise sensitive company information. At the very least, much time is probably being wasted online when productive work could be done.

[Close] We appreciate your compliance.

Best regards,

Nancy White

VP Marketing

Here is an example of indirect-style written criticism:

To: Ned Turner

From: Nancy White

Subject: Your Social Media Use At Work

Dear Ned,

[Buffer] The company greatly appreciates the insights gained from your activity on social media. The information has been quite helpful in revising our future product plans.

[Reasons] However, management has seen cases from other companies where sensitive information has inadvertently been shared with the public. The interactivity of social media has raised concerns that even well-intentioned use could be risky, and usage by younger employees could be more of a personal rather than professional nature.

[Criticism] For these reasons, we ask that you refrain from using social media while on the job.

[Close] You are a great employee, and we sincerely value you and your hard work for the company.

Best regards,

Nancy White

VP Marketing

? practice questions

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1. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/criticism>

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