

Constructive criticism – Is the sandwich technique really the way to go?

As a manager, giving constructive criticism is an essential driver to reaching maximum potential for the business. Some employees will require it more than others and some will need extra support, every employee is different and getting to know how each one operates is key if you are going to support their personal improvements.

So what is the constructive criticism sandwich? It's a technique that boasts ease and positive outlook whilst giving constructive feedback. (See the infographic for an illustrated recipe) From discussing the subject within the online project management community, it is clear that the sandwich is not as tasty as we might think, and may actually hinder performance. Here is some of the feedback I have picked up on during the discussions.

“If you use this technique regularly (or indeed once), employees will become attuned to it, thus every time you praise someone for a great job, they will be waiting for you to spoil it with criticism.”

This does make humans sound very animalistic and the sandwich technique full of fakery. I feel that if the feedback sandwich is given in equal proportions and the bread is clearly not just-for-the-sake of praising someone, the honesty will shine through. This could be more or less effective with different styles of management and different characteristics in the manager themselves. To be a successful manager, you genuinely need to be a people person and the sandwich technique reflects this need.

“By using the sandwich technique the manager is trying to play ‘Good Cop/Bad Cop’ in one role, which is difficult.”

I think that this statement misses the point about the role of the feedback sandwich during a meeting. I'm a big believer on positivity at work, even when things are not going so well because – we all need motivation, right? My perception of the feedback sandwich is that it encourages positivity, motivation and keeps the atmosphere neutral. There shouldn't have to be any switch in tones.

“When giving feedback it is a written rule that you must separate the behaviour from the person to avoid any accusation. If you do this, then there is probably no need to sandwich the criticism between praise.”

This is certainly a rule of thumb and I agree that with some situations this would be an appropriate approach.

“The sandwich approach is not an honest way of giving feedback.”

I think that if managers are saying things to the employee that are simply not true – then that clearly isn't any good for anyone. If there are no positive attributes that your employee holds that you can comment on, then why are they employed? The sandwich is not about lying for the sake of making a fatter sandwich.

“The negative (or constructive) criticism is going to be diluted if the sandwich method is used, there will be less of an impact and focus to the situation.”

According to the [negativity bias theory](#), humans do process negative and positive information differently and tend to focus more on the negative. Although we don't want to draw attention away from the criticism itself, a situation fuelled with negativity is going to leave the employee deflated and irritable, possibly without much motivation to improve. The sandwich method addresses this by leaving the situation on a positive note. If the manager lists clear action points and follow up dates, this will also give the receiver some direction and goal.

This article has given both sides of the story about the feedback sandwich. So is the sandwich technique really the way to go? I'll leave this article as food for thought and would love to hear your comments.



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