

# The Perils of Criticism

*Positive reinforcement can do more than negative feedback*

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When you consider all the barriers that athletes face in their search for success and then think of all the ways coaches assist athletes in reaching their goals, there is something that just does not fit: That is the major form of giving feedback to athletes.

Negative feedback, commonly and accurately called criticism, far outstrips positive reinforcement as many coaches' major communication style. Add a sarcastic flavor to the criticism and what you have is one of the prime factors destroying athletes' self-confidence. The real tragedy is that no coach intends to be destructive and would surely argue that this is not the case. Let me suggest that you withhold judgment on this matter until I have completed my essay on the perils of criticism.

Allow me to get you personally involved in the discussion by asking you to respond to a series of questions.

- Does being criticized ever leave you angry, resentful, belittled or feeling rejected?
- Do you sense you ever make others feel this way, even unintentionally?
- Do you ever hesitate to offer helpful correction for fear of offending someone?
- Have you ever heard an athlete claim, "The coach is on me"? In your days as an athlete, did you ever say that?
- Right now, can you recall three times in your life when you really appreciated being criticized?

These questions begin to put a different slant on criticism, I hope, because you can see the picture from the receiver's side rather than from the myopic view of the giver of criticism.

Criticism was originally conceived as a neutral, objective appraisal of ideas and actions. To criticize meant that you communicated in a way that enabled others to use the information to their advantage and benefit. Criticism, then, was a tool to enhance personal growth and relationships. Does your experience match this description? Or might it be valuable to consider just how criticism works?

Sid Simon, prominent growth therapist, suggests that people are connected by thin gossamer threads along which communication passes. When a person (the giver) sends along some critical comment such as, "How many times do I have to tell you," the barbed arrow is acknowledged by the receiver who immediately sends back an equally caustic reply: "What gives you the right to talk to me that way?"

The reply might be verbal or nonverbal, depending on the equality of power in the relationship. The athlete typically would not throw verbal darts at the coach following critical feedback, but the nonverbal signs can be just as obvious. The important point is this: The receiver of the criticism loses a little chunk of self-confidence because of the negative message and immediately responds by sending an equally harmful reply. Not surprisingly, criticism begets criticism and soon threads are so stretched or torn that communication ceases. But consider who loses the most in this exchange of criticism.

It is well known that success tends to beget success, whereas failure tends to beget failure. Equally well known is the adage that sugar attracts more flies than vinegar. The cost to the receiver of criticism, basically negative feedback, is a loss of self-confidence, the opposite of what

the coach intended.

But this is only the beginning of the criticism cycle. When the athlete's self-confidence is threatened, a protective strategy (albeit subconscious) is to send the return message to the coach to "right the ship." Overtly or covertly, the coach is bound to receive emotional backlash, either in the form of anger or silence. The critical coach ends up the big loser because he or she is labeled a critical person who may see how such an innocent and maybe nonthinking comment gets blown out of proportion (from at least the coach's perspective). The intention is to be helpful but the criticism achieves just the opposite result.

Why is criticism so destructive? First, criticism tends to close paths of communication, not open them. Coach criticism is intended to be a one-way street; no acknowledgment is called for, only the idyllic hope that the athlete will internalize all that the criticism entails and be grateful. Interestingly, it is the coach who labels the criticism constructive because "after all, that's my job and I want my athletes to achieve their potential." Need I belabor the point by asking you to consider if the majority of athletes see constant streams of criticism as helpful. Very few athletes believe that constructive criticism is that beneficial.

Second, as stated earlier, coach criticism is usually followed by the particular athlete's self-justified emotional response (shouting back, denial, silence, moodiness). If you think about your past experiences, my guess is that you have seen all of these responses. Adding this emotional layer to the failure experience prevents athletes from being able to sort out what might be helpful to them.

Third, most criticism offers no suggestions for improvement. Where is it written that athletes tend to perform better when they are told what they are doing wrong?

Where did we learn that highlighting athlete's errors results in performance changes? Or, if it does sometimes, is it the best approach? Are we so naive that we believe athletes will thank us for our reasoned criticism and vow to be better next time? What little I know about the complexity of human motivation and behavior change suggests that athletes tend to be motivated more with positive reinforcement (e.g., praise, recognition) than by punishing criticism.

Last, criticism overlooks the larger performance picture. In reality, most athletes do more things right than wrong, but coaches often tend to focus on the errors. If we get extremely critical, we can even begin to criticize the random and inconsequential errors always present in imperfect performances. We end up criticizing and trying to correct mistakes that rarely repeat themselves in the same week or month.

Is it possible to recast performance feedback in positive rather than negative directions? More specifically, is it not possible to reinforce performance when it is correct or approximates correctness instead of constantly pointing out what is wrong?

Why is criticism used so much? With all the obvious drawbacks of a critical communication style, why would reasoned individuals continue the practice? It clearly is not because it has been well thought out and systematically planned. And maybe that is what makes it so unfortunate.

We are slaves to the power of models unless we recognize and learn to break the cycle. Everyone has heard it prophesied: We will teach as we were taught, coach others as we were coached and raise our children as our parents raised us. What have we experienced and what behaviors do we now model? For a large number of us the answer is criticism.

I am not suggesting that any of us intentionally set out to destroy our athletes' self-confidence and place unnecessary emotional hurdles in their paths, but nonetheless that is the reality. Coaches

have their athletes' best interest in mind when they direct critical comments their way. That is what makes the outcome so unfortunate; we mean to help but often we hinder.

On a more castigating note, there is a certain inherent cheapness to criticism. It is possible to use perfection as your frame of reference and judge each of your athletes against that standard. The reality is that there is no perfect performance; therefore every performance that you observe affords the opportunity for your critical comments. I refer to this as cheap shot coaching because almost anybody can do it; it takes no talent at all. If, indeed, you sense you must always offer some feedback, then you will always have material for your evaluation. But, then, that is the mark of the mentally lazy coach, one who cannot see the big picture of emerging success for the egregious performance glitch.

I suppose by this point you have decided either that my arguments have some validity or that I am out of touch with reality and know nothing about coach-athlete communication. Because, after all, constructive criticism is the backbone of sport skill improvement. For those of you who are going to continue to use criticism, hopefully not as unthinkingly as before, I offer some guidelines.

Periodically, you need to remind yourself of the main purpose of your criticism — to get athletes' attention and motivate them to change their behavior. Criticism then, being as sensitizing as it is, needs to pass some particular tests. To be effective, criticism needs to be filtered before and as it is given.

Following are suggestions to you as coaches as you consider the application of criticism in the coaching process:

- **IS THE TIMING RIGHT?** Is the athlete in emotional shape to hear the criticism? Athletes who are frustrated with their lack of success are not good consumers of negative feedback; they have enough negative thoughts of their own to process.
- **DO YOUR ATHLETES NEED MORE PRAISE?** Positives are more powerful agents of behavior change than negatives.
- **IS YOUR CRITICISM NOVEL?** Or is it the "same old, same old" harangue? The latter is ineffective because you have heard yourself say too often, "How many times do I have to tell you that?"
- **ARE YOU POSITIVE THAT THE ATHLETE CAN MAKE THE CHANGE?** Is the behavior primarily under the particular athlete's control or are others involved (e.g., a bad pass needs both a passer and a receiver's participation). Does the athlete have the skills and confidence to make the change? Is the performance error due to inadequate skill or a lack of effort? The latter is perhaps correctable; the former demands time on task. Do not dismiss the significance of self-confidence because it lies at the heart of behavior change. Only self-confident athletes will be able to internalize performance feedback if it is layered with negative evaluation.
- **IS YOUR CRITICISM CLEAR ENOUGH TO BE ACTED UPON?** Does the athlete know what needs to be changed? Nothing is more frustrating than being criticized and not knowing what to do to make the criticism go away.
- **CRITICISM OFTEN FORECLOSES THE POSSIBILITY OF IMPROVEMENT BECAUSE THE COACH CRITIC DOES NOT LISTEN TO THE ATHLETE'S RESPONSE.** You must process how the information is being received to assess its effectiveness (e.g., frowning brow, gritting teeth, no effort made to change). Be quick to recognize any changes made in response to your criticism.
- **NO HIT-AND-RUN BEHAVIOR IS GOING TO WORK.** Unless you are prepared to be systematic with your criticism and commit yourself to the length of time it takes to change old behavior and consolidate new behavior, it's very doubtful your criticism will be effective.