

2-MINUTE TIP: CRITICISM FAILS TO CHANGE BEHAVIOR

WHY "WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?" FAILS

Hoping for change, we criticize rather than teach.

- "You didn't..." "Why didn't you ...?" "What's the matter with you ...?" "You always" "Why can't you ...?" "You never...." Sound familiar? We reach for criticism constantly, automatically, angrily, with disappointment, with hurt – pointing out errors at work, telling people what they did wrong, blasting a partner over some failing, berating kids.
- It feels efficient, like we're addressing the problem. As if the other will magically do better 100% of the time, will understand how we want things to go!
- Sorry, but criticism rarely produces the response we want. Instead of "Thank you, that helps me do better," we usually get defensiveness and pushback or counterclaims like, "But what you did is". From the other's point of view, it amplifies "I'm not good enough. I can never please you. You hurt me too much and too often."
- **Why We Criticize:** Criticism is the fast food of feedback—quick, available, and seemingly satisfying in the moment. We also criticize because we were criticized. These phrases sit in our verbal 'muscle' memory, ready to deploy under stress. There's a hidden belief underneath: that people need negative consequences. Plus, we've been reinforced ourselves; sometimes we get an apology, contrition, or a promise to do better, and sometimes that does change others' behavior. It's a common pattern in our culture. There's an illusion it gives control.

What Works Instead - Do this:

- **Describe without judgment:** "It would make me happy (pleased, relieved, make my life easier, be so delightful) to wake up to come down to a clean kitchen in the morning."
- **Teach explicitly:** Show the desired behavior rather than just criticizing. "May I show you?" "Here is how to...." "Another way to do that is" "I prefer"
- **Start with praise.** You take good care of us. And [not 'but'!] I would also like...." Or "In addition, it would so good for me when...."
- **Catch people doing things right:** Reinforce success, even partial success. This clearly communicates what you want. Not just "good job" but also "Good job of doing" "I like it when you" "You showed real cooperation when you"
- **Ask questions:** "What's your plan for finishing homework?" invites problem-solving without triggering defense. "My request is" **Making requests is so much better than criticism.**
- **Address systems, not just individuals:** If someone consistently forgets something, maybe they need better systems, not more criticism. Often, we are part of the problem or the system is the problem, especially at jobs. Look to the system first.. Create a culture of mutual feedback, accept
- Criticism feels like action, but **feeling like you're doing something isn't the same as being effective.** If we want to genuinely change behavior, give feedback that can actually be heard and used.

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