

Management Excellence by Art Petty

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Why I Hate the “Sandwich” Technique for Delivering Feedback

May 7, 2009 by [Art Petty](#) · [28 Comments](#)

At the risk of inviting the ire of a great number of readers and trainers, I am once again opting for the dissenting opinion on a controversial topic. **I absolutely hate the use of the “sandwich” technique in delivering constructive feedback.**



For those of you that need a memory jog, this is the approach that many trainers suggest for delivering constructive feedback—the developmental kind, not the positive kind. **It involves delivering praise, offering the specific constructive criticism and then closing off with more praise.** The criticism is “sandwiched” between two points of praise.

Many people find this approach comfortable. It allows for an easy discussion opener and takes away from some of the fear of diving into the real behavioral issue.

Given that many, many managers struggle to conduct the tough feedback discussions due to various (irrational) fears: fear of offending, fear of not being liked, fear of losing someone, fear of upsetting working dynamics, this approach offers a security blanket. Those teaching the technique argue that at least it facilitates having the discussion, and that is better than not having it.

And while I am a huge advocate of delivering timely feedback, I’ll take mine without the bread please.

5 Reasons Why the Sandwich Technique is a Truly Bad Practice:

1. It is a crutch that is solely for the benefit of the giver, not the receiver.
2. It obfuscates the real message.
3. It confuses the receiver by watering down the key message.
4. It destroys the value of positive feedback by linking it with the negative. Don’t forget that positive feedback is a powerful tool for reinforcing the right behaviors and the sandwich technique devalues this tool.
5. It is insulting to the receiver and borderline deceitful. “Bob, you did a great job on XYZ, but... .” It’s like a pat on the back followed by a sucker punch followed by another pat on the back.

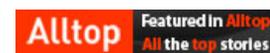
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My guidance:

- Overcome your fear of delivering constructive feedback by planning your discussions, and importantly, planning and practicing your discussion openers by getting politely and clearly to the point.
- Follow the single-behavior/single discussion rule.
- Ensure that you are focusing on the behavioral issue
- Link the issue to business impact
- Identify the proper and required behavioral change
- Jointly develop a plan to drive the change
- Follow up to discuss progress and next steps.

The Bottom-Line:

Consider this some robust feedback: quit sugarcoating your performance discussions. Your associates will respect you more for your clarity and your support of their development. It's time to grow up and lead.

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Comments

Monica Diaz says:

May 7, 2009 at 7:48 am



I have to agree with you on this. I am a big advocate of positive feedback because I truly believe it builds better relationship and reinforces, as you say, practices that we want people to keep up. Plus, I think it is not used enough in the organizational setting. Appreciation should be a daily part of working together, as should be gratitude. That said, it is NOT a good crutch for the “sandwich approach” you describe here, for reason you have eloquently stated. When we build our relationships well, OPENNESS is not only desirable but most people would prefer you say things to them straight (no sugar coating, please). This also builds trust. If not, people are almost skipping the positive feedback thinking “oh, oh... here comes the awful part!” Thanks for a great post.

[Reply](#)

Lisa says:

March 15, 2015 at 7:21 am



Art Petty,

I must say that I agree with several other people here who have posted comments about the power of positive feedback. As someone who has changed careers it is wonderful to hear someone noticed that I am doing something well, especially

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