

Leadership Skills: SHIFTING CRITICISM TO COLLABORATION

By: Pamela Georgiana, MBA



“I believe that we all become better leaders and better people when we work together for the good of our organization’s mission.”

As a leader, do you find it challenging to deliver constructive criticism? Do you feel the need to apologize or justify first? As female leaders, we tend to over apologize. I noticed this when I was an employee. There were so many times I’d hear these conversation starters from my managers:

- *“This is not a criticism, but...”*
- *“I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but...”*
- *“I’m sorry to say this, but...”*

I knew what that meant; a critical comment was coming. I also believed the manager knew their opinion was flawed and wanted an “out” if proven wrong. If their feedback was not based on fact, why would they lead with an apology?

Maybe the comment was truthful and would be ultimately helpful; it didn’t matter. I reflexively wanted to dismiss it because of how it was delivered. These openings close the door for future discussion. What is the point of offering feedback in this way? To show solidarity? To be less negative? To be a leader, not a dictator?

Whatever the reason, it is not leadership.

Setting expectations with the correct language and a sense of inclusion can make a huge difference in your leadership skills. By leading with collaboration, constructive criticism becomes the start of innovation, not the end of a conversation.



A Collaborative Approach

I believe that we all become better leaders and better people when we work together for the good of our organization's mission. I believe in collaboration. In his best-selling book, *Start with Why*, Simon Sinek says if you don't know the WHY of any mission, problem, strategy, or decision, it will never be entirely successful. It is the first question a true leader would ask. They don't assume to know all of the answers. Instead, they think, act, and communicate in a way that says, "I see a situation in a certain way, but I'm not sure I have all the details. Please educate me on this issue."

This is leading with collaboration, something at which

most women do extremely well. We know how to have a conversation, find out the missing details, and figure out how to work together to solve a problem. As leaders, we just need to learn to take it one step farther. If there is still a problem, we should find out why, without criticism or blame, and address it together.

Collaborative Feedback

Coming from a place of collaboration makes constructive criticism much easier to take. Here are some more collaborative ways to start the conversation.

- "Have you thought about addressing the situation in this way?"
- "Let's work together to find a solution."
- "Will this work?"
- "How would you address this aspect of the problem?"

I've done this often in my career. As the marketing team leader for a nonprofit, my graphic designer was struggling to conceptualize a new visual identity for our rebrand. Although she had created beautiful designs, they were not suitable for the brand. I had to deliver this feedback to her in a way that wouldn't crush her confidence and give her more direction as to what we needed to do next.

It was a difficult but necessary conversation. I started by asking her what her thought process was for designing the work she submitted and reinforcing what I liked about it. As we talked, we uncovered some incorrect assumptions she had about the strategic intent of the rebrand. Then, we worked together to create a new set of outstanding, creative, and on-brand visuals.

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