

Are you a “PC” Manager?

Praise is a double-edged sword.

When given for an achievement beyond a person’s usual capability, praise can be a great confidence booster. It lets that person know that it was worth making a real effort, it was worth taking a risk, it was worth going beyond what they are used to (their comfort zone). It was worth striving higher.

However, Samuel Johnson told us that “to praise everything is to praise nothing” and worldwide proverbs tell us that praise is not always a positive thing. It can sometimes play an undermining part in a person’s progress:

An honest man is hurt by praise unjustly bestowed (*French proverb*)

Praise makes good men better and bad men worse (*Thomas Fuller*)

Too much praise is a burden (*Anon*)

Let us take a quick look at these three proverbs.

When honest men are hurt by praise unjustly bestowed

Managers who shower praise on their team members are in danger of losing respect. They could be perceived as not being able to judge when an achievement is worth a special mention or not. Of course, we all like to hear, “This is an excellent piece of work” or “What a good presentation!”, but because deep down we are generally honest to ourselves, we would feel let down if we were praised for a *poor* piece of work or presentation and we would have no incentive to improve.

The first definition of “praise” in the Chambers Dictionary is “to assign value to”. It is important to use praise only when it is truly deserved.

When praise makes good men better and bad men worse

Praise for achievements where people are required to perform at higher levels than usual provides the confidence needed to work at those new levels again. They help them try to go consistently beyond their



usual comfort zone. In some cases, employees might feel that they had genuinely tried hard and produced good results. To praise them, however, when this is not the case would be to shirk your responsibilities towards them. How are they to know whether they are on the right track or not? It is far better to guide a person in the right direction. If you do not, you might think that you are saving a person’s feelings, but you are actually hurting them in the long run.

When too much praise is a burden

Praising a person consistently and effusively can make that person feel that your expectations of them are too high. If they do not feel they can live up to those expectations, their motivation and drive to achieve recognition will drop. There is no such thing as a perfect person and most people need the comfort of knowing that it is OK to make mistakes. In fact, as we will see, we must learn to welcome mistakes.

Therefore, the proverbs tell us to temper praise.

Now let us look at the other side of the coin - criticism.

Criticism, like praise, can be useful. In fact, the Chambers Dictionary defines criticism as “the art of judging”. As with praise it provides a guide as to the value of an action or a task and this takes skill.

As we have already seen, expectations which are too high can de-motivate people, but so can expectations which are too low. If a person is made to feel that they “never get it right”, they will have no incentive to

make an effort. Some people grow up “knowing” that they are “useless” at something - Maths, DIY, Sports, Languages etc. This means that they will never tackle tasks in these areas. Therefore, they never have a chance to improve. They make no effort to try and achieve anything in their area of “uselessness”. “I just can’t do it”, they will say over and over again. However, when given the encouragement and the right guidance, they find that they can actually manage to make some progress and as their self-belief improves, so does their competence, which in turn reinforces the belief that they can do it after all.

Evolutionary scientists such as Paul Ehrlich of Stanford University in the USA and Richard J Davidson of the University of Wisconsin at Madison in the USA believe that our brains have a great deal of malleability and plasticity. They believe that our experiences and environment help to wire up our brains in a modular way. The more we experience something, even if it is to think something over and over again the more we reinforce that particular bit of wiring. Therefore, if we keep saying to ourselves “I just can’t do it”, the wiring for that bit of thought becomes stronger and stronger, so that eventually it becomes almost inherent in us.

Some people will find the idea of criticising as very negative. They feel that any criticism will insult and offend. They feel that it will reduce self-confidence and self-belief. They are right if the criticism is unwarranted or if it is offered in a destructive vein.

The most important thing to remember is getting a balance between praise and criticism. Too much of either is destructive to any person’s progress. However, a balance of the two can work wonders.

In a study of young school children carried out by Madsen, Becker and Thomas in the late 1960s, it was found that a combination of ignoring bad behaviour and praising good behaviour produced a marked increase in productive and constructive work. On their own, neither

ignoring nor praising had any effect on specific behaviours. However, when combined, the results were evident.

In studying management approaches in large, successful, international companies in the 1960s and 1970s, Peter Drucker came to the same conclusion. He found that performance had to be defined by management as a balance of success and failure over a period of time.

What we must remember is that all people make mistakes. This is how we learn. We try, we review and then we try again until we feel we have got it right. How many people do you know who can pick up a violin for the first time and play like a virtuoso? How many people do you know who can perform gymnastics at Olympics standards at their first attempt? How many actors or actresses do you know who can get up on stage and perform perfectly with no rehearsals? Why should it be any different for people we manage?

Our errors steer us in the right direction every time we go off course. If we become afraid of being wrong, we will never try anything new and we will, therefore, never progress. Managers should try to encourage their team to push themselves beyond activities they know they can perform well, beyond their comfort zone. They should try to help them to see mistakes as a necessary part of the process of improvement and achievement.

If criticism is no more than helping someone know when they have taken the wrong turning on the route to a specific goal, then it can be nothing other than helpful. If you were travelling with someone in a car and they took the wrong turning - would you let them know, or would you let them carry on in the wrong direction? Of course, you would let them know! Equally, you would not praise them for being wrong - that would be insulting.

Maria Montessori (1870 - 1952), an Italian physician and teacher, whose methods of teaching have been adapted and used all over the world in teaching and

management, realised the importance of making mistakes. She wrote, "... it is as well to cultivate a friendly feeling towards error, to treat it as a companion inseparable from our lives, as something having a purpose, which it truly has". A generation later, Peter Drucker, as management consultant to several of the USA's largest companies was writing, "The better a person is, the more mistakes he will make - for the more new things he will try".

The message is clear. Help people to stretch themselves and to look forward to errors rather than to fear them. Praise wisely and not with gay abandon. Criticise fairly, constructively and helpfully.

Remembering that experiences reinforce the wiring of our brains, try always to praise in public and criticise in private. The experience of being criticised in public is very humiliating and will only serve to wear down a person's self-esteem and self-confidence. Praise justly given and in public has the opposite effect and can increase self-esteem and self-confidence.

A coin has two sides. It can only exist with two sides. Managers are urged to be "PC", that is to view Praise and Criticism like a coin with two sides. In this way, they can keep the coin rolling a long way forward. ■

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