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Al Levi: Delivering poop sandwiches

Constructive criticism is a myth — don't mix praise and critiques.



Frequent short feedback sessions are the trick.

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I got an email from a client the other day that instantly reminded me of how I once delivered “poop sandwiches” to my own employees.

What's a poop sandwich? It's a mix of good-bad-good or a three-layer sandwich no one wants to receive. Read on.

The owner shared he had a bad habit of always seeking to manage his team of techs from behind the desk. But with my help, this time he got out on the trucks with his techs and was instrumental in observing both good and bad behavior. This ended up improving the team's results the very next week.

The happy owner then shared that he delivered a poop sandwich to one of his techs via email. Two bad things here: The first bad thing was relying on the impersonal email that can't convey great communications, because communication is 70% non-verbal and certainly writing an email allows no room for picking up on non-verbal clues.

The second bad thing was pointing out the good work he observed this tech doing on the ride-along, then pointing out a number of additional things during the call that the tech didn't do — but should have done — that would have enhanced the customer's experience, and that skipping steps should never happen. He then ended the email with a “keep up the good work!”

This is what's known as a poop sandwich.

It's when we deliver a compliment at the beginning, a criticism in the middle and we end with a compliment. Yes, it's a sandwich!

The problem with poop sandwiches

I get it. We, as owners, tend to be overloaded and in a hurry. So, just like I did when I worked at my own company, I made the mistake of not separating the times I delivered critiques or criticism for poor behavior from the times that I wanted to acknowledge their good behavior.

The reasons can be as simple as:

- Observing behavior too infrequently so both good and bad behaviors observed are stockpiled;
- Time being so precious that the good and the bad get rolled into one encounter; or
- Fear to hold people accountable for foul ups when it's needed so it's saved up until it can be sugar-coated with compliments.

Stop stockpiling all of it!

While we're at it, I hate the term “constructive criticism.” It's two words that just don't fit together, such as “jumbo shrimp.” When we criticize or take disciplinary action, there should be some observed behavior that is inappropriate based on the known and documented systems.

There's no need to sugar-coat it especially if you employ what I call the "Steps of Corrective Action." That's because it gives staff members the opportunity to get with the program or to get gone. No one should ever be surprised by actions that result in earning a raise, moving up the ranks or being in trouble.

Frequent short feedback sessions are the trick.

Another reason we mess up on mixing praise and criticism is we forget to follow the basic tenet of good employer-employee relations, which is why we discipline in private and compliment in public.

Keep it separate

Okay, here's another really good example of what delivering a poop sandwich looks like:

"Bob, you're doing a fantastic job as warehouse manager by straightening out the warehouse operations. It's never looked better! The replenishment of the techs' materials is so much faster and better, and the assembly of the big ticket install jobs has really improved. The flow of materials in and out is so good now that we can really track the jobs so much better. That's why you've earned a \$2/hour raise in pay, effective immediately.

"But, I do want to remind you that purchase orders (aka P.O.s) are not being turned over fast enough to the Accounts Payable department. And you're two months behind in the physical count of actual inventory. Also, just last week I saw a Tech wandering around the warehouse on their own because you left the warehouse gate open.

"Okay, congratulations on the raise!"

Now, I'm sure Bob will appreciate the raise and he might have even heard a little of the praise at the beginning, but I'm betting he's more focused and/or upset about all the dumping done during the middle of this.

It's in our DNA to lock onto criticism. Most of us don't like it — we haven't since the time we were kids. And although there are definitely times we do need to provide feedback, we do have to criticize in private and point out what must change and leave it at that. Just like there must be plenty of opportunities to find staff members doing good things that we can make a big deal about to them and in front of others.

If it's a compliment, keep it all a compliment.

If it's a complaint, keep that interaction all about the complaint.

Or, you can ignore me and continue delivering poop sandwiches. The problem is they'll remain no fun for your staff to swallow and they make a mess all over you too. Poop sandwiches are messy for all!

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