

The theme for this segment of Business Casual is Constructive Criticism. Here at Lead Star we know that constructive criticism is an essential tool of leadership. Yet it can be challenging to both deliver and receive. In this segment of Business Casual we explore why this is the case and best practices detailing how to deliver and receive constructive criticism.

We've provided the questions we used to start our dialogue below. Feel free to use them with your colleagues to spark a dialogue on the joys and pain of constructive criticism.

## Here are the questions we discussed:

- ★ What is your personal definition of constructive criticism and what do you think the key elements are?
- ★ Other than at work, in what areas of your life does constructive criticism play a role?
- ★ Are there any situations or circumstances where you have found difficulty in delivering constructive criticism?
- ★ Does position or authority affect your comfort level with regard to delivering constructive criticism?
- ★ When have you found it difficult to receive constructive criticism?
- ★ When receiving constructive criticism what are important factors to keep in mind?
- ★ What are the best practices in delivering and receiving constructive criticism in order to maintain a productive and healthy working relationship?

## Dialogue Highlights:

You are welcome to enjoy the transcript of our conversation, but here is a quick summary:

- ★ The term constructive criticism has obvious negative connotations associated with it. However, if approached correctly, constructive criticism can be helpful insight specifically designed to aid improvement.
- ★ Constructive criticism is only helpful when it contains specific action steps that can be taken for improvement.
- ★ Although it is often called something else, we use constructive criticism in all areas of our lives, not just at work.
- ★ Anxiety about delivering constructive criticism comes out of the fear of not knowing how the person receiving it will react.
- ★ It is important to be able to deliver constructive criticism to persons in positions of authority over you. You must approach this from a perspective of providing valuable insight that can be used to assist them in developing.
- ★ Ego has no place when you are either delivering or receiving constructive criticism.

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## The Dialogue:

**Alison (Lead Star's Managing Director):**

Since we are focusing this quarter on service-based leadership and ways that we can serve those around us, I was thinking that constructive criticism is one of the ways we can accomplish that goal. That might surprise some people, but at Lead Star we view criticism as a service to others when delivered correctly. Just to start it off, what do you think about when you hear the term constructive criticism?

**Courtney:**

Angie comes to mind because she is always giving it out. 😊

**Angie:**

I don't think I do actually. I guess I do. Constructive criticism to me is helpful insight provided to someone to help them grow and improve.

**Courtney:**

To me constructive criticism is someone critiquing your performance and it is usually negative. They are trying to help you. It is usually an awareness of something that you don't do well.

**Angie:**

Absolutely. I think the key word though is helpful. In the true spirit constructive criticism isn't meant to be damaging. It is supposed to be insight that will help you. I think the thing that happens is that often times it turns into a negative experience.

**Courtney:**

Has anyone ever received positive constructive criticism? I think the term constructive criticism was designed to mask the fact that it is advice relating to things you need to do better.

**Wesley (Lead Star's Sales Director):**

My definition of it is feedback on performance that is focused on improvement.

**Angie:**

I like that better.

**Courtney:**

It is actionable feedback. The individual is capable of changing their behaviors.... You discuss a negative

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performance experience that can be changed with this constructive feedback.

**Alison:**

So what you are saying is that in order to be constructive you feel that the person delivering it needs to or should offer suggestions on how to improve not just what isn't working. Is that fair?

**Courtney:**

Sure. The intent is I am going to tell you something that you are not doing well that I think you can do better next time. The way I would deliver constructive feedback is I would offer suggestions for or steps for improvement.

**Alison:**

Okay. Do other people think that is necessary within the context of the conversation?

**Wesley:**

Yes. I think giving steps for improvement is necessary.

**Angie:**

A roadmap. It is also helpful for you to hold them accountable so you give them milestones and objectives and actual things they can do and then you are all on the same page and you know how to touch back with that person to make sure that they are growing and developing as you need them to.

**Courtney:**

It is the responsibility of the person delivering the constructive feedback to follow up and oversee performance improvement.

**Angie:**

I think you touched on a key issue. A lot of people deliver constructive criticism and it is kind of this fire and forget mentality . . . I put it out there and that is it, I am done. It really is the responsibility of the person delivering it to make sure they follow up on the improvement and to coach and mentor that person.

**Wesley:**

If you are going to give constructive criticism you have to be able to give it with the knowledge that the person is capable of changing.

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Alison:

Absolutely. Great point. Here's another thought: We are all used to giving and receiving constructive criticism at work but obviously we use constructive criticism in other areas of our lives. What are the other roles that we use it and how is it easier or harder in these other roles? The thing that came to my mind was within the marriage relationship - where I think it is harder for me to be constructive.

Courtney:

I think if you call it constructive criticism in marriage that is a recipe for disaster. I don't sit down with my husband, Patrick, and announce that I have constructive criticism to deliver. But, we certainly have talks that are focused on improving our relationship.

Angie:

I don't think you call it that but it is the same idea.

Courtney:

What do we call it? We call it parenting and guidance with our kids. We call it, I don't know, relationship talk in our marriage?

Angie:

It is criticism though. In our family relationships, especially the people closest to us, I have got no problem giving my sister "constructive criticism". I think it is just because of the trust level. You trust because you have been through this before.

Courtney:

I think it is called advice or feedback in other roles. It is not really called constructive criticism. It's more unsolicited advice.

Alison:

I think that it could be called constructive criticism though if it is focused on improvement and changing that person to be the best that they can be.

Angie:

Isn't most constructive criticism really unsolicited advice?

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Alison:

So if someone comes to you for advice, they are actually coming to you for constructive criticism?

Courtney:

That is solicited. But how often do people do that though?

Angie:

People come to me for advice all the time, don't they to you?

Courtney:

Sure they do. But when I approach you I am not looking for constructive criticism I am coming to you for advice.

Angie:

You are after insight on how you can improve a situation. I am just saying that constructive criticism doesn't always have to be a bad thing. When it is packaged as "constructive criticism" it seems like it is a bad thing but I think just giving someone advice or feedback in a marriage is a good thing. I guess I personally have strong, negative connotations attached to the term constructive criticism.

Wesley:

I have had friendships recently where constructive criticism has really played a role. You are right. It has got a bit of a negative tone to it but the focus was designed to allow that person and that friendship to grow.

Courtney:

Sure - there are times that things have to be said or else it can lead to resentment.

Angie:

It is important that it is delivered for the individual themselves. For that person to become really the best that they can be I felt that I had to deliver constructive advice, I have had to do it to my mom recently. That is not easy. It is constructive criticism.

Alison:

Do you feel like it is harder? Does that personal relationship make it harder than it necessarily would be in a work situation?

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Wesley:

No. My thinking on this is that it depends upon how much experience you have with the person and how they will react. The less experience you have with somebody whether it is a friend, a peer or somebody that reports to you, you don't know the outcome or how accepting that person is going to be of your feedback. That to me is what makes it difficult. I think about how is this person going to take it? Knowing Angie and Courtney are open to constructive feedback I am very confident delivering constructive feedback. But knowing that my dad, for example, gets defensive and freaks out, it is harder.

Angie:

You have to really focus. Obviously when you give somebody constructive criticism you want to see action and results. You want it to be a very productive conversation. It is hard to give constructive criticism to somebody who immediately you know is going to be defensive and who doesn't want to hear your message. That, to me, requires just a lot more maneuvering to really understand the person and how they need to hear constructive criticism. I think it is really individual. You want it to be an effective conversation.

Alison:

I would actually say that I think it is harder when you have that personal relationship than it might necessarily be when you have a professional one. Courtney what do you think?

Courtney:

I think that it is harder in some ways and easier in other ways. It has to do with your ego and I think your ego is less at risk in your personal relationships and more at risk in your professional relationships, for me. I feel very secure in my personal relationships. You have to say difficult things to people or you have to bring up issues and it is uncomfortable but you do it. It is easier for me to bring them up in relationships where I feel the most safe. So when I say professional it is not necessarily with the people I work with day to day because I feel very safe in those relationships but it is with people outside of Lead Star. I think there are components that make it easier when you have a safe, secure relationship and it gets more challenging when you are insecure about the relationship.

Alison:

What are the difficulties that people have generally when delivering constructive criticism? What makes you anxious when you have to deliver any type of criticism?

Angie:

I think you feel some sort of responsibility for the person's reaction though you really shouldn't. It is the unknown. You don't know how people are going to respond initially when you give them constructive

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criticism. Certainly in the case of family members, since you have probably done it your whole life, you know how they are going to respond but you don't know in professional environments. It is an awkward conversation. I don't really think people look forward to delivering constructive criticism because it also makes you just really analyze yourself and your own performance. You think, "Who am I to give this person this type of feedback?" Because I am certain we all could think of areas where we are not exceeding standards so that can be also awkward too. What will happen and what usually happens when you give constructive criticism, especially to somebody who isn't very confident, is immediately their defenses go up and it turns into a back and forth exchange of, "well you didn't do this – you didn't do that." It is tough. As a leader, you have to make sure that you maintain a high performance level always because of that, just so you can make sure that you are in an effective place to give somebody constructive criticism.

## Alison:

I was thinking about when I was in the JAG Corps..... One day my department head approached me and asked me to tell him the ways that he needed to improve because he realized that the department was dysfunctional. At the time I was relatively young, just out of law school and it was a very difficult conversation for me. Looking back on the conversation now I wonder why I felt like that was such a difficult conversation? I think, at the time, it was the position and the relationship of authority that made that difficult. I think it comes back to Angie's point that at the time, my first thought was who am I to give this advice and criticism to somebody that is obviously in a superior position.

## Courtney:

That doesn't bother me at all. I feel like you have to lead up. You have to provide insight to people no matter what their position or authority is. If you have something that can help them it is your duty and it is like a sense of service towards them. I am always very prepared and very thorough when I have to give criticism to someone senior to me in a hierarchical situation but I would never shy away from that. In fact, I think it can be what distinguishes you as a valuable team player. Now obviously if your senior person has ego issues you could be in a dicey situation. I have definitely had it go completely awry and had people blow up at me. I am thinking of an instance when I worked in a law firm and I was providing a senior associate some insight and perspective. It actually just confirmed to me how much they needed the constructive criticism. I didn't take it personally at all.

## Angie:

Did she act on it though? That is the thing? Did you deliver it in a way that she could act on it or did you just want to do it because you wanted to prove a point?

## Courtney:

No, I wanted to do it because I really wanted to help her. I did it very practical, very much so, so that she

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could act on it.

Angie:

Did she do it?

Courtney:

No. She was that far down the path. She was like you are a first year (new attorney), why would you even give me advice? She had a real huge ego problem. It is sad because she was such a talented attorney. She ended up getting pushed out of the firm. That is the only time it has ever blown up in my face. In the military, my job was to give people senior to me advice about a very specific area where I was a subject matter expert. I was always very candid because I felt a sense of duty. That is what I owed people. They didn't have me on their team to agree with them. They had me on their team to agree with them when what they were saying was valid but to raise objections when what they were saying wasn't valid. I take that very seriously. I do it in a candid, humble way. It is not like I am some big boss of it all. I would hate it if people on my team that were technically subordinate were staying silent on things that needed correction and not giving me insight. My biggest motto here at Lead Star is, "I hired you for your brain, give me your brain on this one." Really what I am saying is, "critique it, criticize it, take this issue apart and put it back together better."

Wesley:

I guess that comes back to the personal relationship issue. Do you think that is easier within the team framework here at Lead Star where we have relatively personal relationships than it is in a setting that is more impersonal?

Courtney:

I don't know. It might be easier but it is even more important in those impersonal settings. I can see how it may be hard for someone to critique their senior vice president or someone like that. However, the process you have to go through in offering a critique, asking yourself is this about me or is this about making the situation or the person better? Am I accurate in my facts? Have I done due diligence? Am I prepared to make this remark? When you feel that criticism is warranted, you have to understand why and make sure it's not about your ego. It is not just willy nilly offering your criticism anytime based on your gut reaction. It is offering people valid, well reasoned opinions and thoughts that will make them better. The times when you can do that are also very rare. It is not like every day I come in with all the right answers and I want to tell everybody what they are. When it is right you know it is right and you almost have a duty to act on it.

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Angie:

I remember a situation when I was starting working in sales in North Carolina. My boss, I loved her, she was a great manager and a fairly good leader too. One day she was critiquing my performance because that was her job. Like all good managers, she was my coach in many ways. Yet during this session, she overwhelmed me with information that I was supposed to act on. She listed fifteen things that I needed to do different about my performance. It was a really important opportunity for me to speak up and say hey, that is fantastic and I know that I've got a lot of room for improvement but I can't act on all of that information at once, I will be a train wreck. Why don't you pick out three things that I can do to improve myself and I can focus on those three areas?? I just can't focus on improving fifteen things at once. It won't work. It was me leading her so she could better understand how to lead me. I wanted her to understand the best way to provide me with criticism while also offering insight that could help her provide criticism better to others. There is such an important role in leading your boss and helping them be an effective manager and or leader to you.

Alison:

What I am hearing you say is that really one of the most beneficial ways to deliver and/or receive constructive criticism is to open it up as a two way dialogue so that both the person that is giving the constructive criticism and the person that is receiving it have a safe space to talk out the issue.

Angie:

I also think it is so important when you receive constructive criticism that the first words coming out of your mouth aren't, "Yeah but..." Anytime somebody gives you constructive criticism the first thing you should say is "Wow, thank you." Treat it like it should be treated - as an opportunity.

Courtney:

I think you should also ask questions. Not a defensive questioning of their feedback but asking questions like "Hey, this is new insight, can you explain this?" Kind of take it and own it for yourself and really kind of open the door for a discussion on it.

Alison:

At what times or in what situations do you find receiving constructive criticism the most difficult for you?

Wesley:

I have thought a lot about this one actually. When I am receiving constructive criticism in an area that I feel that I have demonstrated proven success or I am very experienced in this particular scenario, it is more difficult for me to hear that feedback even though it is probably more critical feedback. However, I find that in scenarios where I am learning something new... Recently, I have surprised a lot of the men

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that I play golf with because when I am on the golf course (since golf is new to me) I am constantly seeking constructive criticism. I am always saying what did I do wrong? Tell me how I can change this. Is it my stance? Is it my grip? What is it? Is it my tempo? Please tell me. I get these looks, a look of surprise or I don't want to tell you because too much of this stuff is just going to throw your game into a whirl. It is not true. For me when I am in a learning scenario I crave that constructive feedback and beg for it. It always helps me. That is my personal experience with it. What I would hope is that over time I can see that even when I receive constructive criticism in an area that I am skilled in, that it is as beneficial as something that I am just learning and discovering.

**Angie:**

I think that is great. Alison what about you? You asked the question. I want to hear your thoughts.

**Alison:**

I had a lot of the same thoughts as Wesley. When I am really trying to learn something new or I have something that I haven't really done before I feel like I am craving and very open to receiving feedback. I find one of the most difficult times, I think, for me to receive constructive criticism is when I am in a position that I am already down on myself. I feel like I can create my own negative dialogue and it kind of self spirals.

**Wesley:**

I feel like you and I have this in common.

**Alison:**

We have had this conversation before. I think that is the hardest time for me to hear that. I need to come up with ways to understand that, again, it comes back to the fact that the criticism is not personal. It is not about me being a bad person or an overall bad performer. I think I sometimes take it that way when I am in a funk. I take it as kind of an overall negative cloud instead of specific advice on how to improve small areas.

**Courtney:**

Those are the times maybe when you need an actual voice of reason that is not as emotionally attached to the issue as you might be. Criticism delivered to you when you are feeling down and out, when delivered the right way, could be the roadmap you need to pick yourself back up.

**Alison:**

I think that's it exactly.

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## Courtney:

A frustrating experience for me is when I am delivering constructive criticism and someone knows they've screwed up and then they try to shut down the criticism. They are like I know I messed up, stop. No, you might think and know you messed up but what you think you know and messed up might be completely different and I will want to share perspective on the whole big picture with someone. I find it is something that people do frequently. They will want to shut down and be like I know I was wrong. That is real general. I think at those times is when you really need to get specific.

## Wesley:

How do you handle that? That is, to Alison's point if you are in an emotional state and you are practically overwhelmed with the gravity of the situation like oh, you know you screwed up and you just need a little time away from whatever it was.

## Courtney:

It depends. My goal is to get the person to back down and relax a little bit and realize that we know this was a big mistake but it is really important right now that we discuss the details because this window is going to pass and the intent of the criticism is going to be changed or lost. So I will bring that to their attention. If there is just no backing them down, then of course I will suggest we reconvene in a day and talk about it then. It is important for people to be open minded because often, I learned this from the Marine Corps, right at your point of weakness, right at your point of failure is actually the best time to provide the insight and correction because it is so fresh and it is so relevant when you are hearing it. It is just again, the key would be to condition your employees and colleagues to not take criticism personally. If you can create and maintain an environment where people are held accountable and for people to begin to seek out to improvement and feedback because everyone is committed to the common goal of high performance you'll be successful at any endeavor. That is a utopian work environment and you have to bring people along to that. Now the Marine Corps didn't bring people along to that. They just said suck it up and deal with it because this is how we are going to be. When you got on board with it, it was an opportunity for your performance to go to a completely new level. The first couple of times your feelings were hurt and you were beat up and you were insecure. Eventually you realized that this isn't personal, this is about me being better and you got on board with it. You almost became a criticism junkie. Come on, make me better, go ahead, I dare you. It is this metamorphosis that people go through. High performers that are very, very sensitive, extremely sensitive to constructive criticism I guarantee you are not going to stay high performers for long. They are going to get passed up by those that are secure enough to embrace well thought out constructive criticism.

## Angie:

I don't want people to walk away thinking that you have to go around every single day riding people hard, constantly giving people constructive criticism. I think that there is a healthy balance of the criticism with

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praise. You need to acknowledge people when they do a good job or exceed your expectations too. You have to coach, guide and reinforce and support. You can constantly hold people accountable to standards. That is important. Yet you have to balance it with praise. Tell people when they do something amazing. Tell everyone when someone does something amazing. Environments where accountability and praise are both present are ones where people thrive.

## Courtney:

It is kind of good and bad. I was talking to a restaurant manager recently and she told me something that I thought was just a beautiful quote. We were talking about standards and enforcement and making sure you hold people to high performance standards. She said you have to be very, very tough on standards but not on people. You have to serve people. You have to provide leadership. You have to care-take. I thought that was just a great way of saying it, "tough on standards but not on people."

## Angie:

My husband once told me that I was really nagging him. It was about small things. It was creating an unhealthy dynamic in our relationship. I didn't even realize it. I thought I was being a service to him by constantly telling him what he was doing wrong but that wasn't helping.

## Alison:

We have all been there.

## Angie:

I didn't realize how it was making me come across too in his eyes. I certainly wasn't perfect. I was just really harping on insignificant things. I was just being a bitch. I really appreciated his feedback too.

## Alison:

This addresses some recent studies that I have read that show that people feel more criticized at work and less appreciated. You guys are all talking about this. I had a former work environment where the constant focus was on what people had done wrong or incorrectly. All you heard about was someone's disappointment with something. You would hear about that same disappointment over and over again. You never heard what is going right. So as a result of hearing all of the negative and none of the positive it ended up creating this culture where people just weren't confident about their performance in any way. Everybody sort of walked on eggshells. You can't just focus on the negative.

## Courtney:

I think what is really important with performance evaluation is the idea of balance. You get the good and the bad. I think there is a lot of issue in the work place with younger generations in the work force

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being so focused on always getting praise. Getting praise for things that aren't significant, they want a trophy. If there is any contest they want to be a winner in some way even if they are not first place. There is this "trophy generation mentality." I think that you can do people just as big of a disservice if all you are giving them is positive, positive praise all the time and you are never giving them any of the hard facts or the areas of improvement or the negative feedback. I think it is balance, everything in life comes back to balance, I think, a healthy diet, exercise, work, all these different things. With constructive criticism I think you build trust and credibility with those that you are offering criticism to when you do offer a balanced interpretation.

## Angie:

I think that there is a way to provide constructive criticism that is actually motivational. I don't think it has to be a beat down conversation. It goes back to what we started off talking about; what constructive criticism is. You are providing information to help somebody. You have to provide it in such a way that you are showing your service and your helpfulness to that area.

## Courtney:

I talk in our presentations about how everyone wants a high performing team but when you realize that one of the ways to getting to high performance is accountability and holding people accountable and having performance standards and when they are not met having sanctions and consequences. People can be adverse to that, almost as if they are saying, "I only want to manage in the good times." For some reason it has become uncomfortable for people to be accountable or to hold people accountable. We have to go back to an accountability mindset in our country. I sat next to a congressman last night on the plane on the way home. He and I were talking about that in general. He is a first term congressman, very idealistic and very focused on being in politics for the right reasons. I obviously had a lot of jokes at his expense on that. ☺ He was so focused on making this country a country of people that want to serve and want to fix the problems rather than a country of people that just opt out. I think there are some under currents of that in people's fearfulness to hold people professionally accountable. It is easier to ignore the performance problem or isolate that person or try to slowly convince them that they should quit instead of being bold like we sometimes have to, holding them accountable and getting past the issue and seeing if this person can be developed and grow within the organization or not.

## Angie:

It is interesting because yesterday too we spoke at a state government organization where their employee retention is pretty high...in many ways this is because of the stability in the organization and the pensions attached to the job. It is especially important in those environments that you hold people accountable, constantly provide the constructive criticism. These are employees that are going to grow with the organization. A small problem that's unaddressed gets worse over time.

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Alison:

To just wrap this up then, if you have one piece of advice from this conversation for a manager, what would that important take away be?

Courtney:

My piece of advice for that manager would be if it feels uncomfortable delivering constructive criticism keep doing it. The more you do it the less of an issue it becomes for you and for your colleagues. The more it becomes expected, the higher a performing team you are going to have. I would say make sure that constructive criticism is continuously balanced with positive, great feedback as well when it is warranted. Say what you need to say when it needs to be said; don't save up criticism for an annual review. And keep your ego out of these communications.

Wesley:

She took all four of mine.

Angie:

I would add don't get caught up in your emotions when you are delivering constructive criticism. If you are not in a good emotional place to deliver constructive criticism, find that place first. The worst thing that can happen is that it turns into an argument. Also, you really have to have a very focused goal for your conversation and stay attached to that goal so you can have a very productive conversation.

Courtney:

It's essential that you check your ego before offering constructive criticism. If you are delivering constructive criticism and it has anything to do with you-- meaning there is any issue connected to you and your issue—stop. It has to be about outward focus and service.

Alison:

And then it goes back to Wesley's definition of being helpful.

Courtney:

Helpful to others. If it is helpful to you, you are wrong.

Wesley:

I was just going to say exactly what you just said. Angie was saying to check your emotions. I was going to say check your ego, it can't be about you.

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Angie:

How about you Alison?

Alison:

My definition of constructive criticism is providing helpful suggestions and guidance on how to improve. I think that one of the biggest take aways from this conversation is that the ideal delivery of constructive criticism is a two-way conversation that includes guidance for improvement and an action plan.

Angie:

I like it. Nice work team.