Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

Episode 21:
Tough Conversations: How to Give and Receive Criticism Constructively – Part 2

By Megan Monson, Nicole Fulfree, Rachel Moseson Dikovics, Audrey G. Ogurchak

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Amanda Cipriano:	Welcome to the Lowenstein Sandler Podcast Series: The Women's Initiative Network, Real Talk. I'm Amanda Cipriano, an associate attorney and member of the Women's Initiative Network at Lowenstein Sandler. Before we begin, please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast series at lowenstein.com/podcasts, or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, Google Podcasts, and SoundCloud. Now let's take a listen.
Megan Monson:	Welcome back to the Women's Initiative Network Real Talk. I'm Megan Monson, Partner in Lowenstein Sandler's Employee Benefits and Executive Compensation Practice Group. This is part two of our discussion with special guest Audrey Ogurchak about giving and receiving criticism in one's career and personal life. Let's jump back in.
Nicole Fulfree:	Yeah, so Megan, you mentioned in asking the question about whether criticism is really necessary, you mentioned that this was something that was originally raised on Glennon Doyle's podcast, and I think where they ultimately landed on this question in their podcast episode was a three element sort of time, place, and manner test for whether it's appropriate to give criticism.
	And I loved it for two reasons. The first being lawyers love elements, and the second being I thought it was really enlightening and just a practical piece of advice to think about before you're giving criticism, to figure out whether it's appropriate or not. And what they distilled it down to is basically, one, do I believe the person that I'm giving this criticism to is good? Two, am I truly invested in a better outcome for the person? And three is this honest feedback as opposed to seeking justice or retribution or some kind of payback? And so I think those three guidelines are really good for when you're the person that's about to give criticism or feedback. It's really good to think through those three items in figuring out whether the criticism or feedback is justified.
Megan Monson:	So we've been talking about how we typically respond when we've been getting criticism or why it's needed, but what are some strategies that we can use to try to relax our brains when we're feeling defensive or anticipate having a difficult conversation to make us feel more at ease?

Nicole Fulfree: So one of the things that helps me, and I think Rachel is kind of alluding to this in the previous answer, is thinking through why the person is giving me that criticism or feedback and kind of seeing it as a positive. And thinking about, as Rachel mentioned, it could be really hard to give criticism whether personal or professional. And so the person that is giving criticism is really putting themselves in a vulnerable position, not so much when it's professional, but more so when personal. But I think it's applicable across the board. It's tough to give criticism and it's not always fun. And so I try to think about, it probably would've been easier for the person giving the criticism to not give it at all. And what would've happened, they had decided not to give that criticism, and it could be because they weren't invested in me, for instance.

So when I'm receiving feedback, I think about, okay, if the person didn't ever want to work with me again, they could have just not given me that feedback. They wouldn't have invested time in me, but I'd like to try to see that criticism as kind of a gift or an investment of time, especially when it's with people that I really enjoy working with and I respect their opinions, and I kind of try to see it as a really positive thing that they took the time and cared about me enough to give me this criticism to try to make me better.

Rachel Dikovics: I think we also have to recognize that there is some feedback that is not a gift, and there are some people who I would say for better or worse, but it really is for worse, who really enjoy giving people criticism and will talk about ways to provide criticism that's actually helpful. But I think that the reality is some people feel better about themselves by criticizing others, and I think it's important for us to be able to recognize when that is happening and to be objective about the feedback we're receiving.

So if the feedback we're receiving like Nicole says, is from somebody who is really invested in us and obviously just wants us to improve, then I think it's important to accept that feedback. Think about incorporating it into the future. Even if you feel defensive about it, try to think about it objectively and think about whether there is at least some kernel of truth in there that you need to consider.

But if you're receiving feedback from somebody who seems to thrive on criticizing others and does not provide actionable items for you, and instead just criticizes your work in sort of a personal way or directly criticizes you personally, those kind of things are not helpful to internalize because you're not learning anything from them. All you're learning is to doubt yourself and your instincts. So I think it's really important to think about context when deciding how to react criticism.

Nicole Fulfree: Rachel, you bring up a great point, which is, I was thinking of the question in the way of how do you think of criticism when you're accepting it, but I think we kind of missed a step, which is you can think about the criticism that you receive and decide whether you want to accept it or not. And I think that's the point Rachel's getting to, which is a really important point because it's so true that oftentimes criticism is not a gift, and you have to decide that for yourself.

Audrey Ogurchak: And I think too, especially if you're kind of caught off guard with some criticism, if it's coming unexpectedly, it's completely fair to ask questions or ask for more information about why this criticism is being provided. Asking questions and say, "can you elaborate on the situation or can you elaborate a little bit on why that might have been wrong?" That's completely fair. And I would say that's not necessarily being defensive, you're just trying to work with the person to come to a solution, how you can learn from the situation. And I think also as you're receiving the criticism, if you ask questions and kind of flip the script onto the other person to explain more, that gives you more time to collect yourself if you are feeling defensive and kind of that anxiety, to start thinking about... And maybe that might put you into a better mindset to be able to really collaborate and work with the person and internalize the criticism.

Nicole Fulfree: Similarly, I think it's totally fine if you feel taken aback when getting a piece of criticism to just tell the person, "Hey, I'm feeling taken aback by this comment, and would it be okay if we took a break and regrouped in about 10 minutes?" And I think in that situation, it's better for everyone. And then you can approach the situation with a clearer mind. Sometimes it can be difficult to have that conversation when you're feeling the physiological responses that defensiveness can lead to, which is like sweaty palms, anxiety, your heart is beating out of your chest. And so I think it's totally fine to just ask for 10 minutes if you're feeling that way.

Megan Monson: And just to add to what Nicole's saying, there can really be a lot told in your tone and your body language and when you're responding to things. So being able to give yourself time to pause and regroup. So even if your words aren't coming off defensive, you might be changing to a tone or demeanor that is kind of giving that impression and not necessarily setting yourself up the way you want to have that conversation.

So then kind of shifting gears to our final topic, receiving criticism, but what are some strategies that we can utilize when we're giving criticism to others? And if we're starting to recognize defensiveness in whomever we're giving criticism to, do you have any tips on how to disarm them so that they can really take to heart the criticism and use it more effectively?

Rachel Dikovics: I think there are a couple of things that are important to keep in mind when we're providing criticism to others. I liked the three point test that Nicole mentioned earlier because it asked you to think about why you're giving the criticism, which I think should be the first question that you ask yourself in a professional context. But if you've decided that you do need to give the criticism, I think there's a couple of ground rules that you should have for yourself. The most important being praise in public, criticize in private. Criticism should be private. It should not be broadcast to any more people than it absolutely must be broadcast to. It should not be a reply all email. It shouldn't be done in front of a lot of other people. It should be between you and the person you were providing the criticism to, in a private setting.

That to me is just the professional way to do it. And I think in terms of helping people be more comfortable with receiving criticism from you, at least the way I do it, and maybe this is another people pleasing thing, but I don't want

to make people feel bad about themselves, but sometimes you do want somebody to change something about their work. And I think it's helpful to communicate to them the fact that you want to keep working with them.

And so if you sort of have a praise and criticism sandwich, I think that that is really helpful. So if you start out by saying, "here's something I really like about what you did. Here's some things I'd like you to either change in this or improve in the future, here's why. Here's how I'd like you to do those things," and then also end on a positive note. I think that can be really encouraging to people, and it can make it a lot easier for them to take your feedback without becoming so defensive that they're not actually going to internalize it.

Audrey Ogurchak: I would say I think I agree with everything that Rachel said, and I also think it's important to, even before you're at the point where you are going to be giving criticism to the person, I think establishing kind of a relationship of trust with them is very important. So if I'm working on an assignment with somebody that I might be supervising them on, I don't want the first conversation or the first real time that we talk about the assignment to be when I'm giving them criticism.

I want to get to know them a bit and establish a relationship where they can come and ask me questions. And I want to be that kind of person that they work with that they can trust will answer their questions honestly and give them honest feedback. And so once that relationship is established and I give them criticism, I think that that is more helpful in getting them to internalize the criticism because they know that I'm not coming after them in an attacking or critical manner per se, that I'm really just trying to help them along with the assignment and give them the feedback that they need. Because if I were receiving feedback, I want to receive the feedback from someone that I have this type of relationship with. So I think that it helps overall in the whole process.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah, those are great tips. I also think back to Glennon's three element test and I think it's helpful if you make those reasons for giving your criticism pretty obvious when you're giving the criticism. And so I think one example of a way that you can present your comment is, I have really high standards and I think you can meet them. You did a really great job on this assignment, but here are the ways that you can improve.

Rachel Dikovics: I think one other thing to consider also before providing feedback to others is whether the feedback that you're going to provide is perhaps a result of something that you did in giving out the assignment. I think it's important if you were getting something that you didn't expect to think back or look back to when you gave the assignment, and assuming that's the context, and think about is there something you said or part of your instructions that made the person believe this was what you wanted?

That's not going to be the case where your feedback is about quality of writing or how detailed a response was, but if it's something where you feel like something was missing, I think it's important to look back and think, is it your fault that that was not there? And if it is, that doesn't mean that you can't ask the person to make a change, but I think it's important to explain yourself

and say, "it didn't occur to me to specify X, Y, Z, but I would really like this included. Do you mind adding it?"

Because I think sometimes we expect other people to know what we're thinking and they don't necessarily. And so I think it's just important to consider whether any of the criticism that you are providing is actually a result of something that you said or didn't say.

Megan Monson: These are really great tips. Thank you all for joining to share your tips on how to effectively navigate both giving and receiving criticism, as well as how to avoid being instantly defensive. Thanks for joining us for another episode of The Women's Initiative Network, Real Talk. We'll see you next time.

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