

Responding to Critical Supervisory Feedback

Receiving “corrective feedback” from your supervisor about your work performance can be very difficult. You are likely to feel threatened and possibly angry or even sad. And the threat may seem greater if the feedback is in writing. Responding effectively – especially when you feel in any of these ways - can be even more of a challenge.

Strategies With Lower Probability of Success

Many people in this situation ask questions like, “What are my rights?” or “How do I defend myself?” It is certainly important to make yourself aware of your rights. This could be very useful information. And it is only natural that you want to feel that your job is safe. But taking an adversarial approach initially by threatening to file a grievance or writing a long detailed letter to the supervisor arguing with every point s/he raised is not likely to persuade your supervisor (or her/his supervisor) that you are right and your supervisor is wrong. And, assuming that if you you’re your case to a higher authority, you will be vindicated, may be a faulty assumption. (Remember, that your supervisor’s supervisor is likely to get all or most of her/his information about you from your supervisor.) Similarly, accusing your supervisor of being inconsistent in applying these expectations to you, or telling your supervisor that you know the real reason s/he gave you this corrective feedback is that s/he is out to get you because of x, y, or z (non-performance-related reasons) are strategies that can backfire and be viewed by the supervisor as more evidence that you are a “problem employee.” And this is true even if the supervisor is wrong about what s/he has said about you or being inconsistent in applying standards.

Strategies With Higher Probability of Success

Although there is no easy “one-size fits all” approach to dealing with this situation, there are a few guidelines that are likely to help and there are some obvious “potholes” to be avoided if at all possible. Often the best way to protect your job is a counter-intuitive approach that avoids taking an adversarial stance for as long as possible. First, it is important to *understand* what concerns your supervisor about your work performance. You must *understand* this before you can respond appropriately or do anything to address the problem – even if you are convinced that the supervisor is wrong. What has s/he told you about her/his concerns? Can you name them specifically? If you can’t, this is a clue that you may need to think about this! Understanding how s/he sees something does not mean you agree with her/him. But, if you hope to resolve the issue satisfactorily, it is essential that you know what genuinely concerns her/him.

Think about your goal(s). For most employees, their primary goal is keeping their jobs. Given the importance of the supervisor in most people's work lives, another goal may be to minimize difficulties – or even to improve relations - with the supervisor. Even if your goal is only to get your supervisor to consider your point of view, the approaches below are more likely to enhance your chances of being successful, whether done in writing or verbally.

- 1) First, indicate your sincere interest in finding *mutually satisfactory* ways to resolve the concern(s) raised by your supervisor.
- 2) If any of your supervisor's criticisms of your work performance seem fair or reasonable to you, acknowledge responsibility for them. And, indicate what you have already done and/or what you plan to do to address them. Then, ask the supervisor if this plan will address her/his concerns (if you were to carry it out). If the supervisor says, "yes," do what you said you will do. If the supervisor says, "no," ask for suggestions about how to improve the plan.
- 3) If you and your supervisor disagree about the legitimacy of one or more of her/his criticisms, indicate that it appears you see these things differently, name the difference in a neutral way, and ask questions to clarify your understanding of why s/he sees things the way s/he does and how s/he arrived at her/his conclusions. Think about the answer s/he gives you. If what s/he says makes sense to you, suggest a plan to address the concerns and make sure your supervisor agrees with it (see #2 above). If what s/he says does not make sense to you, you may need to ask more questions until it does.
- 4) If there are objective criteria that might be used to help bring your perceptions and those of your supervisor closer together, suggest using them. This will demonstrate your willingness to address the supervisor's concern(s) as well as your willingness to use fair methods to assess whether or not you are making the desired changes. For example, if you have different perceptions of what time you have been arriving at work in the morning, you might suggest using a time clock or agreeing that you'll stop in to say hello to your supervisor when you arrive at work. Or, you and your supervisor could agree to ask a specific individual to verify the time of your daily arrival. The criteria you use are less important than the fact that you and your supervisor agree about them.
- 5) If you believe the supervisor has drawn inaccurate conclusions without considering all the relevant facts, use the phrase "given that" and ask questions about how s/he would like for you to have handled the situation differently – or how s/he would like for you to handle it differently in the future (e.g., "Given that I needed A and B from my colleagues before I could begin working on C, what would you like for me to have done differently when my colleagues did not give me A and B in a timely manner?")