



ESC's New, Free Philanthropic Professional Education



ESC is pleased to announce a new, free, professional education resource, the film "Leading a Nonprofit's Staff" featuring Colleen Harvey, Executive Director of Playworks Illinois. To view this, and all of ESC's free professional education and resources, visit <https://www.execservicecorps.org/training>.

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The Critical "Praise to Criticism" Ratio in Strength-Based Leadership

As practitioners of non-profit leadership, and as change agents, ESC volunteers' key job is to communicate advice and recommendations to groups and individuals who want to change but may not know how best to do so. Sometimes clients might not even know where the problem lies, or they may have fixated on a solution that won't work. How do we communicate suggestions -- that might be received as criticism -- in a way that is most likely to be accepted and then used to move our clients in a positive direction?



The “praise to criticism” ratio in our communications with clients likely needs to be very high for it to be useful. A rule of thumb that is widely believed, though the data underlying it has been questioned, is that the teams which performed best received five times more praise than criticism from their team leaders. Those that performed poorly had leaders who issued more criticism than praise. One way to improve even the worst performance is to lighten up on the negative and accentuate the positive.

It turns out that in both love and business, individuals don't do well if they mostly think they are doing it all wrong. Marriage counselor John Gottman found a similar pattern in marriages that succeeded as compared to those that failed: high (5:1) ratios of praise to criticism marked the strong marriages while the failed marriages were marked by more fault finding than praise.

The recommended technique of apportioning criticism has been likened to an “iron fist in a velvet glove,” by Bob Lutz, vice president of General Motors. It's also been compared to a sandwich -- praise is the thick bread on the outside, while the criticism is the thin slice of meat within.

Criticism is important, however. Without it, growth does not occur. So the trick is in the packaging. Even well-intended criticism can be counterproductive if it is met with defensiveness, denial and mistrust.

Humans generally have a much easier time receiving negative feedback if it is wrapped in a pleasing package. For many of us, wrapping our critiques into velvet gloves is a matter of second nature to us in our role as leaders. For others it takes practice and conscience shifting toward looking for and communicating positives. This is especially true when the room for improvement is great. As change agents, our job is to become conscious and consistent and communicate in a way that is most likely to be heard. If that means finding much more to praise than to blame, we may need to look harder for the positives that may come naturally. Our efforts will be amply rewarded by our clients' increased willingness and ability to change.

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