

The sandwich feedback method: Not very tasty

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ABSTRACT

When correcting employee behavior and providing negative performance comments, managers are often encouraged to begin with something positive and are frequently instructed to use the “sandwich method” in which one inserts (or sandwiches) criticism between two positive remarks. Although offered by many well-intentioned management trainers and organizations as an effective and humane way for bosses to communicate how badly an employee is doing something, this commonly used method may be undermining both the supervisor’s feedback and the relationship with their workers. After reviewing this method of corrective guidance, the authors discuss why leaders use the sandwich approach, the problems presented by this technique, and then offer an effective alternative procedure managers can use to address problematic workplace conduct.

Keywords: correcting employee behavior, the sandwich method, employee feedback

“You’re one of the best workers I have—when you’re here; but if you don’t improve your attendance in the next two months, I’m going to have to fire you. You’ve got more talent in your little finger than most people have in their whole body and that’s why I’m so worried about you.”

When employees do things that are unsafe, unhealthy, unfair, or destructive to the organization, such misconduct cannot be ignored or allowed to continue. According to Trevino (1992), misconduct can be defined from the manager’s perspective as any behavior that does not meet work standards according to the prescribed moral or technical requirements. Under this definition,” employee theft, drug or alcohol abuse, tardiness, excessive absenteeism or sick leave use, insubordination, and sub-standard work performance may all qualify as misconduct and must be corrected” (Redeker, 1984).

One very common way that managers are often taught to deal with a worker’s poor performance is to apply the sandwich method (Daniels, 2009), also known as the hamburger method of constructive criticism (The Hamburger, 2007) illustrated in the above statement. Managers using this approach to correct problematic employee behavior are instructed to begin with a constructive compliment on something the worker does well (the fluffy bun part) after which they are advised to get to the meat of the matter, which of course is the constructive criticism part. Finally, supervisors are counseled to end with another constructive compliment (i.e., the other half of the fluffy bun). The intent is to reduce defensiveness, enhance useful communication, and make the input better tolerated by the person receiving the coaching (Nelson & Quick, 2013). Briefly, this approach is illustrated below in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The sandwich protocol.



In using the sandwich technique the supervisor wants to correct some employee bad behavior while simultaneously protecting the worker’s self-esteem and increasing the individual’s receptivity to changing his or her problematic conduct in the future. This practice often makes the *supervisor* feel more comfortable because s/he believes they are protecting the worker’s ego in bringing up positives while still addressing unwanted or ineffective employee behavior and the negative consequences for its future occurrences—which was the point of the conversation to begin with.

While the supervisor may feel good because they perceive themselves as being positive and upbeat, the employee, on the other hand, often becomes confused as to what is really happening and the message of the manager regarding the negative employee behavior is diluted. If continued over time, the employee may learn that praise from a supervisor is a prelude to a rebuke from the manager. The reaction to supervisory-initiated positive reinforcement soon becomes, “What have I done wrong now?” and workers become anxious waiting for something inevitably bad to happen, since the positive comment has become a precursor to criticism. As an unintended consequence, this procedure makes reinforcement less credible at other times.

Sandwiching detracts from the reinforcement value of the positive comments and diminishes the corrective value of the punishing consequences (Daniels, 1989).

This article discusses this common managerial error, why leaders use the sandwich approach, and the problems presented by this technique. The authors then provide an alternative procedure managers can use to address problematic workplace conduct. This is followed by a series of guidelines and a conclusion.

Why Leaders Use the Sandwich Approach

There are numerous reasons why managers use the sandwich technique. Schwarz (2013) offered several reasons: “first, they think it is easier for people to hear and accept negative feedback when it is sprinkled with positive feedback; second, they assume the sandwich approach provides balanced feedback; and third, they believe that giving positive feedback with negative feedback reduces worker discomfort and anxiety”. Regrettably, these supervisors simply assume these reasons to be true without any corroborating evidence from the management literature (Daniels, 1989; 2009). Interestingly, when these leaders were asked to query their subordinates on how they preferred to obtain feedback on their job performance, most employees stated that they only wanted the substance (the meat) without the bread—the censure without the niceties (Schwarz, 2013)! Another interesting finding was that leaders admitted that they used this particular approach since *they* find giving negative performance feedback too stressful. Managers found it to be more relaxing by beginning the discussion with the employee by starting first with positive comments. In spite of this, “easing in” will often produces anxiety rather than preventing anxiety. The lengthier the conversation without providing appropriate corrective feedback, the more uncomfortable managers became. Subordinates sensed their discomfort and then became more anxious and worried.

Other reasons why leaders may use the sandwich method surround the issues of optimism and being positive. Managers are encouraged to be upbeat based on two fundamental motivational perspectives: approach and avoidance. Many of the major theorists of motivation and personality have incorporated the approach-avoidance distinction into their conceptualizations (Elliot & Covington, 2001) as fundamental and basic to human functioning. The origin of the approach-avoidance distinction may be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophers Democritus (460-370 B.C.) and Aristippus (435-356 B.C.), who espoused an ethical hedonism that strives to maximize pleasure and avoid pain as the central guide for human behavior. These two perspectives, one approach and the other avoidance, help account for the popularity of the sandwich method.

Approach

The approach perspective holds that individuals move toward those things they find attractive. (Matlin & Stang (1978), stated that there could possibly be no virtue more enviable in the United States than to be an optimistic and positive person. Researchers such as Judge, Erez, & Bono (1998) and Neck & Manz, (2007) stated that management theorists teachers, theologians, philosophers, counseling and sports psychologists and even well-known self-help experts emphasize the importance of being a positive person in order to be able to achieve productivity, happiness, satisfaction, in addition to personal growth and effectiveness The American way of life is replete with stories emphasizing optimism. The French philosopher

Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in 1831 to determine what made the country so vibrant and successful and noted America's optimism and emphasis on the positive. Perhaps such an emphasis on being positive should come as no surprise since it is a cultural byproduct of a country that placed the right to happiness in its 1776 *Declaration of Independence*.

The cultural tradition of positivity still fuels the American dream in the 21st century (Handy, 2001). Many parents raise their children to see the glass as half-full and to recognize that every cloud has a silver lining. Americans are a positive people—cheerful, optimistic, and upbeat: this is their reputation as well as their self-image (Ehrenreich, 2009). Such a positivity *zeitgeist* has become so ingrained in American society that positive seems to not only be normal but also normative—the way a person *should* be. Thus, it is understandable why managers when correcting poor employee performance want to highlight the positive even as they address a worker's poor conduct.

Avoidance

The avoidance perspective holds that individuals try to evade that which they find to be undesirable or disagreeable. This is the case with providing subordinates negative feedback. Such feedback, however, presents a dilemma; most believe it necessary but few want to deliver it (Ilgen & Davis, 2000). Apparently, it is so aversive that it is often neglected (Landy & Farr, 1980; Von Bergen, 2012), frequently leading to future, more serious problems. Many supervisors would rather endure a root canal than deliver negative performance feedback where there are some hard, cold truths that they cannot avoid discussing (Kjerulf, 2008). This perspective suggests, once again, why managers may like the sandwich approach with its emphasis on positive aspects of employee behavior while interjecting a few words about problematic behavior.

Why the Sandwich Method Is Ineffective

The sandwich procedure offers a security blanket for those managers who find it difficult to provide their employees with hard-hitting feedback because of a variety (and in many instances irrational) concerns including fear of offending the employee, the fear of the employee no longer liking the manager, the fear of the employee leaving the company, and especially the fear of disturbing workplace dynamics. Those who advocate the sandwich system contend that this approach becomes the starting point for the discussion, which is a better alternative than not having the discussion. Nevertheless, although many argue for the sandwich it may not be as tasty as some might think, and may actually hinder performance.

Daniels, 2009; Knowledge train, 2013; Petty, 2009; and Wood, 2013 offer the following key reasons why the sandwich feedback technique might be bad practice:

- 1) First, this method becomes a crutch that for the most part benefits the manager giving the feedback—not the employee receiving the feedback—although many managers believe they are implementing such a strategy to help their employees, it does little to increase the effectiveness of the negative consequence on the performance of the person being corrected. The sandwich technique tends to obscure the real meaning and confuses the employee by diluting the main points. This results, in part, because messages positioned in the middle tend to be overshadowed by those at the beginning (the primacy effect) or those at the end (the recency effect). For any presentation,

people are more likely to remember the *first* and *last* parts (Hogarth & Einhorn, 1992).

- 2) Over time when supervisors praise someone for a great job, employees begin anticipating a reproach. Daniels (2009) calls this “the waiting for the other shoe to drop syndrome” (Daniels, 2009, p. 96). Allen and Snyder (1990) relate a story about a supervisor, Alex, who as a result of positive reinforcement training went into an employee’s office and said, “Lisa, I just saw the report you wrote and the letter was excellent. You have saved me considerable time here and I appreciate it.” The worker stared at the supervisor for what seemed to be a very long time before the leader turned to leave. As he was going, Lisa called out, “Alex, what did you *really* come in here for?” His straightforward and sincere compliment made her suspicious.
- 3) Workers are not mindless and if leaders consistently provide performance feedback using the sandwich method, the employees quickly begin to realize the real purpose behind the message was the zinger the manager delivered during the middle part of the discussion. Employees then begin to doubt the manager’s honesty with regard to any of the positive things they do that the supervisor tells them because they are always wondering when the criticism will come.
- 4) The sandwich tactic demolishes the worth of positive feedback when tied to negative performance feedback. Positive feedback can be an effective means to reinforce appropriate behaviors however, the sandwich feedback method diminishes the effectiveness of providing feedback to the employee. Associated with this is the “yes, but” rule, with the classic example being “Yes, you did a good job, but you know you still have a long way to go” (Daniels, 2009, p. 87). Using the word “but” in the middle of a sentence is often interpreted by the receiver of the message as “ignore what I’ve just said, because the important point is coming up.” This causes people to ignore the first part and obsess on the last part. It becomes a prodding, nagging style of management and workers often respond to such statements by indicating that “No matter what you do around here, you can never please _____.” Motivation is decreased, rather than increased as the supervisor had hoped.
- 5) The impact or need for understanding improvement may be weakened. Supervisors should not reinforce what they want and correct what they do not want in the same breath (Daniels, 1989). The worker may fail to recognize the most important aspect of the feedback provided—the correction—and therefore the original objective of providing the critique (i.e. identifying inappropriate behaviors or opportunities for improvement) may not be achieved.
- 6) The manufactured positives supervisors create often provide the person with an overstated and inaccurate understanding of how they are actually performing. Given that many people already have an overly favorable view of their abilities (Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Nowell & Alston, 2007), providing contrived positives may simply lead to further inaccurate self-assessments and make it more difficult for individuals to recognize their performance limitations.
- 7) An employee’s positive qualities tend to remain consistent over time and repeated use of these same qualities in the sandwich results in the outside of the sandwich becoming more and more “stale”(Kislik, 2007). At the same time, the middle of the sandwich keeps changing or expanding because of both unresolved and new problems.

One take away from the above concerns addresses the issue of truthfulness. It appears that the sandwich approach is somewhat disingenuous in order to make the giver of the negative feedback feel more comfortable when correcting worker performance (Johnson & Phillips, 2003). Whether this approach is labeled sugarcoating, softening the blow, or putting the worker at ease, there appears to be an element of opaqueness inherent in the sandwich method that is problematic.

In order for leaders to be most effective however, they must be transparent with regard to the strategies they employ when working with their employees.

For example, Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric (GE) and current management guru noted (Welch & Welch, 2005):

From the day I joined GE
to the day I was named CEO, twenty years later, my bosses cautioned me
about my candor. I was labeled abrasive and consistently warned my candor
would soon get in the way of my career. ... and I'm telling you that it was candor that
helped make it work" (p. 34).

This approach does not call for rudeness, but sincerity in which an individual respectfully calls things the way they see them. Managers who take this approach don't bother wasting time with the usual sandwich feedback approach, therefore subordinates are more open to their honest feedback. Managers who speak directly to their employees actually treat people with greater respect. Employees then accept compliments from their manager and respect that kind of feedback.

Consider the ridiculousness of the transparency scenario presented by Schwarz (2013) using the sandwich approach. In his example, a supervisor might begin by saying something such as this:

"Alex and Stacey, I have some negative feedback to give you. I'll start with some positive feedback to relax you, and then give you the negative feedback, which is the real purpose of our meeting. Then, I'll finish with more positive feedback so you won't be as disappointed or angry with me when you leave my office. How does that work for you?"

Hopefully, most readers will see the absurdity of making such a strategy transparent.

The Sandwich Alternative

If supervisors have corrective feedback to provide someone, the authors believe it is important to deliver it in a straightforward manner. For some managers it might be helpful to also remember the words of noted behaviorist Aubrey Daniels (2001) who indicated, "'Always be positive,' is the worst advice you could ever give or receive" (p. 44), when correcting worker conduct. This may be important for some supervisors who find it difficult to engage in decidedly non-positive behavior required in disciplinary discussions. There are times when a person's conduct does not call for the manager to be positive and pleasing. Management response like this can actually be harmful to a sound performing company, employee, or team success. According to Podsakoff, Todor, & Skov (1982), rewarding employees by forever being positive often results in failing to teach employees and clarify workplace rules.

Proper correcting is not easy. To decrease unwanted performance a supervisor must pay careful attention to several guidelines. Supervisors who follow these guidelines help people do the right thing as well as reduce the chance that they will perform in an undesirable way. These guidelines are summarized in Table 1 and are designed to provide straightforward, direct, descriptive communication with examples about what the employee needs to improve in an honest and sensitive manner.

The authors propose a nine-step approach for correct correcting as listed below in Table 1 and explained in detail. This model could help managers better address work performance and discipline issues more effectively, thereby leading to better performance and a harmonious work environment.

Table1. Guidelines for Correct Correcting

1. Plan the discussion, when possible.
2. Keep positives and negatives separate.
3. Time discipline so as not to be too soon or too late.
4. Focus on the issue regarding employee behavior.
5. Connect the behavioral issue to how the issue impacts the business.
6. State consequences if behavior does not improve.
7. Identify the proper and required behavioral change that the supervisor expects.
8. Ask how the manager can help the worker.
9. Express confidence in the employee's ability to improve.

Plan the Discussion.

If possible, overcome fear of delivering constructive feedback by planning the discussion with the worker and practicing conversation starters by getting politely and directly to the point. Many managers are uncomfortable with discipline conversations and frequently make mistakes (Atwater, Waldman, Carey, & Cartier, 2001). Thus, it may be helpful for these supervisors to consult with their boss and/or the human resources department before the discussion. This will enhance a leader's self-efficacy and confidence in conducting such meetings. Additionally, if a manager finds himself or herself in a situation where correcting behavior is necessary then they should do it without apology. A leader's wording preparation, approach, and specific examples of misconduct will make them more comfortable as the deliverers of constructive feedback.

Keep Positives and Negatives Separate.

Separate the positives from the negatives. Let some time pass between the two. For example, "Jim, I like your report. It is concise and you completed it ahead of schedule. Thank you." The next morning, the supervisor might say, "Jim, I was thinking about your report and if you will make these two changes, I believe the report will be even better." Avoid saying "You did a good job, *but*" Henry Ward Beecher, noted U.S.

Congregational minister, said it succinctly over a hundred years ago: "The meanest, most

contemptible kind of praise is that which first speaks well of a man (*sic*) and then qualifies it with a 'but'" (n. d.).

Timing.

Time discipline so as not to be too soon or too late. Timeliness is also important for worker correction because it increases the perceived connection between the misconduct and the feedback discussion (Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980; Arvey & Jones, 1985). Punishment tends to work immediately and so if a behavior needs to stop without delay, as in matters of ethical and safety violations, then punishment can be used as an effective strategy (Daniels & Daniels, 2005).

Nevertheless, it may be best to not take punitive action without some review. There can be many extenuating circumstances associated with inappropriate behavior. Therefore, supervisors must evaluate the situation thoroughly before deciding on any corrective action. Additionally, delaying criticism may be prudent if the manager is unsure how to administer discipline correctly or has concerns regarding procedural issues (Butterfield, Trevino, & Ball, 1996). Atwater et al. (2001) found that both managers and recipients recognized that managers often make errors in the employee correction process and that these slips were made when managers were "out of control" (p. 267). Thus, it may be desirable to delay punishment if a manager's emotional state would likely lead to an unduly harsh interaction with a worker.

All too frequently, persons in authority tend to criticize subordinates only when they are upset, angry, and no longer able to hold their temper in check (Baron, 1988). Because of the criticizer's strong emotions, feedback is typically delivered in a biting, insulting tone that includes threats of termination, demotion, transfer, and other negative outcomes (Heldmann, 1988). Such criticism is highly dysfunctional. Hence, some delay in administering punishment may be appropriate—but not too much of a postponement. This is because many managers who wait too long to deliver negative feedback to others often let the negative emotion associated with punishment fester and then blow-up at the target employee thus creating an even more difficult situation (Larson, 1986). The feedback they supply then is likely to be ineffective and may exact serious costs for organizational commitment, job-related motivation, and negative attitudes toward supervisors or toward appraisal procedures generally (Ilgen, Mitchell, & Fredrickson, 1981).

Focus on the Behavioral Issue.

A helpful, constructive attitude on the part of the supervisor when providing feedback has been related to numerous positive outcomes such as satisfaction, perceptions of fairness, and motivation to improve job performance (Burke, Weitzel, & Weir, 1978). Ask for the employee's perception of the problem and what is causing it. Encourage the worker to speak candidly and listen carefully to the information given. Keep the feedback focused on job-related behaviors and never criticize someone personally because of an inappropriate action. Telling people they are incompetent, lazy, or the like is almost always counterproductive. It often results in such an emotional reaction that the performance deviation itself is likely to be overlooked.

Link the Issue to Business Impact.

Link the worker failings to their real impact on the business and on the employee's coworkers. Help the worker see where their actions are unfavorably having an impact on their company and their career. Focus, too, on the positive results that will occur with improvement. Describe the impact of the problem (safety issues, the need to reassign work). For example, employee behavior is one of the primary determinants in workplace safety and injury prevention. Employees who fail to follow proper safety procedures could potentially put themselves and their coworkers at risk for injury and resulting legal liability, as well as a resulting loss in productivity. It is appropriate in this step for a supervisor to also get the employee's explanation for the performance issue. Shapiro and Brett (2005) suggest that the ability to express one's view, often referred to as "voice," plays an important role in how individuals judge the fairness of procedures.

State Consequences if Behavior Does Not Improve.

Follow the punitive procedures as stated in the firm's company policy. Employees need to understand the consequences of failure to demonstrate immediate and sustained improvement. Explain what further disciplinary action may result, such as a written warning, suspension, demotion, and/or dismissal. Document the oral warning, including key elements of the discussion. Once again, it is advisable to contact upper level managers and the human resources department to be sure that the contemplated consequences are indeed lawful and appropriate. Supervisor actions overturned by higher level managers or the human resource department reduce a supervisor's effectiveness over the long run.

Identify the Proper and Required Behavioral Change that the Supervisor Expects.

Remind the employee of the acceptable standards or rules. If they are available in writing, provide them to the employee. When a supervisor addresses areas where improvement is needed, he or she must be very specific in describing the unacceptable performance or behavior. For example, if an employee tends to speak rudely to other employees or customers, give the employee some examples of this behavior and provide some alternative positive behaviors the worker could have used. Define the boundaries by letting the employee know what is acceptable and what will not be tolerated. Discuss with the employee a plan for monitoring performance and re-evaluating the employee.

Help the Worker.

Many times it is appropriate for supervisors to ask how the supervisor can help the worker. If it is determined that the employee lacks confidence in their ability to perform as required on the job, then the supervisor should offer some suggestions to resolve the problem, such as additional training, coaching, or mentoring. If the source of the problem is personal in nature, such as marital or financial issues, encourage the employee to seek treatment or counseling, perhaps through an employee assistance program.

Express Confidence in the Employee's Ability to Improve.

Following the entire discussion, rather than provide more positive feedback, use the time to express confidence in the employee's ability to improve his or her performance. Here it might be important to establish an action plan and a critical points timeline that specifies when the supervisor would like information from the employee about their progress in correcting the problematic behavior.

Maintain Appropriate Documentation of the Discipline Administered.

No discussion of worker misconduct can end without addressing documentation. The United States is becoming increasingly litigious and one of the most essential guidelines for handling any and all worker disciplinary action is documentation. The goal of documentation is to memorialize the firm's efforts to address problematic behavior (Clancy & Warner, 1999). When followed regularly, accurate and contemporaneous documentation will add authenticity and credibility to the events leading to the supervisory action and will help the organization prevail against claims of wrongful discharge, breach of contract, and/or discrimination. Taking notes during or immediately after a discipline review will create a record of what happened and support personnel decisions. Maintaining a journal with dated notes of any and all conferences that take place in the manager's office should become routine, and in a litigated matter, could prove invaluable. They should be kept as part of the supervisor's file in a secure area. If there are no documents, the employee is much more likely to win should there be a court case (e.g., *Lloyd v. Georgia Gulf Corp.*, 1992). Additionally, Attorney West, principal at Employment Practices Specialists in Pacifica, California (HR Daily Advisor, 2011), indicated that it is critical to get the employee's explanation for performance issues and to include it in such documentation. Allowing worker input could reveal a reasonable explanation for his or her misconduct. For example, perhaps materials run out at certain times and that is interfering with production, or perhaps there is a child with a terrible illness causing that employee to be 10 minutes late.

Putting all these guidelines together might look something like this: "Tim, you have been late three days this week. I have spoken to you about this before and you know how important it is for you to be here on time because other employees cannot complete their work until you do yours. If you are late again this month, you will be terminated. Now, do you have any questions or comments?" (adapted from Daniels, 2009, p. 97).

CONCLUSION

Baron (1988) found that it was generally not the delivery of negative feedback, *per se*, that produced such unconstructive outcomes such as increased levels of conflict, resentment, and aggression, but rather the manner in which supervisors conveyed such information that seemed to play the crucial role. Baron (1988) observed that discussions about poor performance using constructive criticism (specific, considerate, feedback that does not contain threats of termination or reassignment, or suggestions that an individual's poor performance results from negative internal attributions such as the person being stupid or lazy) did not generate strong feelings of anger and tension nor increase recipients' tendency to adopt ineffective techniques for dealing with poor performance (e.g., making endless excuses, refusing to change). Furthermore, Ilgen and Davis (2000) forcefully argued that giving negative feedback carries with it the

responsibility to convey the message in such a way that will not adversely affect the probability that the person will perform better in the future. Clearly, managers should engage in constructive suggestions with their poorly performing subordinates regarding how they might improve their future behavior.

Implications for Managers

A 2010 study by the Corporate Executive Board (Griffin, 2010) found that companies that encouraged honest feedback among its staff, and rated highly in the area of open communication, delivered a 10-year total shareholder return 270 percent greater than other companies—7.9 percent compared to 2.1 percent. This illustrates the importance of providing effective feedback. But how it is done is equally important as indicated in this paper. While the sandwich approach has been heralded as an excellent way for giving such corrective feedback, this paper has shown that it possesses a number of limitations and, in reality, may do more harm than good.

Of course, in addition to the financial impact on company performance, employees cannot develop their work potential without clear and honest feedback on their performance. Managers, who do not provide this necessary feedback in an effective manner, not only short-change their employees' development, but can also negatively impact overall company performance.

The sandwich method may be more comfortable for the supervisor and s/he will not initially appear as harsh or critical. However, as illustrated here, the sandwich method ultimately comes across as sugar coating over a bitter pill. There is no evidence to support the effectiveness of this technique in correcting current employee behavior and improving future worker conduct. Conversely, "sandwiching benefits the sandwicher more than the sandwichee" (Daniels, 2009, p. 101) and all evidence points to the more direct approach being the most productive way to provide employee feedback.

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