

YOUR CAREER

Talkin' 'bout Writing

How to discuss a colleague's writing while preserving your working relationship and career.

By James Bell

Picture this: You're eating lunch at your desk and a head pokes into your doorway. It's a colleague asking you to take a look at a report he's written before he turns it in to the boss. You know he wants constructive criticism to help him improve the document, but you don't know exactly how to give it to him. You don't want to risk offending him if he doesn't like your suggestions, but you can't refuse to look over the report either.

Chances are you've been in that situation, whether you're someone colleagues trust for feedback or a manager reviewing your staff's work. The question is, how do you respond in a way that helps the person develop as a writer and preserves your working relationship?

Although there isn't one best way to critique someone's writing, there are some general guidelines. Here's how to offer effective feedback without step-

ping too hard on the writer's toes.

Clarify the goal. A request to review writing can come in many forms. Some examples: Would you take a look at this? What should I put in this section? Is this what you wanted? Before you offer feedback, you must determine your purpose. In all cases, you probably want the writing to communicate effectively, adhere to company standards, and uphold a positive image of the company. But which goal do you want to emphasize: editing the text or improving the writer?

If you focus on correcting the text, the document will improve but the writer probably won't. He may not understand the corrections, be over-

whelmed by the number and variety of errors, and learn, above all else, that you're his manager. Here are some tips to lower the anxiety.

- Put the writer in charge. Ask, "What's the main thing you'd like me to look at?" That emphasizes a crucial writing skill: self-evaluation. It also conveys that the writer is responsible for the document and shouldn't expect you to clean it up.

If the writer replies, "Look for everything," say, "I can't read for everything at once. Do you think I should focus on content, organization, sentence structure, grammar and mechanics, or something else?" That list offers the writer a useful hierarchy of concerns. For instance, there's no point fixing grammar

ate, acceptable, or inappropriate. For example, in this sentence, *After the latest changes, we have less assembly-line problems*, *less* should be *fewer* because problems are countable. However, it will be more useful for the writer if you discuss how the sentence may be acceptable in an email message between two crew bosses but inappropriate for the company's annual report.

- Give reader-type responses rather than expert judgments. Instead of saying, "You should move this sentence from the bottom of the paragraph up to the top because it's your main idea," say, "When I was reading this paragraph, I didn't know where it was going until the last sentence, which I think is the main idea." The first comment invokes either acquiescence or argument from the writer. The second comment invites discussion and, ultimately, leaves the decision with the writer.

- Focus on just a few things each pass. Resist the temptation to dry-clean the paper and make it come out exactly the way you want. Correcting every technical and stylistic error will overwhelm the writer and put you in the position of editor. Instead, teach your writers to edit their own work.

- Try to point out something positive about the writing, making your praise as long and detailed as your most in-depth criticism. The employee will likely repeat that element in his or her next writing project.

- Dispel the myth that people either can write or can't write, and if they can write, then they can write anything. Competent writing can be learned and is a process of gradual improvement. Ensure that your writers know that even professional writers must keep sharpening their skills.

- Create a climate in which sharing writing is natural. Asking other managers or staff for feedback on your writing speaks louder than words.

If you focus on correcting the text, the writer may learn, above all else, that you're a good writer and should do all future editing.

whelmed by the number and variety of errors, and learn, above all else, that you're a good writer and should do all future editing. If, however, your objective is to help the person become a better writer, then you have a much more interesting but difficult job to do. We'll assume the latter purpose.

Meet. Meet with the writer at least briefly. Written comments are impersonal, open to misunderstanding, and leave little opportunity for the writer to clarify her meaning. You can request the document before you meet, or, if it's short, read it on the spot.

Try to lessen the writer's anxiety. He may fear harsh criticism and worry

or punctuation errors in a paragraph that will be deleted when the writer reconsiders content.

- Agree on what will happen. State the objective for the meeting and how you'll both achieve it. For example, "I'll read to see whether you have enough support for the purchase requests. If I agree that there might not be enough support, we can brainstorm more ideas." At the same time, you may want to say what you won't do. For example, "I know you have the company style manual, so I won't look for formatting problems. You can catch those."

- Talk less about what's right and wrong and more about what's appropri-

Structure the meeting for success. The following steps facilitate productive talk about writing.

- Step 1: Ask the writer what to focus on and what questions she or he has.
- Step 2: Read silently.
- Step 3: Briefly answer the writer's questions. Suggest an objective—not what you'll do but what the writer will be able to do by the end of the meeting. Then, state how the two of you might accomplish the objective and ask whether the writer agrees. Although that process may sound cumbersome, it needn't take long. Here's an example: "I agree that there's not enough support for the purchase request if it's going to the vice president. One way we could address that is by brainstorming. Does that sound like a good approach to you?"

Rather than collaborating on brainstorming, some writers may prefer to revise based on a model that you create. Others might want you to ask questions to help them generate ideas. You can tailor your approach according to the writer's preference.

- Step 4: Now that you've focused on the writer's chief concern, address one area you consider crucial. The typical hierarchy of concerns stipulates that once the content is sound, you can address organization; once that's logical, you can address sentence structure; and once sentences are in shape, you can address grammar, mechanics, and punctuation.

- Step 5: Conclude by asking what the writer will do next. That checks her understanding and clarifies the progress of the document. If the writing has to be perfect technically, you can ask to see it a final time.

Although you may be a more experienced writer than the person asking you to review, you don't need to rewrite even a small part. Use these steps to create better writers—which will serve your and the writer's purposes better in the long run.

James Bell is sole proprietor of Bell Education and Consulting in British Columbia, Canada; jim11b@yahoo.ca.

Send submissions to **Your Career**, T+D, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; yourcareer@astd.org.