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How Criticizing in Private Undermines Your Team

by Roger Schwarz | 8:00 AM March 25, 2013

You are holding your weekly team leadership meeting. You are discussing with your direct reports how to handle the project delays that have caused the team to miss its quarterly numbers. You know that Ted — one of your direct reports — contributed to missing the numbers by missing two key deadlines. You've seen this kind of behavior before from Ted, and you've seen the team's frustration with Ted. You decide to not say anything to Ted in the meeting, but afterward you privately tell him that how he's letting you and the team down.

If you're like most leaders, you believe in the adage "praise in public and criticize in private." So when a team member does something that negatively affects the team, you usually talk to the team member in private. But this can be a dangerous adage to follow because it significantly reduces accountability, the quality of team decisions, and your team's ability to manage itself. As Richard Hackman said reflecting on his research, "[T]he most powerful thing a leader can do to foster effective collaboration is to create conditions that help members competently manage themselves." Here's why criticizing in private undermines your team, and what you can do to build a smarter team starting today.

Is your leadership team a real team — one in which members are interdependent with each other for meeting team goals? If so, they should also be accountable to each other for working together to achieve those goals, including how they rely on, work with, and make decisions together. Yet when you "criticize in private" for behavior that occurred in a team meeting or affects the team, you undermine team members' accountability to each other. You send the message that team members are accountable only to you, not to the team. You also send the entire team the message that they don't need to hold each other accountable — you'll do it for them. In short, you shift accountability from the team to you.

You also make it more difficult to solve the problem. If you tell Ted his missing deadlines contributed to the team missing its goals, you and Ted may reach an agreement on how he will change his behavior, and that may inadvertently create new problems for other team members. Or Ted may tell you that other team members made it difficult for him to meet his deadlines, that it's not his fault; at that point, you're likely to become a human ping-pong ball, shuttling back and forth between Ted and other team members trying to understand the problem. The information to solve this problem lies with Ted and the other team members.

Why do leaders unwittingly shift team accountability to themselves? First, they've been taught correctly that they're ultimately responsible for the team. Yet they misconstrue this ultimate responsibility and adopt a "one-leader-in-the-room" mindset; they believe that they are primarily, if not solely, accountable for how the team functions, including providing negative feedback to their direct reports. Second, research by Chris Argyris and Don Schön and my 30 years working with leadership

teams shows that in challenging situations almost all leaders try to minimize the expression of negative feelings: If it's difficult for you to give negative feedback, you prefer to do it in private than in the team setting.

Leadership isn't about being comfortable; it's about being effective, even when you're uncomfortable. Smart leaders address ineffective team member behavior in the team setting when it occurs, or when the behavior affects the team. In the team: that's where the information, solution, and accountability are.

In the case of Ted, you could start by saying something like, "I'm noticing two patterns in our meetings. First, Ted, this looks like the third time in a month where you haven't met a deadline for the team. Am I off? [Assuming Ted agrees, you continue.] The second pattern is that each time Ted says he hasn't met a deadline, I notice the rest of you — Fran, Alex, and Sheryl — sigh or shake your head, but you don't say anything to Ted. Am I on target? [Assuming people agree, you continue.] Since these meetings are the place for solving problems and the team can't meet its deadlines if Ted doesn't meet his, I'm curious, what leads you not to say something to Ted in the meetings?

If you want to create a more effective team, you and your direct reports will need to change how you handle accountability. Here's what you can do, starting today:

• Tell your team you've been unintentionally shifting accountability for the team from the team to you. Explain how you see it affecting the team's results and working relationships. Give some specific examples and ask team members how they see it.

• State that you want a team in which members can openly and constructively give each other feedback in the team. Explain how this will help the team. Ask team members for their reactions.

• Ask your team members what they need to hold each other accountable for how the team is working together. They may need team members to share more information about their parts of the business. They may need to learn how to discuss each other's behavior in the team in a way that's productive and doesn't contribute to defensive reactions. They may need to change their mindset so they see themselves accountable to the team, not just you. They may want some assurances from other team members or you.

Take a few minutes at the end of each meeting to discuss how team members are holding each other accountable and how to improve it. Making this shift isn't easy. Investing a few minutes discussing what worked well and how the team wants to improve next time will increase the chance that the team creates more accountability in the future. And that will save time and get better team decisions.