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# RAP

Resident Assistance Program Newsletter  
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## Is it Flak or is it Feedback? What Experts Say About Giving and Receiving Criticism

“Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary,” said Winston Churchill. “It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.”

Whether it comes across as excessive and judgmental or as a casual correction, it’s never fun to be criticized. It can upset us, enrage us, put us on the defensive, deflate our egos or make us feel like giving up. It’s very uncomfortable when an attending physician, a fellow resident, a staff member or a patient is critical of something we’ve said or done. Dealing

with criticism in appropriate ways is part of the successful professional’s skill set. When we are able to accept and then act upon the feedback we get from others, we demonstrate that we are interested in improving ourselves and are adaptable to change.

### Getting Past Defensiveness

“One of the reasons we become defensive when criticized is that our three brains — upper human/ thinking; middle mammalian/ emotional; and lower reptilian/ fight or flight — tend to align around a focus and an expectation,” explains Mark Goulston, M.D., author of *Get Out of Your Own Way*. “When we are met with criticism, what we expected suddenly changes. This is often referred to as ‘being blindsided,’ and it can cause us neurologically to become a little unglued. Our thoughts, feelings and actions no longer fit what we are dealing with.”

Darwin asserted that it is not the strongest, or the most intelligent who survive, but those who are most adaptable to change, Goulston notes. “Our defensiveness is an attempt to

Good communication skills can smooth your way in every personal and work situation. Learning to present criticism in a constructive way can make a difference in your work relationships. So can learning to accept criticism and make adjustments when it’s warranted. Many barriers can stand in the way of getting and giving constructive feedback.

If you find yourself questioning whether you need extra help to become a better communicator during your residency, you have a caring and confidential resource available 24/7: your Resident Assistance Program. Equipped to help you resolve a wide range of troubling, stressful and overwhelming personal and work related issues, RAP professionals will listen to your concerns.

Contact RAP: 813-870-3344

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“You can’t let praise or criticism get to you. It’s a weakness to get caught up in either one.”

- John Wooden

protect ourselves, until we realize it is not the end of the world. Then, we see that we will survive, and that we can adapt to the new situation.”

Goulston, who is also a speaker, coach, consultant and trainer, says that feedback is the best way to learn adaptive skills, and that those skills will serve you better than nearly all other skills. “Adaptive is not to

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## Resources

- *Get Out of Your Own Way and Get Out of Your Own Way at Work*, by Mark Goulston, MD
- *The Success Principles: How to Get from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be*, by Jack Canfield
- Toastmasters International [www.toastmasters.org](http://www.toastmasters.org)
- Kim Crosby, CustomerClix Ltd. [PublicSpeaking@CustomerClix.com](mailto:PublicSpeaking@CustomerClix.com)
- Free public speaking tips: [PeopleMatter@CustomerClix.com](mailto:PeopleMatter@CustomerClix.com)
- "Six Tips for Surviving Medical Residency," blog post by Jacob Goldstein <http://blogs.wsj.com/health/2008/06/25/six-tips-for-surviving-medical-residency/>
- 5 Tips for Not Letting Criticism at Work Get the Best of You," blog post by Lindsay Lavine <http://www.fastcompany.com/3032091/5-tips-for-not-letting-criticism-at-work-get-the-best-of-you?partner=rss>

## Your Resident Assistance Program

The RAP newsletter is provided as a benefit to medical residents at the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine and their dependents.

*We welcome your comments on newsletter topics, however, we cannot provide RAP services by email.*

Gary L. Wood & Associates, P.A.  
4700 N. Habana Avenue Suite 300  
Tampa, FL 33614  
RAP Helpline: 813-870-3344  
[www.woodassociates.net](http://www.woodassociates.net)

### Editor

Patricia N. Alexander, Ph.D.  
[PAlexander@woodassociates.net](mailto:PAlexander@woodassociates.net)

### Writer

Susan H. Burnell, APR  
[SusanBurnellAPR@gmail.com](mailto:SusanBurnellAPR@gmail.com)

## Flak or Feedback? Learning from Criticism

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be confused with being wishy-washy or passive," he says. "Think of it more as being agile."

### How to Invite Constructive Feedback

Jack Canfield, author of *The Success Principles*, suggests asking family members, friends and colleagues the question, "How do you see me limiting myself?" While the answers may seem hard to listen to, "most people find the information so valuable that they are grateful for what people tell them," Canfield writes.

Just as a new author relies on experienced editors to polish, refine and perfect a novel, residents can become better at what they do by asking more experienced physicians, "What would have made that conversation or encounter more effective?"

### Giving and Receiving Constructive Criticism

Professionals who want to develop stronger communication skills along with the ability to give and receive criticism may want to consider joining a local Toastmasters club. Toastmasters International has 292,000 members and 14,350 clubs in 122 countries.

"On the surface, Toastmasters is about helping people to speak more effectively in public," Goulston says. "But you will learn much more, including how to give constructive feedback to your fellow Toastmasters members after they have given a talk."

Learning how to deliver constructive feedback helps you understand its value. "At a Toastmasters' meeting, everyone is given feedback," explains Kim Crosby, Managing Director at CustomerClix Ltd., and a past president of one of Britain's oldest Toastmasters International clubs.

"We are taught to give feedback in terms of Commend - Recommend - Commend," Crosby says. "By doing so, we highlight the positive things people do, and offer ideas for improvement. And, we learn how to do all of this with a level of warmth."

The style of giving feedback matters, Crosby continues. "The person giving feedback should take ownership for the comments. So instead of saying to Bob: 'You did this, you did that,' a good evaluator will say: 'I felt that Bob had a tendency to do...' By taking ownership of the comments, and by stating them in the third person, the delivery is gentler and less confrontational."

"Think of it as coaching," says Crosby. "However, remember that feedback is one person's view. So the recipient of the feedback can either accept or reject another person's viewpoint."

"The greater your skill in delivering constructive feedback and in dealing with conflicts head-on instead of avoiding them, the greater everyone's regard and respect (including your own) will be, Goulston adds. "If you can learn to deliver feedback constructively, you will set yourself apart from the vast majority who don't."