

Take the heat

Peter M. Greco, Associate Editor for Ethics in Orthodontics

Philadelphia, Pa

Jake was referred to you by his general dentist to explore the possibility of aligning his mandibular anterior teeth. He displays an exceptionally thin biotype and has been evaluated by 2 periodontists who provided him with conflicting information. One suggested that he should have gingival grafts placed before orthodontic treatment. The other advocated for initial tooth movement followed by grafting. Jake sought your opinion as a tiebreaker. Because of the tissue deficiency and the root prominence of the anterior teeth, you strongly recommend tissue augmentation before the mandibular teeth are aligned. Jake interrupts before you finish your sentence. “I was afraid of that,” he said. “The periodontist who suggested that sequence was a nice guy, but his office was dirty.” Your facial expression must have betrayed your surprise. You have exchanged many patients, and his clinical care is reliably superb. Jake simultaneously lifts his cell phone displaying 2 photographs of the periodontist’s office. One image displays a clump of dark hair on the beige operatory tiles. The second one portrays a yellowed, cracked keyboard cover in that same operatory. “I won’t go back there,” he says. “Who knows if the tools he uses for my surgery are clean?” You attempt to support the periodontist by affirming his level of care. Jake won’t buy it. But you can’t help wondering if it is your responsibility to discuss the issue with the periodontist. After all, wouldn’t you want to be told if something wasn’t right with your office?

Before you call the periodontist, you script your comments carefully. After the typical niceties, you plan to communicate your appreciation of his clinical skills. You’ll then ease into the issue of office cleanliness and play it by ear as to how to advise him that the issue caused him to lose a patient. You figure you’ll balance the sweet with the sour—and hopefully, it will work out just fine.

In a study involving 87 undergraduate students enrolled in 2 levels of French classes, students were surveyed to determine their preference to receive positive reinforcement (praise) vs negative reinforcement (criticism). The beginner-level students studied basic grammar and pronunciation. The upper-level students

analyzed complex, classical French literature. The results revealed that the beginners preferred praise and encouragement rather than emphasis on enumeration of their errors. The upper-level French students preferred, and even sought, a detailed critique of their work, including specific identification of each of their mistakes. This difference between the groups is at first confounding. But the investigators surmised that the beginners sought emphasis on what they did correctly, and the more advanced students needed recognition of their shortcomings rather than praise of work well done. The beginners used positive reinforcement to justify a worthwhile commitment to their goals, whereas the expert performers yearned to improve their expertise in goals that have already been validated.¹

Psychologists affirm that criticism can be an unanticipated gift that might provide a formidable learning opportunity if the feedback is conveyed unemotionally and rationally. The veracity and relevance of negative feedback should be confirmed by a small cadre of “loving critics” who are authentic in their intent to assist in your improvement.² The criticism should not alienate the criticized from the critic but rather be viewed as a caring gesture and genuine interest in improvement.

One common defense mechanism we subconsciously use to cope with criticism is labeled self-affirmation. Self-affirmation is a reflexive, internal focus on our strengths, which evolves within us when we are criticized. The periodontist might find sufficient solace in his reputation for his clinical skills to graciously accept the embarrassment of your gentle criticism. As a seasoned expert in both business administration and clinical procedures, he should welcome your sincere veracity as a constructive, collegial suggestion to improve his office presentation and his reputation. If he’s smart, he’ll realize he owes you a debt of gratitude.

REFERENCES

1. Finkelstein SR, Fishbach A. Tell me what I did wrong: experts seek and respond to negative feedback. *J Con Res* 2012;39:22-38.
2. Eurich T. The right way you respond to negative feedback. Available at: <http://hbr.org/2018/05/the-right-way-to-respond-to-negative-feedback>. Accessed June 3, 2019.