

up beat

Be firm but fair

Choosing your words well can make delivering criticism easier, writes **Rebecca Martin**.

Owen Firth is a fan of sandwiches – and not just for lunch. With 15 years' experience in managing people, he has found that the best way to give an employee negative feedback is to sandwich it in between a couple of positives. "You need to let people know what they do well, even if that makes the negative stuff seem positive," Firth says.

He doesn't always so confident about giving an employee negative feedback. After working with accountants at a professional services firm, Firth took a job as the assistant financial controller at an IT company.

When his boss left, he found himself promoted to manager and in charge of a team aged between 21 and 60. "I had been used to dealing with professionals and accountants, qualified people who were motivated. They were easy to manage because they self-managed. In the new team, some were qualified, some weren't. I quickly discovered that one method didn't work and that

they were all motivated by different things and I didn't have the experience to deal with that."

Telling employees that their work or behaviour is not up to scratch is one of the toughest things about a management role, yet necessary if any improvement is to be made.

Kathy Adams, of the Australian Institute of Management, trains about 800 middle managers a year and says most struggle with giving criticism. Although many understand how to do it in theory, they don't get it right.

"Either they are too aggressive, or too passive, rather than being honest, assertive and timely. The [feedback] given is also fairly general, and lacks specifics," Adams says. "A lot of managers are fearful [giving negative feedback] will lead to conflict between themselves and an employee. Or they feel they may have a negative impact on employee performance and affect motivation."

The trick is to keep things upbeat, positive and proactive, says Carol Royal, from the Australian School of Business.



Management challenge ... Owen Firth found one approach doesn't suit all employees. Photo: Marco Del Grande

"[You] need to break down what the roles and what the requirements are so everybody is clear," she says. "Then you provide ways in which the employee can improve. If they are not good at, say, managing team members, explain that but also provide a series of steps to help them improve."

Firth had one employee who just ignored the negative feedback she was given. "They were totally doing their own thing," he says. "It was unproductive and wasting time but they had it in their head that they were doing things a better way."

The trick is to keep things upbeat, positive and proactive.

The first conversation about the problem seemed to go well. "She accepted [the negative feedback] intellectually but then just went back to doing it the other way," he says. By the second conversation Firth started to use words like "concerned" in relation to the problem. This time the employee argued the point but seemed to understand him.

"By the third time, when I saw her doing things the other way again, I was quite frustrated."

"I said, 'I need to see you in my office,' as things were starting to bubble up in front of everyone and I don't do feedback in a public forum," Firth says. "She said 'no'. I said, 'You don't have a choice,' and walked into my office and waited for her."

"She came in and kept arguing with me. So I said, 'I think you would be better off in another kind of role somewhere else,'" he says. "It's an extreme example, as normally the nice talk works."

Sacking someone is not usually the desired outcome a manager wants but Adams says it never hurts for other employees to see

where wrong behaviour can lead. "The feedback won't work if the employee knows there are no consequences," she says.

Although the "bad news sandwich" is a handy tool it pays to use it only when needed and to make sure your positive slices are genuinely buttered. "If managers use it habitually, employees cotton on to the fact that that is always the way they are given feedback," Adams says.

"It can be quite transparent and be seen as a process or routine and can have the opposite effect. The key to giving negative feedback is to make it genuine, positive and balanced."

It also can't be personal. As the frustration mounts with the fact that has again forgotten to send emails or juggled up the spreadsheet, try to remember it is not about you, it is about them. "The feedback needs to be given for the benefit of the employee, rather than the manager getting something off their chest," Adams says. "It's about improving productivity or behaviour to the benefit of the team."

dangers of criticism

A study by University of Melbourne PhD student Victoria Lim found that management tones are littered with examples of adverse reactions from employees after they've been given a few home truths.

This is not surprising as negative feedback can threaten an employee's ego and cause him or her to lose face, prompting retaliation, hostility, anger and

conflict, according to *Communicating Negative Feedback: The Tactics Managers Use*.

"In [one] study, workplace aggression was a problematic employee reaction to negative feedback," Lim says. "For example, spreading unkind rumours about the manager, ignoring the manager, threatening some form of retaliation and physical attacks."