

Tools You Can Use!

The Project Status Report: How to Coach, not Crush, your Employees

Your people have been working on an important project and now they are reporting their progress to you, perhaps in front of your own executive group. Of course they are using PowerPoint; nearly everyone these days presents everything to you in PowerPoint.

You spend a lot of your time listening to these bore and snore presentations; and sometimes you wish you were getting more value from the time spent. You can, by recognizing one simple fact: rarely are you watched as closely by subordinates as when you are listening to a presentation. Everyone who might conceivably make a presentation to you will be calibrating your slightest reaction, looking for insight into how to please you and how to avoid criticism. Exploit this simple fact. You can coach your subordinates on how to add value with their presentations, not by sending them off to expensive and time-consuming training, or lecturing at them yourself, but by how you behave when they are in front of you.

You are looking for insightful analysis and practical solutions. The issue is important or you would not be spending your time on it. You have your own ideas on what will work, but you wanted your subordinates to run with it. Of course, you want to be involved in the dialogue along the way, that's why they are presenting to you. It's not as difficult to get more for your money as you might think. Six simple rules can help you get more value from your time and that of the presenters:

1. **At the outset** of each presentation, ask the presenters what stage of their project they are working on and presenting, and in what areas they would particularly like feedback, coaching or advice. This sets everyone's expectations to the same level. They may very well shrug and say, "All of it, I guess", but it will create a more reciprocal environment and you have just learned something about the presenters.
2. **Try to listen** to the entire presentation - grit your teeth and don't say anything until the end or until the presenter stops and asks for feedback. Jot down notes so you don't worry about forgetting to ask something. Don't try to remember your questions – that will interfere with your ability to listen critically.
3. **Preface any critical comments with the positives.** If there are areas of their endeavor that you legitimately believe were well done, say so. Try to be as specific as possible -- positive reinforcement is your most powerful tool for shaping behavior. (Negative feedback can only extinguish behaviors; positive reinforcement alone can increase the frequency of desired behaviors.) If there is nothing positive to say about the presenters' content or process but they put a lot of time and effort into the presentation acknowledge that. However, if there really is nothing good about any aspect of the work, do not make something up just to be nice.
4. **Start with questions of clarification.** Ask questions such as "When you said X, what did you mean?" and listen carefully to the answer. Follow up with coaching questions, such as:
 - "What did you want to achieve with that approach/process/interaction?"

- "How satisfied were you with the outcome".
- "What else might you try?"
- "What have you learned so far in working on this project that will help you with others?"

If the presenters have brought up obstacles resist the urge to offer advice or make a snap decision. Instead, involve the presenters in removing the obstacle through questions such as:

- "What's stopping you from achieving/doing X?"
- "What help do you need?"
- "What would you recommend?"

If the presenters are unable to advance the discussion, ask the other meeting participants if they have ideas or experience that would be helpful. If there is dead silence, let that silence work for you; someone will start the discussion.

Worst case, ask the presenters if they think the project is really worth pursuing.

5. **Before giving constructive criticism and advice ask yourself** if their approach is genuinely off-track or just different from what you would do. This is particularly important for diverse teams. Different cultures will approach an issue with very different assumptions, resulting in different approaches and possibly different conclusions. Because they started from different assumptions than you did, their approach may offer advantages that you didn't consider.
6. **When giving advice** or criticism be clear, specific, and succinct, using descriptive and non-judgmental terms. Avoid sarcasm. If the product does not meet your standards explain what is required and why. When a report or presentation is a good example of the standards you expect, explain why and circulate it to the whole team.

There are two traps best avoided; one laid by you for the unsuspecting presenter and the other set by presenters to avoid arousing your displeasure.

1. **Avoid slipping into a Socratic Dialogue**, that is, using a series of pointed questions to manipulate the presenter into arriving at your viewpoint or solution. Likened by one executive to a vulture picking a corpse clean, this approach teaches subordinates that all presentations should confirm the wisdom of the boss's idea.
2. **Stay out of the grimble**; focus your attention on assumptions, logic, and conclusions. If you have concerns about the validity or reliability of the underlying raw data, suggest the presenters meet with subject matter experts or functional leaders to identify and resolve any data-related issues.

It will take consistent behavior from you over a couple sessions before your subordinates understand things are different and begin anticipating your questions. The benefits to you will be greater insight into your subordinates' thinking, more creative solutions, and a better use of your time. Your subordinates will benefit from spending more time thinking through substantive issues and less time designing killer slides.