

Criticize Indirectly

If you need to criticize, don't make it a direct frontal assault. Do it indirectly. Do it with subtlety - with humor if you can - but never sarcastically. This is a corollary to "never tell people they're wrong." What you want to do is lead them into accepting the fact that there is room for improvement, and that there is cause for congratulations on what they've achieved so far. **You always want to let them know that you've seen effort and growth.** That assures them that you acknowledge them and you appreciate them.

The most important part of Dale's lesson is about the one little word "but" that needs to be changed to "and." We often say, "That was good *but*..." Notice what Dale says about it. If you give a compliment and follow it with "but," then you do several things. *First*, you negate the compliment - it might as well be left unsaid. *Second*, you sound insincere about the compliment - so you're worse off in their eyes than if you'd never said it (you're a phony now and untrustworthy). *Third*, you imply that the person is a failure - because by negating the compliment, they have nothing left to show for their efforts.

By following the compliment with the word "and," you make the area of improvement less obvious. That is, the thing that needs change becomes less direct. It is no longer the main topic of what you're saying. "That was good, and I know you're going to continue..." By using "and," you show not only that you acknowledge that growth has taken place, but you have confidence in them, that they will continue on the right path. So you've blessed their past, and you've given them a fine reputation to live up to in the future. **You are seeing them as they can be, not as they are.** That's a leadership skill.

One word of caution: some folks are smarter than you think. If you never give an unconditional compliment - "That was *good*." with a big old period on the end of it - then they may feel that they can never live up to your expectations. They give up. They learn helplessness (remember those randomly shocked dogs?). We're in the business of instilling hope, not helplessness. So let's not fall into that trap. I made that mistake with my kids. I never complimented them enough. I thought I'd make them conceited, I guess. Right motive, wrong outcome. Heap loads of compliments that end with a period on people before you ever try to correct them.

I might add that *silence* is not a compliment. If people, especially kids, do things right all the time, but never hear a kind word because they haven't done anything wrong, that's just as harmful as criticizing them. It ignores them. It marks them as unworthy of admiration. That's what they feel. That's how I was raised, and it was how I tended to raise my own kids. They never felt quite worthy enough. They found themselves desperate for admiration from anyone who would say a kind word to them. That's sad. Don't treat people like that. It's wrong, and it's mean.

Leadership principle: *The first step on the road to success begins inside our heads. Until we grapple with our past failures and conquer our sense of inadequacy, we will never be able to handle success.*
Richard Doebler.