

## **The Sandwich: I Won't Bite**

### **by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP**

There are literally thousands of leadership courses for managers. In most of them, one of the techniques advocated is called the "sandwich" method. The recommended approach when a leader has a difficult message to deliver is to start with some kind of positive statement about the other individual. This is followed by the improvement opportunity. Finally, the leader gives an affirming statement of confidence in the individual. Some people know this method as the C,C,C technique (compliment, criticize, compliment).

The theory behind the sandwich approach is that if you couch your negative implication between two happy thoughts, it will lessen the blow and make the input better tolerated by the person receiving the coaching. The problem is that this method usually does not work, and it often undermines the credibility of the leader. Let's examine why this conventional approach, as most managers use it, is poor advice.

First, recall when the sandwich technique was used on you. Remember how you felt? Chances are you were not fooled by the ruse. You got the message embodied in the central part of the sandwich, the meat, and mentally discounted the two slices of bread. Why would you do that? After all, there were two positive things being said and only one negative one. The reason is the juxtaposition of the three elements in rapid fire left you feeling the sender was insincere with the first and last element and really only meant the central portion.

A manager might be able to slip the sandwich technique past you at the start of a relationship. At that point, you do not have a pattern to guide your subconscious thought. Later, if the manager has a habit of using the sandwich, you will become so adept that you will actually hear the second and third part of the sandwich coming up before they are even uttered by your manager.

This interesting phenomenon also occurs in e-mail exchanges. Managers often use the sandwich approach in an e-mail. It might sound like this:

"Your review of the financial information this morning was excellent, Mike. The only improvement I can see is to use more charts and fewer tables of figures to keep the meeting more lively. Given your strong track record, I am sure you can make this tiny adjustment with ease."

If you know this boss well, you can anticipate there is going to be a "but" in the middle long before the boss brings it up. The last part is a feeble attempt to prop you up after the real message has been delivered. If you received this message, chances are you would have internalized the following: "Stop putting everyone to sleep with your boring tables and use colorful charts to show the data." You would probably miss the compliment at the start because it was incongruent with the second message, and you would certainly discount the drivel at the end of the message because it was insincere.

It is not **always** wrong to use a balanced set of input, in fact, if done well, it is helpful. If there really is some specific good thing that was done, you can start with that thought. Make the sincere compliment ring true and try to get some dialog on it rather than immediately shoot a zinger at the individual. Then you can bring the conversation to the corrective side carefully. By sharing an idea for improvement, you can give a balanced view that will not seem manipulative or insincere. Try to avoid the final "pep talk" unless there is something specific that you really want to stress. If that is the case, then it belongs upfront anyway.

Examine your own communication with people, especially subordinates, to reduce the tendency to use the sandwich approach mechanically, particularly if you have to stretch to find the nice things to say. You may find it hard to detect the sandwich in your spoken coaching, but it will be easier to spot in your written work. The habit is particularly common when writing performance reviews or when trying to encourage changes in behavior.

The sad thing for the boss is that he or she was actually taught that the sandwich technique is normally a *good* thing to do. That makes it easy to fall into a pattern of doing it subconsciously and not realize that it is actually lowering your own credibility, unless it is used very carefully, because you come across as insincere. How can you reduce the tendency to use the sandwich approach if you already have the habit?

The first antidote is to become aware when you use it. That means you need to be especially alert when giving verbal input. It also means proofreading notes where you are rating people or trying to change behavior. When you see the sandwich being used, change it. Give the request for modified behavior with no preamble or postscript in the same breath. Just frame up the information in as kind a way as you can, but be sincere in your words. Do share a balance of positive and negative things as they apply, but do it naturally, not in a forced, 1,2,3 pattern.

A second way to stop using the technique is to teach others to stop using it. The best way to learn anything is to teach it to others. As you help others see their bad habit, it will remind you that it sometimes shows up in your own communication. If you can reduce your tendency to use the sandwich approach by 50-80%, you will become a more polished and effective leader.

The third way to prevent this problem is to encourage the teachers of "Management 101" to stop suggesting this technique in the first place. It is not an effective method of changing behavior. Instead teach leaders to give both positive and corrective feedback in a natural way and only include sincere and specific praise, never force something to butter up the other person. People have a keen ability to sniff out insincere praise, especially if it is just after being corrected for doing something wrong.

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