

To keep the creative juices flowing, employees should be receptive to criticism

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Attention managers: the next time you need to inspire your team creatively, be more attentive to your employees' feelings when you deliver negative feedback. Though most firms today embrace a culture of criticism, when supervisors and peers dispense negative feedback it can actually stunt the creative process, according to a new study co-authored by Yeun Joon Kim, a Ph.D. student at the University of

Toronto's Rotman School of Management.

Kim, who worked as a [software engineer](#) for Samsung before pursuing his graduate studies, is familiar with having his [creative work](#) scrutinized—and at times, picked apart. His previous professional experience actually inspired the thinking for his latest paper, which is in press with the *Academy of Management Journal*.

"I personally hate hearing negative [feedback](#)—as most people do—and I wondered if it really improved my performance, particularly when it came to completing creative tasks," says Kim, who in May will join the Cambridge Judge Business School as an assistant professor.

This is an issue that many other researchers are curious about, as well. The literature has been mixed when it comes to determining whether [criticism](#) inspires or inhibits [creative thinking](#). In this new investigation, Kim and his co-author Junha Kim, a Ph.D. student at Ohio State University, observed—through a field experiment and a lab experiment—and reported on how receiving negative feedback might impact the creativity of feedback recipients.

In both studies, Kim found that negative feedback can help or hinder creativity. What is most important is where the criticism comes from.

When creative professionals or participants received criticism from a boss or a peer, they tended to be less creative in their subsequent work. Interestingly, if an individual received negative feedback from an employee of lower rank, they became more creative.

Some aspects of these findings seem intuitive, says Kim.

"It makes sense that employees might feel threatened by criticism from their managers," says Kim. "Supervisors have a lot of influence in

deciding promotions or pay raises. So negative feedback from a boss might trigger career anxieties."

It also stands to reason that feedback from a co-worker might also be received as threatening. We often compete with our peers for the same promotions and opportunities.

When we feel that pressure from above or from our peers, we tend to fixate on the stressful aspects of it and end up being less creative in our future work, says Kim.

What Kim found most surprising was how criticism proved to be beneficial for supervisors when the negative feedback came from their followers (employees that they manage).

"It's a bit counterintuitive because we tend to believe we shouldn't criticize the boss," says Kim. "In reality, most supervisors are willing to receive negative feedback and learn from it. It's not that they enjoy criticism—rather, they are in a natural power position and can cope with the discomfort of negative feedback better."

The key takeaways: bosses and coworkers need to be more careful when they offer negative feedback to someone they manage or to their peers. And feedback recipients need to worry less when it comes to receiving criticism, says Kim.

"The tough part of being a manager is pointing out a follower's poor performance or [weak points](#). But it's a necessary part of the job," says Kim. "If you're a supervisor, just be aware that your negative feedback can hurt your followers' creativity. Followers tend to receive negative feedback personally. Therefore, keep your feedback specific to tasks. Explain how the point you're discussing relates to only their task behavior, not to aspects of the person."

And, in general, be kind and attentive.

"Don't criticize recklessly. Anyone who wants to offer [negative feedback](#) on the job should do so—discreetly and sensitively."

Provided by University of Toronto

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