Master “the ask”

Would you rather be criticized and told what to do, or be helped and learn a new skill?

By: Leslie Whitaker, CTW Features

If you can keep in mind that the obvious answer — the latter — applies to both you and your co-workers, you will fare better when you need to point out someone else’s mistakes.

“When you learn to make that distinction and put it into practice in your own life, you will soon learn that it does much more than make for painless conversations. It changes everything about the relationship between you and the people around you,” writes corporate trainer Richard S. Gallagher, author of *How to Tell Anyone Anything: Breakthrough Techniques for Handling Difficult Conversations at Work* (AMACOM, 2009).

Gallagher acknowledges that stressing the positive, especially when you’re angry and need to correct a colleague, takes a lot of practice. But it is worth the effort.

The artful use of questions can help ease the way. If someone misses a deadline and offers to explain, for instance, you can do the usual — express frustration and say “I don’t want to hear it.” Or you can respond with a “good question,” such as “What challenges did you face?” Because this more constructive approach doesn’t put the other person on the defensive, it can create “the space,” Gallagher says, for a more productive dialogue about what went wrong and how to prevent a recurrence.

Asking questions also is heralded by Casey Hawley, a communications consultant, in *10 Make-or-Break Career Moments: Navigate, Negotiate, and Communicate for Success* (Ten Speed, 2010). If you suddenly find yourself standing next to your department head or CEO, for example, it’s common to feel tongue-tied. Asking a thoughtful question is one smart way to initiate conversation. Do not play “stump the CEO” by asking tricky questions, Hawley warns. Rather inquire about an issue she cares about: “What’s your take on that?”

Whether you are trying to impress or correct, strategic question-asking can help you two ways. You will leave a positive impression, and you may even learn something valuable in the process.