

## CAREERS

# You're not Elon Musk: Here's how normal people should critique their superiors

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As one of the world's richest men, Elon Musk is uniquely insulated when airing grievances.

Most people, though, should share negative feedback with higher-ups privately, career experts said.

Start with something positive and authentic about the individual before launching into criticism.

## Disagree with the boss?

Badmouthing a higher-up publicly, like how Elon Musk this week called President Trump's signature bill "a disgusting abomination" on X, won't make sense for most people. But career experts said there are other, more practical ways to deliver negative feedback to a superior.

"No one recommends taking to social media to criticize your boss," said organizational psychologist Alison Fragale, especially if your name is attached and you're seriously looking to drive change.

"Though you might get a lot of thumbs up, it also comes with a lot of risky downside," Fragale told Business Insider.

## Getting loud generally isn't the best strategy

As one of the world's richest men, Musk is uniquely insulated when airing grievances. The CEO of Tesla, Space X, and several other companies wields exceptional power and status, and being outspoken is part of his personal brand.

For the rest of us, taking an offline, confidential approach to voicing discontent is generally best since it avoids embarrassing the recipient and inviting backlash, said Yale University management professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld. That's a lesson many big-company CEOs have used in recent weeks to push back against the president's significant tariff hikes.

"They've managed through private collective action to get him to move considerably," said Sonnenfeld. "They went in with the facts. They didn't try to publicly humiliate him."

Musk didn't call out Trump by name in his social-media posts criticizing the president's bill, which includes cuts to Medicaid and an extension of the tax cuts that Trump and Republicans enacted in 2017. His messages, though, land as a personal attack because Trump has been aggressively touting the bill, calling it "beautiful" and pushing for Congress to pass it.

"It will be the biggest Tax Cut for Middle and Working Class Americans by far," Trump wrote on Truth Social last month.

Musk has said that the bill will increase the nation's already bloated deficit, undermining the months of work he put in at the Trump administration's Department of Government Efficiency.

On Wednesday, Musk asked Americans to take action to try to stop the bill from passing.

"Call your Senator, Call your Congressman, bankrupting America is NOT ok! KILL the BILL," he said on X.

## When and how to raise concerns

In the workplace, career gurus generally advise people to only pipe up about concerns that impact multiple workers or a company at large. Personal grievances are best handled through a direct manager, human resources, or an employer's complaint hotline.

"Not every truth needs to be said out loud," said Fragale.

A collective voice creates legitimacy, which is why she also recommends gathering allies and having at least one by your side when you're ready to speak out.

Consider whether you're the best person to raise the matter to someone at the top of the corporate ladder if you lack status or haven't earned the person's respect.

"I have outsourced almost every aspect of my kids' education, not because I don't know how to swim or ride a bike, but because they won't listen to me," Fragale said.

Meanwhile, keep in mind that you may not have all the facts as to why a superior made whatever decision you have beef with, said Bill George, an executive fellow at Harvard Business School. It's possible your criticism is unwarranted, so he recommends couching your critique as being based on what you know.

"Sometimes CEOs have to make decisions for reasons that aren't apparent," George, who was CEO of the health-technology company Medtronic earlier in his career, said. "You have to understand the whole context."

Only speak up to a superior when you have something meaningful to point out, said Candice Pokk, a senior consultant at human-resources consulting firm Segal. "It needs to rise to the level of their position," she said.

Some business leaders say they are receptive to negative feedback as long as it's conveyed respectfully.

When George was Medtronic's CEO, a manager privately told him that he'd hurt several employees' feelings during a group meeting. Though he stood by the substance of his remarks, he apologized for how he relayed them and said the feedback made him think differently about his communication style.

"It caused me to reflect on it," he said.

To share negative feedback, start with something positive and authentic about the individual before launching into criticism, and keep it brief, Pokk said.

"Executives want information that's bite-sized and easy to understand," she said.

Dishing criticism to someone in a more powerful position can be nerve-racking, no matter how prepared and confident you are.

"Couriers of bad tidings are often fearful that the messenger will get shot," said Sonnenfeld.

Yet being forthcoming can pay off.

"If you're right, you could maybe save lives or save a company," he said.



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