

Receiving and Giving Criticism



by Patti Hathaway

CRITICISM IS AN indispensable part of our lives. If we can understand and use it, criticism can empower us to become better people.

Why, then, do so many of us resist taking full advantage of critical feedback?

One reason we tend to resist criticism is that a good part of our self-image is based on how others view us. When we find that someone sees us in a less than positive light, we may feel devastated.

We like to hear what is consistent with our own views and resist ideas contrary to our beliefs. Criticism implies that we could be wrong. What could be more personal and threatening? It takes an open mind to listen to an opposing view.

Receiving Criticism

As the recipient of criticism, we have more control than the critic, since we can decide if it is valid or invalid, vague or unjustified—and whether we believe the criticism has merit and is worth acting upon.

We experience three stages when coping with criticism:

1. Awareness. You are aware that criticism is “just criticism” and then move quickly to assess its merit.

2. Assessment. You assess how the criticism was delivered, the intention of the critic, and how valid you believe the criticism to be.

3. Action. You decide what action, if any, you want to take with the criticism. Let's examine three actions for dealing assertively with criticism.

- **Fogging.** When faced with unjustified criticism, force yourself to avoid counter criticism or counter manipulating your critic. Instead, use the assertiveness skill, fogging—calm acknowledgment of the possibility that there may be some truth in the criticism.

- **Admitting the truth.** Admitting the truth is very effective when handling valid criticism. However, while you accept it as valid, you do not fall into

exaggerated put-downs and negative self-talk. Avoid over-apologizing or over-compensating for your error.

- **Requesting specific feedback.** When encountering valid criticism, request specific feedback. By asking questions, you can begin focusing on the future instead of dwelling on the past. It moves you directly into the action stage and forces the negative critic to look at potential solutions instead of belaboring your failure. Also, it enlists the critic to be on your side.



Guidelines for Giving Criticism

There are many positive aspects of criticism. Open criticism can relieve stress, stop game playing, clarify expectations, and supply evaluation. Also, criticism can improve interpersonal relationships, as honesty promotes trust and paves the way to intimacy.

Criticism, correctly given, provides feedback that can improve job performance and promote continuing professional and personal development, resulting in higher levels of productivity and morale and in a culture of openness, one component of excellence.

1. Set realistic goals and expectations. The first step we must take before we can give criticism is to let the other person know our expectations of him or her. If we have never shared our expectations, we have no basis on which to base our evaluation or criticism. A question every critic must ask himself or herself is, “Did I set realistic expectations on which to base my evaluation?”

2. Be immediate. Once you mutually agree on expectations, you need to observe the other person's behavior and be prepared to give positive or negative feedback, depending on the outcome of his or her actions. If someone has done a good job, don't just keep quiet: praise that person for it. Criticism can be positive as well as negative, and helpings of the former can help us tolerate doses of the latter. Give the feedback as close to the actual event as possible. Be short and specific. Select a good time, but don't save up your comments until you have a 15-minute litany to discharge. When giving criticism, you should not ask for a complete character change. It is more effective to address one trait or issue at a time.

Be sensitive to timing when you criticize another person. If he or she is already under a great deal of stress, you might elect to wait until he or she would listen to you and do something about the criticism. You might want to put yourself in the other person's shoes and ask yourself how you would feel receiving the criticism at that time. Giving criticism requires compassion, insight, and tact.

3. Be specific. We often omit the step of specifying corrective action. A part of us really wants an apology or some kind of guilt-ridden response from the other person after we tell him or her how we feel. But we need to specify a corrective action. This allows the person criticized to do something about the criticism rather than just defensively react to our expression of negative feeling.

Giving and receiving criticism are essential skills for each of us to master. By opening ourselves to criticism, we learn how to improve ourselves both personally and professionally. If we are completely satisfied with ourselves and unwilling to accept criticism, we won't progress much further in our careers nor experience much growth and satisfaction in our lives. Thomas Edison once said, “Show me a thoroughly satisfied man, and I will show you a failure.”

Providing others with honest feedback in the form of criticism can deepen our interpersonal relationships with them and can provide us—and them—with the tools necessary to improve productivity and self-esteem. PE

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