

## Handling Criticism and Complaints

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**A**lthough some handle it better than others, none of us can claim to like it when we are criticized, especially if the critic knows us well. But when handled properly, criticism can become a multi-faceted opportunity to improve yourself and your performance, to strengthen your relationships and to re-examine your thinking.

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### **Fight or Flight**

Whenever you're being criticized, whatever the circumstances, you're instinctive reaction is the same. Your heart beats faster, your skin temperature goes down, and you even lose peripheral vision. Because you feel under attack, your first instincts are to focus on that feeling, making it more intense. You then feel like withdrawing or retaliating. Just remember that either instinctual response (fight or flight) leaves you with fewer options - not more - so avoid both.

When you focus on your feelings, you are distracted from hearing the content of the other person's comments, leaving you more likely to react rather than choosing how you want to act. Avoid a "face-off" of escalation of comments between the two of you. Instead, imagine a triangle of three entities: the other person, you, and the topic of the criticism. Picture the two of you staring at the criticism, the third point in the triangle, to work through the comments, rather than staring each other down, where one person has to be wrong.

### **Focus on the Positive**

Look to other people's positive intent, especially when they appear to have none. You are your most disarming when you compliment someone else for taking the time to give you feedback. You take the wind out of their sails. The other person might even backtrack.

Yet our first instincts are to look for the ways we are right and others are less right. In responding to criticism, the momentum of defensive emotions builds fast. Why? Because we mentally focus on the smart, thoughtful, and "right" things we are doing, while obsessing about the dumb, thoughtless, and otherwise wrong things the other person is doing, leading us to take a superior or righteous position, get more rigid, and listen less as the criticism continues.

Difficult as you might find it, try staying mindful of your worst side and the other person's best side as you engage in responding to the criticism. You will probably be more generous and patient, thus increasing the chances he will see areas where you might be right after all. Act as if he means well, especially if he appears not to - not for his sake, but for yours.

### 1. Acknowledge the Critic

Acknowledge that you heard the person - with a pause (buys time for both of you to cool off), a nod, or a verbal acknowledgment demonstrating you heard. Whether the criticism is justified or not, an attempt to avoid discussing it will loom large in the minds of bystanders and stick to you like flypaper as you attempt to move on. Do not disagree or counterattack.

Prove you have heard the person's comment perhaps by saying, "I understand you have a concern" rather than "You shouldn't have." Avoid blaming or "bad-labeling" language such as "That's a lie" or "You don't know what you're talking about" which only pours hot coals on the heat of escalation and hardens the person into a position with an urge to elaborate.

Take this moment of acknowledgment to reflect on the kind of criticism you are facing. There are four basic types:

**Concerned Criticism** – This criticism is based on concern for you as person. The person giving the critique genuinely cares about your well-being. Concerned criticism is tactful and gentle. It is helpful, considerate and usually easy to accept.

**Constructive Criticism** – This type of criticism is focused on improving your behavior. It points out what is wrong in order to help you do better. Constructive criticism moves beyond the problem and suggests alternative behaviors. It then provides encouragement and support for the new behaviors.

**Casual Criticism** – Casual or uncaring criticism is difficult to receive. It is often blunt or harsh. It is frequently a result of poor judgment and based on a lack of knowledge and understanding. It may be more false than true.

**Confrontational Criticism** – This criticism is hostile and may be based on anger, fear, jealousy or similar negative emotions. It often has an ulterior motive or hidden agenda. It is the most difficult criticism to handle and need not be taken seriously.

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## **2. Concede Goodwill or Ignorance**

Take criticism as friendly. This attitude is for your peace of mind, not your critic's. When you concede goodwill, you disarm any negative attitude in the critic and encourage him to become an ally. Brian Tracy calls a person with this goodwill attitude "an inverse paranoid." In reality, everyone is not out to help you, but by holding the belief you avoid becoming defensive toward criticism or the critic.

What about when the person really is out to get you, as in confrontational criticism? In that case, concede ignorance. When someone says something hostile toward me, I like to picture the following scene: I see myself helping an elderly blind man across the street when a bus buzzes by and spooks him. The blind man begins to strike me with his cane. I defend myself and calm him down, but I don't hit him back, and I don't get mad. Why? Because he is blind and doesn't understand the situation. The same is true of your hostile critic.

Ask for more information so you both can cool off more and stay focused on the issue, not the feelings or personalities. Go slow to go faster later in reaching agreement about how to resolve the criticism. Try to warm up to the part of the person you can respect. Focus on the positive part of her mentally, and refer to it verbally: "You are so dedicated" or "knowledgeable" or whatever self-image leads her to criticize you. The more fully the other person feels heard, the more likely she will be receptive to your response, whether to agree or disagree.

## **3. Be Objective, and Seek Common Ground**

Examine the reasons behind the criticism. Is it deserved? Ask yourself, what is the amount of truth in this criticism? Ask a friend if he thinks the criticism is true. If it has little or no truth, then reject it from your mind and life. Ignore untrue criticism. Eleanor Roosevelt said, "Living in the public eye accustoms one to accept criticism. One learns gradually to take it objectively, and to try to think of it as directed at somebody else, and evaluate whether it is just or unjust."

If possible, align with something the other person has said with which you agree. That is, first speak to the common ground you feel is not in dispute. There may be only one, apparently small point, but starting with the positive creates some momentum forward. If, in listening, you can find no point of agreement, refer to the part of the person's positive self-image that might have inspired him to raise his concerns. For example, you might say, "I understand you want to be very thorough in how you approach these matters" or "I know that you really care about this project."

## **4. Treat Factual Criticism as an Opportunity**

True criticism gives you the opportunity to improve some aspect of your life. It can be a warning sign telling you that something in your life needs to be fixed. Solomon said, "He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise. Whoever heeds correction gains understanding." Ask yourself what you can do to improve based on the criticism.

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## 5. Add Your Own Point of View, and Dismiss Untrue Criticism

Add your own point of view, asking permission first. If you believe the other's comments are accurate, say so. If an apology is in order, give it sooner rather than later. Then say what you plan to do differently to respond to the criticism. Ask for the person's response to your comments and again say thanks for being thoughtful in offering them. If you find truth in the criticism, the sooner you verbally agree, the more likely you will engender respect from the other person and any others who witness the interaction. In fact, if you tell others who are important to that person that you were wrong and appreciate having it pointed out to you, you will feel and appear more comfortable with yourself.

If, on the other hand, you disagree with the comments, say, "May I tell you my perspective?" This sets the other person up to give you permission to state your view, as you have been willing to listen to his.

After you have honestly considered the criticism, if it doesn't apply to you, forget about it. Write it off. Kick it out of your mind. If the person continues to direct false criticism at you, do your best to avoid that person. Sophia Loren says, "I like criticism when it is constructive; then it helps me. But when someone is critical just to be mean or tear something down, I must go away from that person."

Henry Ironside said, "If what they are saying about you is true, mend your ways. If it isn't true, forget it and go on."

People are most revealing when offering praise or criticism. Praise indicates what they most like about themselves, and criticism often shows what they least like or feel least competent about in themselves, which means criticism is actually a two-way mirror. Responding to another's criticism with honesty and grace, and actually gaining new insights about yourself and the other person in the process, is a tremendous skill that will help you take your business success to a whole new level.

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