

Working With Others: Coping with Criticism¹

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Have you Ever been Criticized?

We are all criticized on occasion. Whether we are a community volunteer, an employee, a member of a family, or a supervisor, we experience criticism. We will probably be criticized during the next few months, whether we are making decisions in community committee, teaching or training others, working in an office, or serving the public.

Criticism can make us feel hurt, angry, vulnerable, guilty, or helpless. Even words from strangers in a parking lot may cause distress. We can dwell on those words for hours, take them personally and overreact, or we can learn from them.

Criticism can be delivered in a variety of ways. It may happen in the form of an evaluation letter, verbal demand, or hallway insult. It may come as a “barb” or “stinger.” It may feel like an attack. But it can be constructive too.

Criticism Defined

(1) To consider the merits and demerits of and judge accordingly; evaluate;

(2) to find fault with; point out the faults of . . .

Syn: criticize, reprehend, blame, censure, reprobate, condemn, denounce - (all) mean to find fault with openly. Criticize implies finding fault esp. with methods or policies or intentions. . .

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary

Learn From It

We can't control whether or not we are criticized. We can, however, control how we respond to criticism. We can also take control of situations when we are being criticized. We can live through verbal criticism without being devastated. We can even learn from criticism and make it work to our advantage.

Implications of Criticism

Criticism, and the way we react to it, can block communication. Hurt feelings and resentment can zap our energy, and prevent us from working together effectively. At its worst, criticism can have a long-lasting negative effect on relationships.

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It helps to step back, evaluate, and let go of these barbs.

Jennifer James

Critic's Intent

Not all critical statements are meant to hurt. A critic's intent may be positive or negative. It's important to determine the critic's intent.

Negative criticism is intended to:

- Be destructive;
- Hurt, humiliate or belittle;
- Manipulate or control;
- Blame or create guilt; and/or
- Get attention.

Positive criticism is intended to:

- Be constructive,
- Help improve a situation,
- Motivate us for positive change, and/or
- Open communication and make us aware.

Coping with Criticism

Prepare Mentally and Emotionally

Coping with a difficult situation is easier when we feel confident. We can develop a positive, confident attitude by reminding ourselves:

- I can cope with criticism when it happens.
- I can learn from criticism.
- I can accept criticism when the critics intentions are good.
- I can be in control of my feelings when I am criticized.
- I can learn to use criticism positively.

Prepare Physically and Intellectually

When we are criticized, emotions may erupt, and emotions can cause physical reactions. Hurt or angry feelings can get in the way of coping. Before we deal with the situation, we need to bring our feelings into balance. It helps to:

- Take long, deep breaths.
- Say, "I need a few minutes to think about that."
- Get rid of extra energy by taking a quick walk.
- Decide whether the criticism is intended to be positive or negative.
- Be prepared to express concern, as you learn more information.

Understand the Moment

- **Know When You're Being Criticized.** Some criticism is obvious, some is subtle. "Listen to your stomach. . . Go back over the last few minutes of conversation and see if you can find the stinger" (James, p.88). Sometimes the critical statement may not be obvious to you until several hours later.
- **Determine the Type of Criticism.** Each time you are criticized, you make decisions quickly to determine what the critic means. Ask yourself: Is this serious, or should it be ignored? How much impact does the critic have on my life?
- **Analyze the Remark.** Examine what was said as data, before you let your emotions get involved. Ask yourself Is this a comment about the quality of my work, or my behavior? Is this typical, negative communication by this person? If the critic has a valid point, am I willing to change?
- **Look Beneath the Negative Comment.** What is happening to the person who is being critical? What is happening at this moment in his or her life? Is this person upset with me or someone else? If you can't figure it out, just ask.

- **Avoid Personalizing the Words.** If the criticism is intended to be hurtful, you can choose not to internalize the message. For the future, you can consider preparing a defense against negative words.
- **Evaluate for Prejudice.** If you think the critical remark is racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive, consider a diplomatic comment, such as: "I don't think or feel that way."

Three Ways to Deal with Criticism

There is not one way to handle criticism. "Applying the right strategy depends on which response works best in the particular circumstances you are in" (James, p. 87). With practice, we can learn to use a variety of techniques and make each one work for us. Here are three effective ways to cope with criticism:

1. Distraction
2. Admit the truth
3. Ask for specific feedback

Technique #1: Distraction

This technique should be used when there is no truth to the criticism.

The Goal

The goal of this technique is to stop the criticism as soon as possible. Later, we can decide whether or not to do something about the situation that provoked the criticism.

Description

We calmly tell the critic that we have heard his/her words. Then we move away from that negative discussion or environment, as soon as possible. Distraction allows the critic to voice his/her opinion, but our response keeps further criticism to a minimum.

What It Does

Distracting allows us to hear the words, without internalizing them or becoming defensive. We are listeners. It allows us to decide what to say or do next.

Distracting Words to Use

"You could be right about that. . ."

"Perhaps I could. . ."

"I think about that too sometimes. . ."

Examples of Unjustified Criticism

"You are ALWAYS late."

"Every time I tell you about a mistake, you get defensive."

Examples of a "Distracting" Response

"Perhaps I'm a bit late this time."

"You might be right, I don't like to find mistakes either."

Do not get caught in the game of saying, "Yes, but. . ." Critics who intend to hurt us are not inviting us to engage in logical communication. The critic does not want to hear reasons or excuses. "Yes, but. . ." may encourage the critic to step up the attack and become even more critical.

Results of the "Distraction" Technique

We choose to be unaffected by manipulative, unjustified criticism. The critic will probably reduce or stop this level of criticism because there is no satisfaction in throwing negative words at us, when we do not react. "You can modify negative behavior by being disinterested in it (James, p. 92).

**"Be thoughtful of the opinions of others.
There are three sides to a controversy - yours,
theirs, and the right one. . ."**

Raygene Paige

Jennifer James offers more suggestions for coping with ongoing, unwarranted criticism:

- **Extinguish It!** "Blink your eyes, yawn, look away. People hate to think that what they are saying is boring to you when they hoped to intensify your attention" (James, p. 93).
- **Give It Back!** Be as direct as you can and send the remark right back. Ex: *I'm sure you did not want to hurt my feelings. Or, Is there a reason you would want to hurt my feelings?*
- **Drape It Over You!** "Go along with whatever is said until the other person gets bored. Take the power out of the remark" (James, p. 94). If you have a sense of humor, you can even

build on the critic's message: *You've gained weight. Aren't you about 20 pounds overweight?* Your response, *Yes. Actually its closer to 25 pounds. Terrible, isn't it?*

- **Register It!** Let them know you noticed the remark, by writing it down, but have decided not to respond to it directly. You might even ask the person to repeat the remark so you can use it for the book you are writing!

Sometimes people say negative things because they are afraid or hurt about something totally unrelated to you. Then the distraction technique involves hearing and letting go.

- **Bury It** Dig an imaginary hole with your foot, drop it in, and let it go. "The ability to forgive and let go is one of the most important survival skills any of us has" (James, p. 91).

Technique #2: Admit the Truth

This technique is very effective when the critic has identified a real concern. The first thing to do when handling valid criticism is to accept it as true, but not fall into exaggerated self put-downs and negative self-talk.

The Goal

When admitting the truth, the goal is to recognize mistakes as mistakes, then to move forward, without feeling like a bad person and becoming overwhelmed. It focuses on future behavior.

Description

Admitting the truth allows us to listen to the critic, acknowledge the problem(s) accurately, accept the mistake, apologize as appropriate, and then offer future action. It is important to acknowledge the mistake, without over-apologizing.

Truthful Words to Use

"I really feel bad too, I have another plan."

"I made a mistake, and I plan to do better next time."

"You are right. I didn't get the report done on time this month. I have built more time into my schedule for next month."

"Yes, I probably didn't think it through carefully. Now I know another approach and I can correct it."

If there are others involved with the mistake, talk to them at another time.

Ex: The next day, you might say: "For me to do a better job, I need the reference notebook you borrowed from me two months ago." Or,

"We could work together to avoid this problem again. I'll draft a list of things we need, then you can review it and add to the list."

Results of "Admitting the Truth"

Once we accept a mistake and acknowledge it, we can move forward rather than becoming bogged down by it. Others will accept us as we are.

It is easier to be critical than to be correct.

Disraeli

Technique #3: Ask for Specific Feedback

Requesting specific feedback is probably the most powerful technique to deal with valid or questionable criticism. Through questions, we identify how to move into positive and productive action, quickly.

The Goal

The goal for requesting more, specific feedback is to move to productive activity in ways that we can manage, as soon as possible. This technique focuses on future positive behavior, rather than dwelling on the past.

Description

We ask questions to learn facts and understand the critics feelings and perspectives. Requesting specific feedback prompts the critic to provide more information for us to hear and analyze. As we gain information and exhaust the critics complaints, we

also discover common ground together and identify ways to move forward.

Specific Feedback Words to Use

“What specifically did I do?”

“Could you give me an example?”

“If you were in my shoes, what would you do?”

“Could you help me make that change?”

“Are there other ways I could improve. . .”

Vague Criticism

"Your report was really sloppy."

"You're not much of a team player, are you?"

"Specific Feedback" Responses

"Specifically, what was sloppy?"

"What makes you think I am not a team player?"

Results of “Specific Feedback”

This technique allows us to break the manipulative cycle of criticism and defensive behavior by improving communication and understanding. It encourages the critic to look at potential solutions with us, instead of dwelling on our mistake. It becomes a “win-win” situation. It creates positive energy for everyone.

It is difficult to see the picture when you are inside the frame.

Roger von Oech

From Control to Communication

“Abrasiveness or cruelty is less and less acceptable in a society concerned with quality of life. . . Energy that once might have been enhanced by criticism and fear is now reduced by verbal abuse” (James, p. 4). Our basic mode of interaction today, is changing from control over people, to communication with them. Success, for most of us, is dependent on how we use our energy and how safe we feel. An emotionally safe environment makes it possible for us to use all our creativity and passion productively. Encouragement from others, increases our feeling of safety and gives us energy.

Whether a volunteer, community committee member, an employee, a member of a family, or a supervisor, we can cope with criticism effectively and learn from it. We can use our energy wisely to ensure a safe, productive and encouraging environment for one another, our organizations and our communities.

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