

How to Handle Criticism

By Stephen Judd

Leadership comes with its costs, one of the most prominent being criticism. The underperformers rarely attract attention; it's those at the forefront. As President Harry Truman famously said, "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." Indeed, if you are in a leadership position, be prepared to face criticism.

Criticism, whether positive or negative, whether it makes us bitter or better, invariably changes us. Many leaders fail to achieve their potential not through a lack of skill or dedication but due to their inability to handle criticism effectively.

Consider the tale of a persistently critical barber. A salesman entered his shop, sharing his excitement about a forthcoming trip to Rome. In response, the barber disparaged the reliability of the airline the salesman planned to use and criticized the service at the hotel where he would stay, advising him to stay home. Undeterred, the salesman mentioned his plans to close a significant deal and his hopes of meeting the Pope, to which the barber scoffed, stating that such meetings were reserved for truly important figures.

Upon the salesman's return, he visited the barber, who inquired about the trip. The salesman reported a successful journey: the flight was smooth, the hotel service was excellent, he closed his significant deal, and he even met the Pope. Astonished, the barber asked what the Pope said during their encounter. The salesman replied that after kissing the Pope's ring, the Pope touched his head and asked, "My son, where did you ever get such a lousy haircut?"

This story illustrates the adage, "What goes around, comes around." Attitudes, whether negative or positive, tend to be reciprocated in our interactions with others. A critical, negative mindset will likely bring about negative experiences. Conversely, a positive and joyful outlook tends to attract joy back into one's life. Aristotle encapsulated it well when he said, "Criticism is something you can avoid easily by saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing." However, those who dare to act, speak, and be something should be ready for criticism and learn how to manage it constructively.

TEN EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR HANDLING CRITICISM

1. Understand the difference between constructive and destructive criticism.

Recognizing the nature of criticism is fundamental to personal and professional development. Constructive criticism aims to build up, offering insights and suggestions that lead to improvement. In contrast, destructive criticism seeks to tear down, often leaving the recipient feeling demoralized and less confident.

A tongue-in-cheek definition suggests that constructive criticism is when I criticize you, and destructive criticism is when you criticize me.

Questions to Ask When Receiving Criticism:

- In What Spirit Was It Given?

Analyzing the spirit behind the criticism is essential. Look beyond the mere words to understand the critic's motives. Does the critic have a gentle, helpful demeanor or a judgmental, harsh attitude?

- When Was the Criticism Given?

The timing of the criticism can reveal much about the critic's intentions. Constructive feedback is typically given privately, allowing the recipient to reflect and respond without public pressure. If criticism is given publicly, it often suggests that the critic's intentions are to embarrass or undermine, rather than to aid in improvement.

- Why Was the Criticism Given?

Understanding why someone offers criticism is key to determining its value. Is the critique meant to promote personal growth and benefit, or is it stemming from the critic's personal grievances or hurts?

Addressing these aspects can help differentiate constructive from destructive criticism and enable a more productive response to feedback.

2. Don't take yourself too seriously.

In the journey of self-improvement and receiving criticism, it is invaluable to not take yourself too seriously. Learning to laugh at yourself is a sign of emotional maturity and resilience. The truth is, everyone makes mistakes, and sometimes those mistakes can be downright silly. Recognizing and accepting this can not only alleviate personal stress but also enhance your relationships with others. Being able to smile at your own blunders is a blessing, as it allows you to maintain a sense of humor and perspective, which are essential for personal growth and happiness.

3. Look beyond the criticism and see the critic.

Understanding who the critic is can be as important as the criticism itself. When receiving feedback, consider the source before you react. This approach involves several key questions:

- Who is the critic?

Determine the reliability and intentions of the person providing feedback. Is this someone whose character and judgment you respect? Insightful criticism from a respected individual can be more valuable than flattery from someone less discerning.

- Is the criticism habitual?

If a person frequently offers criticism, it's essential to discern whether it's a pattern of negativity or genuinely helpful feedback. Habitual critics may offer fewer valuable insights compared to someone who seldom criticizes.

- Does the critic genuinely want to help?

Consider whether the critic is supportive and sincerely aims to assist you in improving. Those who are actively contributing often do not waste time undermining others. As the saying goes, "People who are busy rowing seldom have time to rock the boat."

Consider the story of a 12-year-old boy who had never spoken a word in his life, causing his parents to think he was unable to speak. After repeatedly being served oatmeal and disliking it, he finally spoke up, expressing his dislike for the meal. This outburst made his mother ecstatic, but it also illustrated a point—sometimes, the quietest people speak up only when necessary, and when they do, it's for a good reason.

By incorporating these strategies into your approach, you can handle criticism more effectively, learning from feedback without letting it undermine your confidence or peace of mind.

4. Watch your attitude toward criticism

A negative attitude toward criticism can be more damaging than the criticism itself. It's important to monitor your own responses and maintain a positive outlook when facing criticism. Remember, as the saying goes, "a chip on the shoulder indicates wood higher up," implying that small grievances can suggest deeper issues.

Herman Hickman, a renowned football coach at institutions such as Tennessee, Army, and Yale, once advised, "When you are being run out of town, get to the head of the line and look as though you are leading the parade." This perspective encourages taking control of difficult situations and facing adversity with head-held-high dignity.

The Bible offers profound guidance on handling criticism, particularly in 1 Peter 2:21-23, which speaks about Christ's response to suffering and injustice:

"For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 'Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His

mouth'; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed *Himself* to Him who judges righteously;"

This passage underscores the importance of resilience and faith in the face of criticism. Following this example, we are reminded that when we are obedient and trusting in the divine, criticism is to be expected, especially when taking stands that may not be popular.

It's also crucial to remember the call to love those who are critical of us. Understanding and compassion towards critics can transform potentially negative interactions into opportunities for growth and connection. By embracing this approach, we can handle criticism with grace and maturity, turning challenges into steppingstones for personal development and stronger relationships.

5. Realize that even the best are criticized.

It is a common misunderstanding that only the flawed or the contentious are subjected to criticism. History and religious texts remind us that even the most virtuous individuals have faced harsh judgments. For instance, Jesus, known for his pure motives and impeccable character, was criticized and labeled in many derogative ways including being called a glutton, a winebibber, a Samaritan, and a friend of sinners.

Living a life inspired by Christ-like principles often means facing criticism, especially from those who may not understand or agree with these values. In fact, criticism from secular sources can sometimes serve as a confirmation that one's life has undergone a significant transformation towards higher virtues.

If you find yourself living on a higher moral plane than what is common in the world, it is natural to expect some level of criticism. This should not deter you but rather affirm that your choices and actions are making an impact. Viewing criticism through this lens can help transform it from a source of pain to a badge of honor, indicating you are moving in a direction that challenges the status quo and promotes higher ethical standards.

6. Stay physically and spiritually fit.

Physical and spiritual well-being are critical in maintaining a balanced reaction to life's challenges, including criticism. Physical exhaustion can significantly affect one's behavior and reactions, distorting perceptions and impairing judgment. It's essential to recognize that our minds and bodies require adequate rest to function optimally.

The story of Elijah and Jezebel from the Bible illustrates how weariness can lead to vulnerability in the face of adversity. Elijah, a steadfast prophet, found his strength sapped by the relentless opposition of Jezebel. This narrative highlights how physical tiredness can diminish our resilience and increase our susceptibility to negative influences.

Weariness not only makes us overly critical of others but also diminishes our capability to process and cope with criticism directed at us. It is a state in which our defenses are lowered, making us more prone to negative reactions from both internal and external pressures.

To combat the negative effects of exhaustion, it is crucial to maintain both physical and spiritual health. Regular physical activity and adequate rest, as well as time spent in the Lord's presence, can fortify us against the stresses of life and the inevitable criticisms that come with it. By staying in shape on both fronts, we can better handle the challenges posed by others and maintain a healthier perspective on life.

7. Don't just see the critic, see if there is a crowd.

When faced with criticism, it's crucial not just to focus on the critic but to assess whether their opinion is widely shared.

When criticism is repeated by multiple reliable sources, it's an indication that there may be a legitimate issue needing attention. However, if the criticism comes from a small group of consistently negative people, the challenge lies in not letting their negativity affect you. This distinction is vital for responding appropriately to feedback.

George Bernard Shaw, the celebrated Irish playwright, had a witty approach to handling criticism. After a play's opening, a critic bluntly labeled his work as "rotten." Shaw humorously agreed, remarking, "I agree with you perfectly, but what are we two against so many?" This response highlights his ability to maintain perspective and humor, even in the face of negative feedback.

It's helpful to expand your vision beyond immediate criticism to understand its context and prevalence. This broader perspective can help differentiate between criticism that is constructive and that which is simply noise, allowing for more measured and effective responses.

8. Wait for time to prove them wrong.

In dealing with criticism, time can often be your best ally. Events may unfold that can eliminate the initial cause for criticism, ultimately vindicating your decisions or actions. If you are confident in the correctness of your decisions or actions, it is wise to remain steadfast. Time has a way of revealing truths and proving the merit of well-founded decisions.

A prime example of time proving a leader right is Abraham Lincoln, one of the most beloved yet most criticized presidents in American history. Despite facing harsh and often personal attacks, Lincoln's legacy was ultimately defined by his leadership and not by the criticisms of his time. An illustration of the severe criticism he faced is evident from a review by the Chicago Times in 1865, following his Gettysburg Address. The newspaper harshly commented: "The cheek of every American must tingle with shame

as he reads the silly, flat, and dish-watery utterances of a man who has been pointed out to intelligent foreigners as President of the United States."

This historical perspective shows that while criticism can be immediate and harsh, the long-term view provided by time can shift perceptions and prove the critics wrong. Lincoln's steadfastness in his principles and decisions, despite severe opposition, is a testament to the strength of patience and moral conviction in the face of criticism.

9. Surround yourself with positive people.

The people you choose to spend time with can have a significant impact on your ability to handle criticism effectively. Opt to spend your discretionary time with individuals who uplift and support you. Consider the analogy of a hawk: when attacked by crows, the hawk does not fight back; instead, it soars higher and higher in ever-widening circles until the pests can no longer reach it. By metaphorically rising above negativity, you can maintain your focus and well-being.

10. Focus on your mission.

It's crucial to concentrate on your overarching goals rather than getting bogged down by setbacks. Many people react to criticism by shifting their goals or obsessing over their errors, but this often compounds the issue. Remember, the only true mistakes are those from which we learn nothing. Embrace your mistakes as opportunities for growth. Acknowledge them, learn from them, and continue to move forward with your mission. This approach not only fosters resilience but also keeps you on track towards achieving your objectives.

As someone has said regarding criticism: "If it's unfounded, ignore it; if it's unjust, stay calm; if it's uninformed, simply smile; if it's valid, it's not just criticism—learn from it."

TEN TIPS FOR GIVING CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

1. Check your motive.

When offering criticism, it is essential to ensure that your intentions are constructive, not destructive. The primary goal should be to aid in improvement rather than to demean or embarrass. Consider the following in guiding your approach:

- Relevance of the Criticism:

Ask yourself if you would still offer this criticism if personal feelings were not involved.

- Impact on Your Image:

Reflect on whether your criticism is aimed at improving someone else's actions or merely boosting your own image. True constructive feedback should focus on the person receiving it, not on making yourself look better.

- Emotional Effect:

Analyze whether delivering this criticism brings you pain or pleasure. If you find pleasure in pointing out others' flaws, it might be time to reassess your motivations. Criticism should be a tool for positive change, not a source of personal satisfaction at another's expense.

These guidelines help ensure that when you do offer criticism, it is thoughtful, justified, and ultimately beneficial for the recipient.

2. Assess the significance of the issue.

Before proceeding with criticism, it is crucial to evaluate whether the issue truly merits attention. The adage, "You have to be little, to belittle," serves as a reminder that trivial criticisms often reflect poorly on the critic rather than the recipient. By focusing only on matters of significant consequence, you ensure that your feedback is both constructive and warranted.

3. Be specific in your criticism.

When offering criticism, clarity is key. It is important to be tactfully explicit and precise in what you say. This involves not only stating the issue clearly but also providing sufficient context and evidence to support your points. If you find that you cannot specify exactly what the problem is, it may be best to hold back until you can articulate your concerns more clearly. This approach helps prevent misunderstandings and focuses the discussion on actual improvements rather than vague discontent.

4. Preserve the individual's self-confidence.

When delivering criticism, it is essential to handle the process in a way that does not undermine the person's self-esteem. A constructive approach involves identifying and commending strengths before addressing any areas that require improvement. By highlighting what the individual does well, you not only foster a positive atmosphere but also reinforce their confidence, making them more receptive to feedback about areas where they can improve. This balanced approach helps maintain a constructive dialogue and supports personal growth.

5. Avoid Comparing Individuals.

When offering criticism, it is crucial to avoid comparing one person to another. Such comparisons can lead to feelings of inadequacy and resentment, which are counterproductive to personal growth and development. Instead, focus on the

individual's unique strengths and areas for improvement. By treating each person as an individual with their own set of skills and challenges, you foster a more supportive and effective feedback environment. This approach helps individuals understand that the feedback is tailored specifically to them, enhancing their motivation to improve.

6. Be creative in providing feedback.

When offering criticism, strive to be creative rather than just critical. It is far more constructive to provide solutions alongside any critiques. This approach not only addresses the issue at hand but also aids in fostering a positive and proactive environment. If you find yourself unable to suggest practical improvements or alternative strategies, it might be worth reconsidering whether to raise the issue at all. By focusing on creative solutions, you contribute to a culture of innovation and problem-solving, which is ultimately more beneficial than merely pointing out faults.

7. Focus on the issue, not the individual.

When providing criticism, it is crucial to concentrate on the specific problem rather than targeting the person. Addressing the issue directly helps maintain professionalism and ensures that feedback is constructive. Personal attacks can not only harm the recipient's morale but also undermine your credibility as a fair and objective observer. A confrontation that devolves into personal criticisms can create a defensive environment, leading to a no-win situation for all parties involved. By focusing solely on the issue, you promote a solution-oriented and respectful dialogue.

8. Time your criticism appropriately.

When it comes to offering criticism, timing can be as critical as the feedback itself. Addressing an issue promptly after you become aware of it is essential. Delaying feedback can cause the issue to lose its relevance or urgency, reducing the impact of your critique. Moreover, waiting too long to address a concern can make it seem like an afterthought, which might lead to the recipient feeling unjustly surprised or cornered. Therefore, to maintain the effectiveness and appropriateness of your criticism, ensure you confront issues at the most opportune moment before they become a thing of the past.

9. Look at yourself before criticizing others.

Before addressing someone else's shortcomings, it is crucial to first evaluate your own performance and experiences in similar situations. This practice of self-reflection can provide valuable perspective and empathy. Ask yourself whether you have successfully managed to accomplish what you are about to criticize someone else for failing to do. By placing yourself in the other person's position, you can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and offer more compassionate and constructive feedback. This approach not only helps in providing fair and balanced criticism but also fosters a more respectful and empathetic environment.

10. Conclude criticism with encouragement.

When offering criticism, it is crucial to end any confrontation on a positive note. This approach is often referred to as the "sandwich technique," where criticism is layered between an initial compliment and concluding words of encouragement. Starting with praise sets a constructive tone, the critique addresses the necessary issue, and ending with encouragement helps maintain the individual's motivation and ensures they do not feel disheartened.

Leaving someone feeling discouraged after a critique can be both cruel and counterproductive. Instead, by encouraging them, you underscore the belief that they can improve and overcome the highlighted shortcomings. As noted by a German poet, "Correction does much, but encouragement does more." This philosophy highlights the transformative power of encouragement over mere correction, fostering a more positive and effective outcome.