

Criticism – An Encore Presentation!

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Years ago, earlier in my career, while working for a Wall Street firm, I initiated a user survey to gauge the quality of service provided by a technical group to my community of business users, after months of user complaints. I presented the survey findings—which highlighted all negatives and little or no positives—to the manager and department head of the technical group. They received my criticism very poorly—they were very irritated and became defensive. The episode led to a standing conflict between their group and mine and we ultimately lost sight of the prime objective—to improve services to a 300-person business community. We subsequently resolved our conflict and they gradually improved the quality of their service, but our working relationship took a major hit that took months to repair.

Criticism is a reality of life. It is inherent in human nature to criticize. Why? Because we all have our own system of evaluation and fairness, and we often feel the need to express the demerits of something based on our individual system of evaluation and fairness. Give a young child the (visibly) smaller of two packs of candy and you can expect an outcry—an expression of criticism. Exercise sound judgment that happens to be unfavorable to one of your closest friends and you can expect some degree of criticism. Watch your favorite team lose a close game that should not have been lost and you will find yourself joining the criticism bandwagon. Finally, take a firm stand on a core principle and you can expect someone somewhere to offer a form of criticism, given time.

But first, what is criticism? Most people, if polled, would define criticism as a process of finding fault with something; another group would define it as offering a critical opinion. While these two common definitions are correct, criticism also refers to the act of rendering a fair judgment after considering the merits (positives) and demerits (negatives) of something. Unfortunately, the common and sad reality is that many people seemingly or conveniently forget the “fair” and the “merits” part of this latter definition!—as was the case in my opening story. If you ask people to describe their perception of criticism, based on a prior experience—where they were the focus of the criticism—you would hear descriptive terms such as – an assault or attack, an unfair evaluation, or a ploy (to distract). These negative views of criticism often relate to social or humorous situations where little is at stake; however, the reverse—high stakes—may be the case.

Common Perceptions of Criticism

- An Assault or Attack**
- An Unfair Evaluation**
- A Ploy to Distract**

Many of us are often quick to criticize—sometimes out of habit—and when we do, it is done in one, or both, of two ways. First, we criticize without the benefit of all the facts. Second, we highlight the negatives and discount (or totally ignore) the positives. The unexpected result of these two common approaches is a negative valuation of the person offering the criticism, which translates to a loss of (Earned) respect—one of the three categories of respect that I outline in my book, *Respect: Gaining It and Sustaining It*. In some specific settings—personal relationships, workplaces, and educational environments—respect is gradually eroded through a continuous cycle of unfair criticism. In fact unfair

criticism is a common root cause of workplace conflict between employees, and most conflict persist for long periods of time contributing to loss of mutual respect.

Although subjective, criticism is a very good thing—if it is exercised fairly and properly. Criticism can translate into a learning process where the basis for demerit is outlined; it can result in a confirmation process where the basis for merit is affirmed; it can lead to a revelation where an unexpected merit or demerit is uncovered; and it can amount to a revaluation when fair judgment is offered. People who exhibit a habit of fair criticism—also labeled constructive criticism—almost always earn respect in the process.

Leaders with a highly effective reputation never pass on an opportunity to offer criticism when warranted; and when they do, they do so fairly and constructively, earning them even more respect.

Let's take a close look at a family setting where a hierarchical structure is in place. The parents, or a parent in a single-parent household, would be the leaders. It is perfectly normal for a parent to render criticism of the actions and behavior of a child, or even a spouse. However, constant criticism, exercised unfairly and improperly, can lead to a loss of self-esteem (in a child) or to conflict between spouses. I have observed this phenomenon quite often—as many of you probably have. Self-esteem relates directly to self-respect while conflict resolution often leads to disrespect—refer to the EKTIMIS article on Conflict Resolution.

Similar situations persist in the workplace—an environment where many of us spend a good deal of our time. In the workplace a hierarchical structure is also in place, leading to a variety of roles and positions that command Positional respect—another one of the three types of respect that I outline in my book. It is very common to experience moments of criticism between a superior and a subordinate, or between peers. Again, constant criticism exercised unfairly and improperly almost always leads to conflict (between peers), or loss of respect (for a superior).

So how can criticism become a means to gain, and indeed sustain, respect? The key lies in the knowledge and proper understanding of the true essence of criticism—to transform a subjective assignment into an objective task. This implies fairness in judgment, and acknowledgment of both merits (positives) and demerits (negatives) of an issue based on facts. In the event one is unable to identify any merits (positives), in the course of rendering criticism, the wise action would be to offer an alternative to each identified demerit (negative). Such a measure would reflect an understanding of the situation under scrutiny and would offer an opportunity for a dialogue between the person being criticized and the person offering the criticism. A fair dialogue as opposed to a monologue—one person doing all the talking—often creates an atmosphere for courteous exchange and a path to mutual respect.

**From the perspective of the criticizer
the true essence of criticism is to
transform a subjective assignment into
an objective task.**

I have a lot of respect for people, in my personal and business circles, who offer fair criticism; I often go back to them to solicit their opinion on other matters that are important to me. So, brace yourself! Over the next 24 hours you are very likely to find yourself in a

position to offer criticism. Exercise proper judgment and capitalize on the opportunity—and good luck!

About the Author



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