

The Discomfort of Criticism: Transforming Pain to Gain

Katherine A. Greenwood
USC Office of the Ombuds
UPC Ombuds
ombuds.usc.edu



Think of two or three criticisms that people have shared with you in the past that you found hurtful or difficult to release.

What do you usually do when someone criticizes you?

Does criticism generally hurt your feelings?

If so, how might you take steps to constructively deal with the hurt?

Why Does Criticism Sometimes Feel So Personal?



Criticism can be experienced as a social threat.

Any threat can make us defensive.

Any threat can cause emotions to rise.

Because we are social beings, other people's opinions often matter.

Context is often key. Who levied the criticism? (parent, coach, teacher, friend, stranger)

What exactly was criticized? (an action, behavior, speech, possession)

Individuals each have their own unique sensitivity to criticism.

Our own response to criticism can vary; sometimes when we feel criticized, it rolls off our back and at other times, criticism hurts us to our core.

Constructive vs. Destructive

Solicited vs. Unsolicited

Expected vs. Unexpected

Types of criticism

The Power of Choice



- We can accept or reject the information contained in the criticism
- We can ignore the criticism or integrate the information to improve

Criticism May Cause Disequilibrium of Our Self Worth



Resetting Our Self Worth

Criticism doesn't have to pop our entire sense of self.



We can view the criticism as a comment on a part of our whole self.

We can repair the harm by reframing it in a neutral or positive light.

We can hit a "re-set button" and remind ourselves that, even if we made an error, we are still fundamentally ok.

Reframing Our Self Worth



Approaches to Embracing Criticism

- Accept that no one is perfect
- Strive to be open for improvement
- Listen attentively
- Remain polite
- Assess the motivations of the person delivering the information
- Evaluate content of the criticism
- Look for any strands of merit or truth
- Ask relevant clarifying questions in a non-defensive way
- Ask for additional facts or examples
- Ask for time to reflect on the criticism if you are feeling overwhelmed
- Try to avoid: making excuses, blaming, minimizing, rationalizing, or sidestepping

Johari Window

The 'Johari' Window model was developed by psychologists, Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham (JoHari) as a feedback/disclosure model of self-awareness.

This model can be used to increase understanding and to enhance communication between the members in a group.



Generally, as humans, we all have room to improve and yet, we may have blind spots that others can shed light on.

Learning how to accept feedback or criticism is one way that we can improve ourselves and our interpersonal relationships.

When Facing Criticism or Feedback at School or Work

- Protect the Relationship
 - Be aware that the manner in which you accept the criticism may define future interactions
 - Remind self to build bridges, not burn them
- Listen with Deep Focus
 - Be fully present
 - Expect hidden gems in the narrative
- Adopt and Project a Demeanor of Openness and Dignity
 - Avoid defensiveness to the best of your ability
- Share your intention to reflect on the criticism and to take steps to address it
- Have self compassion if emotional reactions arise
- Weigh the content and explore what you might do differently
- Design an improvement plan
- Create benchmarks to evaluate progress



Constructive Criticism



Constructive criticism is the transmission of opinions or perceptions about the actions, work, or attitude of another with the intended objective of improving the performance or productivity of that person.

However, as we may have experienced, not all criticism feels constructive. Continual or serial criticism can sometimes be destructive to relationships.

John Gottman's "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse":

Criticism

Contempt

Defensiveness

Stonewalling

The Other Side of the Coin - Giving Criticism



If you are criticizing someone else:

First, become clear about your motives

Second, ask:

- “How can I make the conversation as safe as possible?”
- “How can I best deliver the criticism, so that it can land?”
- “How can I prepare for an emotional response?”
- “How can I be clear in my message?” (use data points, avoid “blur words,” share impact)

Third, after sharing the critique, ask: “How do you see it?”

Performance Reviews

- For many people their job is an important aspect of themselves and their identity may be inextricably wrapped up with their profession.
- A perceived slight, even on a few small things, may feel like an attack on the entire self.
- Employees may feel like they are trying their best and are not being seen or appreciated and may feel deflated by feedback.
- Employees may feel surprised, particularly if they are not fully aware of how their actions or words are perceived by others.
- Oftentimes people in the workforce fear for their job, as the salary is equated to *survival*.

The Feedback Sandwich



Many managers have implemented the Feedback Sandwich during performance review time.

New research suggests that it may not always be effective. Why?

Possible reasons:

- Many people are aware of the technique and thus quickly dismiss the first point of praise because they are steeling themselves for the anticipated bad news
- They may feel that the delivery is disingenuous
- They may feel that they are being manipulated

After the Ouch of a Critique - What Can Be Learned?



- Try to stay openminded
- Remember that we all have blind spots
- Seek to understand the issue from the other person's point of view
- Wonder if there is truth or value in the comments
- Be curious - might anything that was shared be helpful to you?
- Acknowledge your own reactions and sensitivities
- Take time to absorb the information
- Make any appropriate changes
- Let go of what is not useful (sip the nectar)

*Do the best you can until you know better.
Then when you know better, do better.*



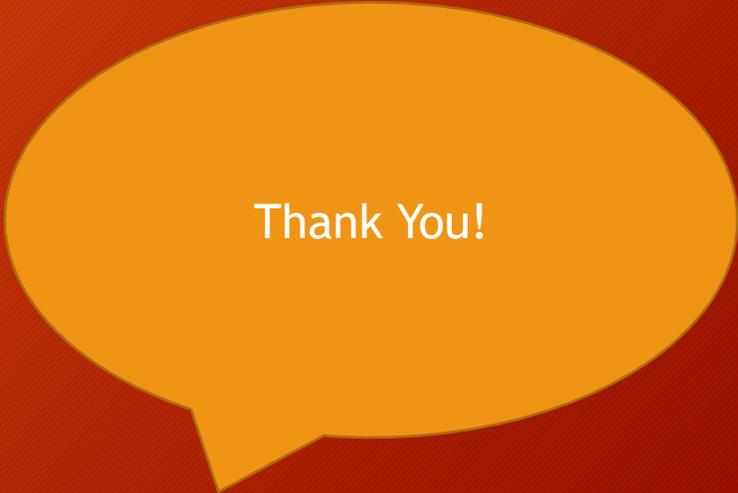
Maya Angelou

References and Resources

- *Steps to Handle Criticism at Work*. Indeed.Com. 1/5/2021. <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/steps-to-handle-criticism-at-work>
- *Five Ways to Bounce Back From Criticism at Work*. Forbes. Ashley Stahl. 5/30/16. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashleystahl/2016/05/30/five-ways-to-bounce-back-from-criticism-at-work/?sh=732a52c28be1>
- Sensitivity to Criticism Test:
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/tests/career/sensitivity-criticismtest#:~:text=This%20sensitivity%20to%20criticism%20test,given%20statements%20apply%20to%20you.>
- *Why You Feel Crushed by Criticism and What to Do About It*. Tiny Buddha Blog. Esther Mellar. <https://tinybuddha.com/blog/why-you-feel-crushed-by-criticism-and-what-to-do-about-it/>
- *Why Criticism Is So Hard to Take*. Leon F Selzer. Psychology Today. Com. 1/30/2009 and 2/5/2009.
Part 1. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/200901/why-criticism-is-so-hard-take-part-1>
Part 2. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/200902/why-criticism-is-so-hard-take-part-2>

Questions?

Comments?



Thank You!

Katherine A. Greenwood, JD, PhD
USC Office of the Ombuds, UPC
Telephone: (213) 821-9556
Email: upcombuds@usc.edu
Website: ombuds.usc.edu