

# The Joy of Criticism

Sometimes It Is Better to Receive

**D**id you ever think that criticism could bring you joy? This viewpoint might be a new one for you, but think about it: Why should we react to criticism with anger, sadness, or frustration if the criticism could help us better ourselves? Why do we often make those who offer the criticism feel bad about sharing their valuable insights?

In my line of work, I have been blessed to interact with bright, considerate, and successful people. Their openness and direct feedback have made me a better professional and a better human being. What a blessing it has been to elicit the constructive criticism that they have been so kind to offer. If it were not for their insights, my consulting services would not be as comprehensive or beneficial. Even more important, I would not be as good a partner to my husband or parent to my child. How unfortunate it would be if my clients only shared positive feedback with me, even though such feedback, of course, is nice to hear.

Do you make it easy for people to approach you and tell you what you truly need to know, or do you only elicit feedback that you want to hear?

Traveling, consulting, and studying with the National Speakers Association, I've had the opportunity to study the habits and behaviors of

people who are truly successful in business and in life. A pattern emerges among those whom we all try to emulate. They study throughout their life. They often ask for help and learn from everyone, not just their peers. They thoughtfully consider viewpoints that a more shortsighted person might not want to hear. Significantly, they make it easy for others to criticize them.

Over time, I have learned that accepting criticism is a skill unto itself. To properly accept criticism, we must learn how to ask for it with the intention of learning from it. In addition, we need to control our negative response to it and not make excuses for our behavior. Even more important, we need to say "thank you" when we receive this gift. It is financially and personally beneficial to be skilled at accepting both constructive and destructive criticism: If your skills in this area are poor, how can you expect your team to learn and grow? Don't you want a long-term team that is happy and motivated?

I heard recently from a client who had changed some of his negative behavior and worked harder to become a better listener to both his patients and team. The client is an avid hunter and was planning his annual weekend trip with his buddies; as a result, he was planning to stay at home on the following Monday to process and clean the deer. Several members of his team decided that rather than shut down the office, they would go to his farm (uncompensated) on Sunday and help him process the deer, so that the entire team could be present in the office on Monday. The team knew that they had a goal for the year and they were not going to risk missing that goal by being short-staffed on Monday. What a great team!

So, how do you elicit and respond well to criticism? First, you have to make it easy for people to tell you the truth and you need to elicit feedback in such a way that it tells the other party that you really consider and value their viewpoint. Below are some tips on how to gain feedback:

- Consider the timing and location of the conversation. Create an environment that makes it easy for the person to talk with you.
- Make it safe. Tell the person you want his or her opinion and you want him or her to share the truth—even if the person believes it is something that you don't want to hear.
- Know that the person will not just jump in and bare his or her soul right away, particularly if you've been resistant to feedback in the past.
- When the person speaks, do not act with



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emotion. Even if the manner in which he or she gives you the information upsets you, remain calm. This process is not about changing his or her opinion of you. You are learning.

- Ask questions and don't give excuses. Take the time to learn from what he or she is saying. How does it affect that person? How does he or she think you could handle it differently and what would be the result if you did? What does the person see as the result of your current approach? How could you be better?
- Thank the person for his or her feedback. Remember, you just asked him or her to do something that benefits you and it may have been uncomfortable and perhaps risky for this person to share his or her critique with you.

Speaking of which, I'm guessing that your academic training never addressed how you could offer constructive criticism to others, but the fact is that being able to do so is a cornerstone of leadership. Unless you can give feedback to your team in a manner that doesn't make them defensive and helps them to understand what needs to be different, you will always be hindered in managing your business. Below are some tips on how to give feedback.

- Create the right environment. Never criticize a team member publicly. Again, the timing and location of the conversation are critical.
- There should be no emotion on your part. If you are frustrated, then hold off. A staff member may not be receptive to your feedback when you are edgy or angry. It never serves you well to vent your nasty emotions on a team member.
- Use language that makes it about the behavior, not the person. For example, “Lorraine, this morning I noticed you were rolling your eyes at Mr. Jones when he requested an evening appointment. Did you notice that you were doing this? Do you think he might have noticed? Was there a reason you reacted this way?” Use a calm, nonjudgmental tone when asking. Don't attack. When you attack, the staff member will become defensive, and when that happens, he or she doesn't hear.
- Your job is to learn and not assume. By learning more about why the staff member took the approach he or she did in a given situation, you will be able to teach your team member a better way to deal with that situation. Consider this a moment to teach—not to bash.
- Get feedback and ask the team member what he or she will do differently next time. Know that the person understands and knows how it will impact his or her future performance. If you are doing all of the talking, you will have no real understanding of what the person learned from your discussion.

While discussing a patient survey process with a client recently, he said that he may not be comfortable knowing the negative information that his patients might share. However, as we discussed it further, he realized he was more uncomfortable not knowing how the success of his practice was being hindered by what he and his team members were doing or not doing. It's what you don't know that hurts you. Does it matter if one person has a negative perception of your behavior? Maybe not. However, if this perception is common among your team members, patients, or family, it becomes more important.

Think about it. What if you had certain behavioral responses or issues that were costing you money, friendships, team loyalty, and family closeness? What if changing the way in which you worded your feedback made your life better? It's worth the effort to learn. ♦



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