

Criticism

Reaction to Criticism

Even when criticism and feedback is constructive it can be difficult to handle. We all react differently to criticism and some of these reactions can be counterproductive. We have identified some of the most common responses to criticism however it is important to remember that there is usually more than one reaction.

- **Fear.**

This is a normal response to criticism. Sometimes the fear is due to the comment itself or due to the person's manner. It can also be due to what we think the criticism means, there could be a consequence. Ensure that you examine exactly what you are afraid of and then evaluate whether the fear is really justified.

- **Anger.**

This is one of the most common responses - *How dare they say that to me!* The emotion is not the problem, however, it can distract us from examining the message - *Maybe I could do this better.*

- **Counterattack.**

When someone attacks us and some often think of criticism as an attack, the impulse is to attack back. We even feel justified in attacking as - *They did it first* – this attitude just makes it worse.

- **Denial.**

It's tempting to respond to criticism with a flat denial - *I don't make mistakes like that.* This looks assertive, and, in some circumstances, it can actually be a viable response. The problem with denial is that it often has a counterattack hidden inside it - *you're wrong.* The other person will feel attacked and will come back with another criticism.

- **Defence.**

In some circumstances, saying something in our own defence is appropriate. What we need to be wary of is putting the other person into the position of our judge and jury. When you have offered your defence, the other person has the power and they determine whether your defence is good enough. By defending ourselves we imply that we are willing to have them pass judgement on our behaviour.

- **Shame and inadequacy.**

Criticism can make us feel terrible about ourselves, although this is normal, it can interfere with our ability to respond in a useful way to negative feedback. Rather than wallowing in shame and self-loathing, we may actually want to think through the feedback. *“OK, so I misfiled something. How could I organise things better the next time?”*

How to Cope with Criticism

- **Relax.**

Criticism may cause you to tense up. This will put you into a defensive or aggressive body posture, change the emotional tone of your voice, and make it harder to think of an effective response. Before you respond to a criticism, relax yourself as much as you can by breathing deeply and slowly, unclenching your hands, and releasing the tension in your face and body.

- **Avoid retaliation.**

Don't immediately turn the focus onto the other person. This tempting gambit makes the other person feel they haven't been heard, and they will usually either become angry or repeat the negative feedback more forcefully and less helpfully. Stay with the topic – even if you know that the other person is vulnerable on the related issue.

- **Hold back.**

The intention of some criticism is to get you to react. The person wants you to get upset about the remark so they can deny any negative intentions - *Boy, are you ever touchy! I didn't mean anything by it!* Then they can feel free to criticise you even more. *You really need to calm down. No one can tell you anything!* In this situation it is often best to simply ignore the offensive comment. Only use this technique when the intention is clearly to get you to retaliate, otherwise it can backfire.

- **Consider your safety.**

Some critical people are physically violent. This is especially a concern when you know that the person has been violent in the past or when the person confronting you is a stranger. Averting violence is more important than coming up with the best assertive response, so exercise caution in these exchanges.

- **Don't demand perfection.**

Most people aren't all that great at providing negative feedback. One option is to demand that every bit of feedback they give you should be you should be phrased in exactly the right way, otherwise you won't pay any attention to it. Unfortunately, this will rob you of some good opportunities to learn from any feedback you receive. Even when some feedback is not expressed well, consider whether there may be some value in it.

- **Validate their perception.**

If you can see why they might think the way they do, say so - *I can see how you'd think that*. This defuses some of the frustration and makes a reasonable exchange more likely. The fear holding you back from doing this is usually a belief that the other person will feel they have won. The reality is that they usually calm down enough to have a sane discussion.

- **Validate their emotions.**

If the person is upset, acknowledge this - *You're really concerned about this, I can see that this has upset you*. The person will usually feel that they have been heard and will relax. Some of the emotional drama you see is designed to show you that it's a serious issue. If you signal that you have received the message, the function of the emotion has been served and the emotional display may subside. Then you can talk more easily.

- **Agree in part.**

Sometimes you may be unwilling to agree with the entire criticism, however you may genuinely agree with part of the criticism. If so, it can be wise to let your critic know this. Once you have the real topic on the table, you can have an open and honest discussion.

- **Listen and wait.**

Before you respond, allow critics to voice their points completely. Listen. Eventually they will slow down and be more prepared for an open exchange. If you jump in with your response too quickly, they will feel blocked and their emotional tone will usually escalate. Listening to criticism does not mean that you have to bury it or believe it. You take criticism in, but you don't necessarily take it on.

- **Narrow and specify.**

People are often vague when they provide criticism. It can seem as though they are critiquing everything about you when, in reality, they are just reacting to a single event. Ask what the criticism is

- **Ask for clarification.**

When you are given indirect or nonverbal criticism, it's fair to ask the person about it. Rather than responding to what you *guess* they mean, ask them. This forces the person to take responsibility for the criticism – *I'm not sure what you mean*. If the person refuses to elaborate, that is their right. You cannot control their behaviour and you cannot force them to be open. You have communicated, however, that you will not respond to communication for which the person will not take responsibility.

- **Explain without offering excuses.**

If appropriate, you may wish to offer your version of events with a brief explanation - *Oh, I'm sorry I missed that call – it was my day off. You're right, I did forget that – I was very busy on Tuesday*. Do not go on at length, however - *I know I forgot to call you on your birthday, but _____ and _____ and _____ and _____ happened, and then _____ and then ...* Long strings of excuses communicate a lack of confidence and invite your critic to challenge you.

- **Don't try to change their mind.**

You can't control what others think. They have a right to their opinions – even if they are mistaken. If you try to force them to change, you hand them power. Don't keep justifying, explaining, and arguing endlessly until they agree with you. They may never agree with you. They don't have to, and you don't need them to. Even in the odd case when it seems you *do* need them to agree with you (perhaps at work), you can't force them to do so.

- **Thank the critic.**

When someone gives us something we need, it is appropriate to thank them. Consider thanking them even if you didn't ask for the feedback, even if it wasn't given in a particularly nice style, and even if you have no intention of acting in accordance with their advice. Thanking them makes them feel heard and reminds us that simple feedback doesn't hurt us.

- **Respond to the style.**

React to the manner in which the criticism is given. If the person is kind and obviously well-meaning, offer some positive feedback on their style. If the criticism was given in an intentionally hurtful way, consider pointing this out to your critic and suggest an alternative way of communicating

- **Ask for time.**

Sometimes it may not be appropriate to respond at the time. The other person may be so upset that they will react negatively to anything you say. You may want time to ponder the possible truthfulness of the feedback. It may take you a while to figure out how to respond. If so, consider asking to meet at a later date to clarify what has been said.

Using these techniques will enable you to respond effectively to the criticism and ensure that you use the feedback in the right way.

