

# Calming Criticism

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Have you ever walked away feeling crushed, ruined, cut off at the knees, humbled, humiliated or plain cheesed off after being criticized? There are those that are totally against using any form of criticism and then there are the critical hardliners who say, "A real friend will tell you the naked truth." Some people have been so wounded in their youth by constant putdowns, sarcasm and criticism that they do exactly the same to others or go to the other extreme of never uttering a word of disagreement. Some people seem to be gifted with a critical mind and perspective. Their gift to the world is a logical critique that forewarns of problems. But where is the balance?

Dr. Sidney Simon's classic little book, ***Negative Criticism***, provides a filter or series of questions to ask before we criticize another:

1. Is this the right time?
2. Can she or he do anything about the situation or behaviour?
3. Has she or he heard this before? Is this new information?
4. Am I sure that none of my own hangups are involved?
5. Is it possible that this person needs more encouragement, than anything else?

In the Toastmasters leadership and communication program one of the most useful skills members learn is the fine art of constructive feedback. The sandwich technique is typically used when giving comments to fellow members who have just given a speech. The process goes like this:

1. One, two or three areas of the presenter's strengths are described. "I liked your enthusiasm, how you made three clear points and involved your audience."
2. One or two suggestions are made for improvement from "Next time you could make longer eye contact with your audience" to "See if using your hands naturally adds some effective body language."
3. The feedback ends with the most obvious strength of the speaker. "I noticed your depth of topic knowledge. It was obvious to us all that you came well researched and well prepared. Thank you for an incredibly informative speech and we look forward to your next one."

"Fine," you are saying, "But what about those times when I get dinged with old fashioned criticism and I didn't ask for it? Here are some methods for managing unwelcome criticism:

1. Take a breath, stand back emotionally and put the message you just received through Simon's filtering questions. Then you can ask yourself realistically if it was fair and deserved information.
2. Discern if it is verbal abuse or helpful, perhaps courageously given (because someone cares about you) information. If you decide it is verbal abuse you just received, say "STOP!" and walk away. Note: verbal abuse often involves "You are . . ." messages, name calling and put downs.

3. Acknowledge receipt of the message with a simple statement, "Thank you for the information."
4. Support yourself in your brain with caring self talk: "This *information* is their opinion. I will listen. I don't have to agree. Their opinion may help me in the long run. I get to decide whether to accept their perspective or not. It is OK for me to make mistakes and I learn from them.
5. Agree to any part of the criticism that is true and accurate. Do not acknowledge the parts that are off. "Yes I am late. I am late by 5 minutes."
6. Learn to say, "I will think it over" rather than making a quick decision to make a change.
7. Apologize if you were in error, insensitive or caused harm.
8. Avoid defending yourself, counter attacking or adding your own self critical comments.
9. Later, if appropriate, return to the critics and tell them if their *information* was helpful or not.

For me I prefer a cheerleading role of encouragement, often using my Toastmaster, sandwich feedback method. Likewise, I suggest you use the kind of criticism and feedback you want to receive.

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