

Handling Criticism With Honesty and Grace

Kare Anderson

Perhaps one of the most vulnerable of moments is when someone criticizes you-especially if you are a government professional who is supposed to serve the public and may face more criticism than many other professionals but fewer options for how to react. Further, you must respond to diverse interests and personalities, each with an agenda to pursue, from persistent critics to deadline-driven reporters, from true believers to big campaign contributors, from well-intentioned people who are naïve about the process to experienced government vendors-all in a time-pressed, "photo-op" society.

You are most vulnerable when the criticizer knows you well. The scalpel of his comments can be surgically rapid and close to the bone, more damaging than the rubber hammer of a stranger's passing slight.

Yet, as the old saying goes, "What doesn't kill us can make us stronger." In fact, in these uncomfortable moments you have the opportunity to act with grace under pressure and to draw new support to yourself. Moreover, you have the best chance to learn about someone when they are expressing strong feelings because people are most revealing when offering praise or criticism.

Praise indicates what they most like about themselves, and criticism often shows what they least like or feel least competent about in themselves, which means that criticism is actually a two-way mirror. How can you respond to another's criticism with honesty and grace and actually gain new insights about yourself and the other person in the process?

First, Recognize That You Are an Animal Under Attack

Whether you are with someone you love, hate, know little of, or just met, when you first realize that you are being criticized, you will react in the same way. Your heart will beat faster, your skin temperature will go down, and you will even lose peripheral vision.

Because you feel under attack, your first instinct will be to focus on that feeling, making it more intense. You will then feel like withdrawing or retaliating. Just remember that, with either instinctual response, you are saying, "I don't like your comments; therefore, I will give you more power." Both fight-and-flight responses leave you with fewer options, not more, so attempt to express neither of these responses.

When you focus on your feelings, you are distracted from hearing the content of the other person's comments, leaving you more likely simply to react, rather than choosing how you want to act. Avoid a face-off, with an escalation of comments between the two of you. Instead, imagine a triangle of three entities: the other person, you, and the topic of the criticism. Picture the two of you staring at the criticism, the third point in the triangle, to work through the comments, rather than staring each other down and assuming that one person has to be wrong.

Look to Other People's Positive Intent, Especially When They Appear to Have None

You are at your most disarming when you compliment someone else for taking the time to give you feedback. You take the wind out of their sails. The other person might even backtrack. Yet our first instincts are to look for the ways in which we are right and others are less right. In responding to criticism, the momentum of defensive emotions builds fast.

Why? Because we mentally focus on the smart, thoughtful, and "right" things we are doing while obsessing about the dumb, thoughtless, and otherwise wrong things the other person is doing, leading ourselves to take a superior or righteous position, get more rigid, and listen less as the criticism continues.

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Difficult as you might find it, try staying mindful of your worst side and of the other person's best side as you engage in responding to the criticism. In this way, you will probably be more generous and patient, thus increasing the chances that he will see areas where you might be right after all. Act as if he means well, especially if he appears not to-not for his sake but for yours. The more you can look to someone else's positive intent, the greater the likelihood that you can respond to her comments before she adds more or elaborates.

Follow the easy-to-remember, four-step process outlined here when responding to criticism. Remember, it is never comfortable to hear negative comments; still, I find this approach easier than any alternative I've found.

"AAAA" Approach to Responding to Criticism

Step 1: Acknowledge. Acknowledge that you have heard the person with a pause (buys time for both of you to cool off), a nod, or a verbal acknowledgment that you have heard. Whether the criticism is justified or not, an attempt to avoid discussing it will loom large in the minds of bystanders and will stick to you like flypaper as you attempt to move on. Do not disagree or counterattack.

Prove that you have heard the person's comment, perhaps by saying, "I understand you have a concern," rather than "You shouldn't have . . ." Avoid blaming or "bad-labeling" language such as "That's a lie" or "You don't know what you're talking about," which only pours hot coals on the heat of escalation, hardens the person into a position, and gives them an urge to elaborate.

Step 2: Ask for more. Ask for more information, so you can both cool off more and stay focused on the issue, not the feelings or personalities. Go slow, so you can go faster later in reaching agreement about how to resolve the criticism. Try to warm up to the aspect(s) of the person you can respect.

Focus on the positive part of her mentally, and refer to it verbally: "You are so dedicated" or "knowledgeable" or whatever self-image leads her to criticize you. The more fully the other person feels heard, the more likely it is that she will be receptive to your response, whether to agree or disagree.

Step 3: Align. Align with something the other person has said with which you agree. That is, first speak to the common ground that you feel is not in dispute. There may be only one, apparently small point, but starting with the positive builds some forward momentum.

If, in listening, you can find no point of agreement, refer to the part of the person's positive self-image that might have inspired him to raise his concerns. For example, you might say, "I understand you want to be very thorough in how you approach these matters" or "I know that you really care about this project."

Step 4: Add your own. Add your own point of view, asking permission first. If you believe the other person's comments are accurate, say so. If an apology is in order, give it sooner rather than later. Then, say what you plan to do differently to respond to the criticism. Ask for the person's response to your comments, and again say thanks for being thoughtful enough to offer them.

If you find truth in the criticism, then the sooner you verbally agree, the more likely it is that you will gain respect from the other person and from any others who witness the interaction. In fact, if you tell others who are important to that person that you were wrong and appreciate having it pointed out to you, you will feel and appear more comfortable with yourself.

If, on the other hand, you disagree with the comments, say, "May I tell you my perspective?" This sets the other person up to give you permission to state your view, as you have been willing to listen to his.

Some Other Ways to Respond:

Dump their stuff back in their laps. If someone is verbally dumping on you, do not interrupt, counter, or counterattack in midstream, which only prolongs and intensifies her comments. When the person has finished, ask, "Is there anything else you want to add?" Then say, "What would make this situation better?" or "How can we improve this situation in a way you believe we can both accept?"

Ask, what will make it better? Ask the person to propose a solution to the issue being raised. If he continues to complain or attack, acknowledge that you heard him each time, and, like a broken record, repeat yourself in increasingly brief language variations: "What will make it better?"

State your view and what you would like from him. If he disagrees, ask, "What would make this situation better for both of us?" Move the other person from a mode of criticizing to one of problem solving. If he continues to criticize, again act like a broken record. In a calm voice, acknowledge, and then ask more briefly, "I understand you have a concern, and we disagree. What would make it better for us both?"

If the other person continues on the downward track of criticism, say, "I want to find a way to resolve your concern. When do you want to talk about it next?" In this way, you can remove yourself from the tone of that discussion and put the other person in the position of initiating follow-up.

Presume innocence. What if you believe another person is actually lying to you? "Naive you are if you believe life favors those who aren't naive," Mason Williams once said. Nobody wants to be told they are wrong. Whenever you have reason to believe that someone is lying or purposely not making sense, you will not build rapport by pointing it out to them.

Allow the person to save face by asking questions until you lose imagination or control. Say, for example, "How does that relate to . . . (state the apparently conflicting information)?" You might find that you were wrong and thus save face. Or, by your continued nonthreatening questions, you can "softly corner" the other person into self-correcting and can protect your future relationship.

Learn how personalities clash. To gain insights into the kinds of people most likely to criticize you and those you are most likely to criticize, learn more about your personality type according to the classic Myers-Briggs process. Even if you have taken the Myers-Briggs personality profile in the past, you can take a quick, free refresher course on the Internet. (Here are two places where you can do an abbreviated version of the profile on-line, read about what happens when different personality types clash, and learn what you can do to

respond better: <http://www.whitman.edu/~peterscc/psych/jung.html> or <http://www.keirsey.com/cgi-bin/keirsey/newkts.cgi>.)

Demonstrate visible good will up-front. When criticized, you are more likely to find resolutions sooner if the other person comes to trust your positive intent. Demonstrate your willingness to find a compromise and your ability to be genial, even and especially if you don't like the person or the situation. Often, the best solution to a criticism leaves both parties a little unhappy but not enough to retaliate later on. You are both somewhat satisfied with your compromise and willing to move on.

Know that "less is often more." Especially in the beginning, listen more, talk and move less, and keep your motions and voice lower and slower. These animal behaviors increase the chances that others will feel safer and more comfortable around you.

Act to enable them to save face, and you will preserve the relationship. If you think someone is lying, keep asking questions (until you lose control or run out of imagination), rather than accusing them of misrepresentation. Asking questions gives you time to see if you were mistaken, thus possibly saving face for yourself, while gently cornering them into making a self-admission that they were mistaken and volunteering an alternative. You also leave room to escalate later.

Honor commonalities more frequently than bringing up differences. Whatever you refer to most and most intensely will be the center of your relationship. Keep referring to the part of them and their points that you can support and want to expand upon.

Let them see it differently. If the other person does not accept your response at first, consider making the same suggestion later on and in a different way. Do not overlook rearranging elements of the same suggestion or offering to find a more mutually attractive compromise.

Choose your own approach. Contemplate how you say what you say. Consider the other perspective in how you make any request. For example, a priest once asked his superior if he could smoke while praying, which led to a negative answer. Yet if he'd asked if he could pray while smoking, he might have received a more positive response.

In considering any of these ways to respond to criticism, know that the worst way is to keep your resentment inside and festering. Your reactions always show, in one way or the other.

Kare Anderson is co-founder of the Compelling Communications Group, Sausalito, California. She is the author of the book Resolving Conflict Sooner: The Powerfully Simple 4-Step Method for Reaching Better Agreements More Easily in Everyday Life (\$10.95, The Crossing Press, ISBN 0-8954-976-8).

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