

BEFRIEND CRITICISM AND COMPLAINTS

Almost anyone who suggests a new idea, challenges the status quo, or takes action to meet goals will get criticized.

It's a good bet you will face criticism and complaints at some point—and you won't like it. Fortunately, you can work creatively with both types of feedback.

Treat criticism as feedback, not failure

If we keep our egos out of the way, we can accept criticism as an opportunity to evaluate ourselves. When we find truth in the criticism, we can learn ways to improve. We can move from thinking *How dare she say that!* to *How can I use this comment to become more effective?*

Imagine hearing someone say, "You're always late to our club meetings." Instead of taking that comment as an insult, we can hear it as the front end of a suggestion: "If you want to support the group, then be on time." We can use the comment to promote our success.

When we experience criticism in this way, we can actually be thankful for the gift it offers. Leo Tolstoy used to read drafts of his novels to his hired workers, seeking to make sure that his writing was clear. He received so much constructive criticism that he became one of the world's greatest novelists. Advertising executive David Ogilvy used to circulate drafts of his memos to colleagues with the note, "Please improve." His willingness to receive criticism built him a business empire and a fortune.

Put criticism into perspective

Blowing criticism out of proportion is self-defeating. Putting criticism into perspective allows us to hear it with more clarity.

One way we inflate the significance of criticism is to identify with the criticism. We hear the comment "You screwed that up," and translate it to mean "You *are* a screw-up." The difference is subtle but significant. The first comment points out that we *made* a mistake. The second one implies that we *are* a mistake. Remembering this distinction can help us put criticism into perspective.

We can also acknowledge and accept what we do well. Imagine that you give a performance and 100 people evaluate it. Seventy-nine of the reviews are positive, thirteen of them are neutral, and eight of them are negative. Many of us will spend more time remembering the negative evaluations than celebrating those that are positive. We might even lose sleep over those eight negatives.



Putting criticism into perspective means telling the truth. And telling the truth means celebrating what we've done well and acknowledging where we can improve.

The purpose of receiving criticism is to learn and grow. We do not need to use it as a weapon to berate or punish ourselves.

Avoid defending with denial, anger, or humor

Many people react to criticism by denying it, by becoming angry and attacking the person who is criticizing, or by making jokes. These strategies are designed to defend against attack. They compromise our ability to accept criticism as a gift.

There are two main problems with denial, anger, or evasive humor. First, they prevent honest reflection and self-evaluation. We cannot defend ourselves from criticism and engage in honest self-reflection at the same time.

Second, when we react with denial, anger, or jokes, we decrease the chances of receiving useful feedback in the future. After people run into our defenses, they're less likely to speak candidly next time.

Choose your response to criticism

Ultimately, we get to decide what to do with criticism. If we find some value in it, we can choose the next step to take in response. If we find no value in the criticism, we can thank others for their concern and let the comment go. The point is that we always have a choice.

Instead of being critical of criticism, we can develop a new habit of listening fully and absorbing it. We can take what we find useful and leave the rest behind.

Listen for the feeling in a complaint

When a person who is complaining feels that he's fully heard and understood, his upset often decreases. He's more likely to hear other points of view and discuss solutions. As listeners, we can help this happen by heeding the feelings that underlie the content of the complaint.

Consider a woman who says to her husband, "You spend most of your weekends watching sports on TV."

"So you're saying I shouldn't watch any sports?" he responds.

"That's not true," she fires back. "You're missing the whole point."



All the ingredients of an argument are coming together here. She feels ignored. He feels confused and defensive.

The problem can be avoided if he responds to the feeling in her complaint: “I understand that you’re upset about me watching sports. You seem hurt.”

“Right,” she says. “The truth is, I really don’t mind you watching sports. I’d also like it if you would spend some time with me and the kids on the weekends. Could you find a way to do both?”

Now the conversation is moving toward a resolution—one in which everyone in the family wins. What made the difference was listening for the feeling in the complaint.

Listen for the request in a complaint

In addition to finding feelings in a complaint, we can discover hidden requests as well.

“We never go out for romantic evenings any more” can be translated into “Can we go out for a romantic evening?”

“We always run out of money at the end of the month” can be heard as “Let’s budget our money and find a way to increase our income, reduce our expenses, or both.”

Complaints often contain requests. When people forget this, complaints become dead ends that create discomfort and perpetuate discontent.

Hearing the request in a complaint allows us to produce a new result. After extracting the request from a complaint, we might grant the request and promise to fulfill it. Or we might deny it, make a counteroffer, or suggest another way for the speaker to get what he wants. Any of these responses can be far more productive than the usual agreement, judgment, or sympathy that follow complaints.

When we hear a complaint, we might get defensive. If we listen for the request in a complaint, we can pave the way for solutions. One measure of excellence in listening is our ability to move from complaints to requests and then to action. By listening carefully for requests, we can turn even casual complaints into powerful commitments.



