

## Leadership Development Within Group

# Coping With Criticism

HE-501, September 1992

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Many difficult situations arise when groups meet and people work together. We are all criticized on occasion. We will be criticized at least a few times during the coming year. Criticism often makes us feel hurt, angry, vulnerable, guilty or helpless.

We can learn how to live through criticism without being devastated. We might even make it work to our advantage.

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*One of my favorite sayings is that in our company we stack every bit of criticism between two layers of praise.*  
*Mary Kay Ash*

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## The Implications of Criticism

Criticism and the way we react to it can block communication and opportunities to work together. Hurt feelings and resentment do not foster a positive or cooperative environment. At its worst, criticism can have long-lasting negative effects on a relationship between two people or within a group.

We can take control of situations when we are criticized. We can develop leadership skills to cope with criticism.

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## Critic's Intent

Our critic may have destructive (negative) or constructive (positive) intentions when she/he criticizes us. The critic may have planned to criticize or may hide the criticism within a conversation.

### **Destructive criticism is meant to:**

Hurt or humiliate and belittle...  
Manipulate or control...  
Blame or create guilt...  
Get attention

### **Constructive criticism is meant to:**

Help improve or make us aware...  
Express concern or caring...  
Keep communication open...  
Clear the air...  
Motivate us to make positive change

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*When pointing out a mistake by another person, always consider the person's feelings. Milton Berle was dining with his wife, Ruth, in a Hollywood restaurant when a waiter put too much pepper on her salad. Mrs. Berle tasted it and said, "Hmm. Needs more salad."*  
*Bits & Pieces, September 1990*

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Emotions take over when we are criticized. Our hurt or angry feelings can get in the way of coping. Before we can deal with this difficult situation, we need to bring our feelings into balance. To find balance, it helps to:

1. Take several long, deep breaths
2. Ask for time "I need a few minutes to think about that"
3. Exert a bit of energy by walking around the building.
4. Decide whether or not the criticism is intentional or not.

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*If you wish to make enemies, tell people simply, "You are wrong." This method works every time.*  
*Henry C. Link*

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## **Coping With Criticism**

Coping with a difficult situation is easier when we feel confident and positive. We can develop a positive attitude by reminding ourselves:

I am a good, capable person.  
I can learn from criticism.  
I accept criticism when the critic's intentions are good.  
I can be in control when I am criticized.  
I can learn to use criticism positively.

Here are three effective ways to deal with criticism.

1. Distracting
2. Admitting the Truth
3. Asking for Feedback

With practice, we can learn to use each technique and make it work for us.

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### **Technique #1 DISTRACTING**

When there is NO TRUTH to the criticism, the distracting technique should be used.

#### **Description**

Distraction allows the critic to voice his/her opinion. It is calm acknowledgement that we heard the critic's words.

#### **What It Does**

Distracting allows us to hear the words without becoming defensive or anxious. We become listeners without trying to read the critic's mind to see why he/she has criticized us. It allows us to decide what to say or do next.

#### **The Goal**

The goal of distracting is to stop the criticism. Later we decide whether or not to do something about the situation that provoked criticism.

#### **Result**

We choose to be unaffected by manipulative, unjustified criticism. The critic will probably stop because it is no fun throwing words if we do not react.

#### **Responses**

"You could be right about that..."

"What you say makes sense..."

"Perhaps I could..."

Do not get caught up using "Yes, *but*..." Our critic does not want to hear an excuse. "Yes, *but*..." may encourage the critic to be even more critical.

#### **Unjustified Criticism**

"You're always late."

"Every time you are told about an error, you get defensive."

#### **Distracting Response**

Perhaps I'm a bit late this time."

You might be right. I don't like it when I make errors either."

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### **Technique #2 ADMITTING THE TRUTH**

This technique is very effective when a critic has pointed out a real concern. The first thing to do when handling valid criticism is to accept it as true but not fall into exaggerated self-put downs and negative self-talk. Avoid over-apologizing for the error.

#### **Description**

Admitting the truth allows us to accept our mistakes and faults without apologizing for them.

### **What It Does**

Admitting the truth allows us to recognize mistakes as mistakes, without feeling like a bad person.

### **The Goal**

When admitting the truth, the goal is to get past this mistake or barrier. The truth will help heal relationships and enable the individual and group to become productive again.

### **Results**

Once we accept the mistake, we can move forward rather than become bogged down in depression and self-criticism. Others will accept us as we are and see us as fellow human beings.

### **Responses**

"You are right. I didn't complete the report on time and that is what I'm planning to do next month."

"Yes, I probably didn't think it through carefully, and now that I know another approach, I can correct it."

Avoid saying, "I made a mistake, BUT...." The use of the word "but" attempts to explain why the mistake was made. There are many reasons why mistakes are made. This is the time to focus on future behavior. "I made a mistake, AND I plan to do better next time."

If others are involved with this mistake or problem, talk with them at another time.

*(next day) "For me to do better, I need the notebook you have by Monday."*

*"We could work together to avoid this mistake again. I'll draft a list of things we need, then you can review it and make suggestions."*

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*It is difficult to see the picture when you are inside the frame.*

*Roger von Oech*

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## **Technique #3 REQUESTING SPECIFIC FEEDBACK**

Requesting specific feedback is probably the most powerful technique to deal with valid criticism. When we request specific feedback from a critic, we focus on the future instead of dwelling on the past. Through questions, we identify how to move directly into ACTION. It forces a critic to look at potential solutions instead of talking about our mistake. This technique invites the critic to be on our side and work WITH us to improve the situation.

### **Description**

Requesting specific feedback prompts the critic to provide more criticism for us to hear and analyze. We ask questions to gain facts and elicit his/her feelings.

### **What It Does**

We gain information and exhaust the critic's complaints. We uncover true feelings and discover common ground so we can talk about things upon which we agree.

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*I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them have never happened.*

*Mark Twain*

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### **The Goal**

The goal for requesting specific feedback is to move to manageable, productive activity as soon as possible.

### **Result**

This technique allows us to break the manipulative cycle of criticism and defensive behavior by improving communication and understanding.

### **Responses**

"What specifically did I do?"

"If you were in my shoes, what would you do?"

"Help me understand your view of the problem."

"Could you give me an example?"  
"Is there anything else you can think of?"  
"Are there other ways I could improve my work?"

It is important to be genuine when asking for more information. We need to use a neutral tone of voice. It is helpful to paraphrase what we hear to help the critic clarify his/her expectations.

#### **VAGUE CRITICISM**

"The report you turned in was really sloppy"

#### **RESPONSE**

"What specifically was sloppy about the report?"

#### **VAGUE CRITICISM**

"You're not much of a team player, are you?"

#### **RESPONSE**

"What makes you think I'm not a team player."

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## **I can...**

Learning is more complete when you apply your experience to your personal situation. Here is an activity to do on your own or with a friend to learn more about dealing with criticism within a group.

Think about a time when you were criticized.

- How did you feel?
- What did you do at that time?
- What would you do if this happened again?

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*The world keeps putting pebbles in your shoes. Walking along becomes more uncomfortable. It's nice to have someone come along and take a few out by saying things like this:  
I apologize. You were treated unfairly.  
I don't blame you if you're upset. I regret that happened.  
Bits & Pieces, September 1990*

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## **Images**

*It is easier to be critical than to be correct.  
Disraeli*

*Davy Crockett had a simple motto: "Make sure you are right, then go ahead." Every one of us, like every successful person you will ever meet, faces moments of criticism. No matter what your career involvement, the more successful you become, the more criticism you will receive. Only those who don't attempt anything remain forever above criticism.  
Bits & Pieces, May 1990*

*I believe the first test of a truly great (person) is humility.  
John Ruskin*

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*Be thoughtful of the opinions of others. There are three sides to a controversy -- yours, theirs and the right one....  
Raygene Paige*

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## **Sources**

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