

Get Criticized and Like It!

Criticism: Just the word can create a negative reaction for some of us. Some of us fear being criticized and whenever possible we avoid occasions like performance review meetings or family events where this may occur. For some of us giving criticism is as difficult as being criticized.

In the disputes I mediate, sometimes the giving and receiving of criticism has fuelled the fire of a conflict already simmering. Sometimes in a mediated discussion I hear a participant expressing their feelings of hurt by blaming the other person. Whether the criticism is motivated by distorted self-interest or a genuine desire to help, a defensive kick back by the person being criticized serves to make the experience a negative one.

Criticism is more effective when it sounds like praise.
-Arnold H. Glasgow

This issue of Common Ground focuses on receiving criticism. The next issue will provide the balance, the other side of this topic - giving criticism.

One of the two most frequent responses to criticism is to fight back and attack them even more vehemently. The other frequent response is to run away literally or by closing up and feeling hurt. The challenge is to handle the experience of responding to criticism so that you feel positive about it, even if you do not go so far as to like it.

The first step of responding effectively to criticism is to manage your reaction. You may find yourself in that first rush of anger wanting to fight back or run away. Do not follow that rush of anger and react based on your instincts. Take a break. You need to make some space for yourself to

think about what they are saying and about how you wish to react. You can also use the "time out" space to talk it over with someone who is outside the situation and is able to be objective. You can let your critic know that you *do* want to talk about the subject and that you want to do this at a later time when you can focus on it more clearly. If possible make a specific plan with the other person about the time when that later discussion will occur so that it does not become a variation of running away.

Better yet is to avoid the rush of anger by thinking positively. Believing that it is possible to achieve positive outcomes from being criticized is an important prerequisite. If you have a meeting scheduled in which you expect to be criticized you can start the positive self-talk in advance. Here are some positive ideas to keep in mind:

- this person is not necessarily trying to hurt me;
- it's OK for me to make mistakes and not to be perfect;
- I could learn something from this;
- this person cares enough about me to tell me this information;
- listening may improve this relationship;
- this is not about who is right or wrong;
- I can listen to them, then choose whether or not to change.

Being criticized gives you an opportunity to understand the other person and their experience of you. Whatever their motivation for criticizing you, they have provided an opening for you to examine with them the dynamic between the two of you. Keep your focus on the goal of improving your relationship with the other person and use the opportunity to develop a positive outcome. You may even be able to get criticized and like it.

5 Steps to Getting Criticized & Liking It

1. **Manage yourself.** See Left.
2. **Listen.** Use good listening skills to make sure you understand. Paraphrase, ask questions to clarify, ask for specific details, and summarize back to them your understanding of what they are saying. It is important first to make sure you understand what they have said and then to communicate to them that you have "got it". Check that your body language and tone of voice also communicate the message that you genuinely want to understand their point of view.
3. **Agree.** There is amazing positive value in agreeing, especially if the other person does not expect agreement. If you agree with the criticism, acknowledge that. If you disagree with the criticism, you can often find *some* way to agree with *something*, however small, in what they've said. For example you may be able to agree in part or in principle with your critic. When we look for what is constructive and useful within what initially seems to be otherwise, we communicate a willingness to listen and that may inspire greater trust and honesty in those around us.
4. **Clarify.** Request permission to clarify your intentions, clarify your assumptions, or explain your understanding - all the while using good communication skills. This does not mean argue, make excuses or justify yourself.
5. **Solve the problem.** If circumstances warrant, immediately commit to working out a solution. Invite them to join with you to solve the problem or, if time is not available now, to schedule a later time when this can be done.

Munn-thly Memo

Q. My supervisor recently told me when we were having lunch together that she thinks I am too aggressive and that it is getting in the way of me being promoted. She said that she thinks I am particularly aggressive with women. I do not think I am aggressive and she did not give me any details. I did not say anything to her because I did not want to lose my temper with her. I think I have not handled this well and the situation has me very worried. Right now it is important for me to stay with this organization and I'd like to be considered for promotion. What should I do? If it's too late now, how should I handle this kind of conversation in future?

A. When you are being criticized, consider it an opportunity to understand the other person. Your supervisor is giving you some insights into her experience of you and it is important for your future relationship with her that you respond positively. What you did well was to not lose your temper with her, take a break and think about how to handle the situation.

Although you feel you mishandled the situation at the time, it is probably not too late to approach the supervisor, tell her that you are concerned and ask for time to speak with her privately. Not getting it right the first time just means that you're human. Usually the other person will respond positively if you try again to resolve the situation.

For that second meeting or for future situations in which you are criticized, follow these 5 steps as described in more detail in this issue of Common Ground.

1. Manage yourself.
2. Listen.
3. Agree.
4. Clarify
5. Solve the problem.

In this situation a key factor is to clarify what your supervisor meant when she said you are "too aggressive" and "particularly aggressive with women". In order to respond effectively, you need to have a good understanding of what she views as aggressive behaviour. Ask her for specific examples of the circumstances that she is using to draw her conclusions. The purpose of the conversation is not to decide which of you is right but for both of you to become aware of the other person's perspective about appropriate conduct in this workplace. There are several specific steps suggested for clarifying someone's assumptions.

First, describe the behaviour: "When I hear you say that I am being aggressive..."

Express the impact on you (optional): "I feel very confused"

State your assumption (optional): "I assume that you think I am aggressive because I made several comments in the team meeting this morning."

Invite them to clarify: "Am I right about that?" Or "Please tell me more about that." Or "Please give me an example of a time when you think I was aggressive with women."

Clarify your own intent (optional): "I'm asking because I don't want to misunderstand you. I want to do a good job here."

Invite them to problem solve (if appropriate): "I would like to find a way to participate in team meetings so that we can all feel comfortable."

Make sure that you understand your supervisor's concerns and are able to summarize them back to her before you move on to try to solve the problem.

Mark Your Calendar

Upcoming Training Events
Presented by Kathryn Munn

Fundamentals of Mediation

Full 40 hour program

is planned to be offered in the fall, 2005.

If you would like to be contacted about the course dates please call or email us.

I am pleased to fill requests for presentations about mediation and negotiation at meetings of professional and business groups. Call or e-mail to make the arrangements.

Electronic Common Ground

If you prefer to be on our e-mailing list please send us an e-mail. Common Ground is available at www.munnrcs.com.

**Criticism may not be agreeable,
but it is necessary. It fulfills the
same function as pain in the
human body. It calls attention
to an unhealthy state of things.**

-Winston Churchill

**Pain is inevitable.
Suffering is optional.**

-John deRuiter

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