

How to Handle Criticism With Grace

by lola akinmade

Let's face it. Criticism sucks. We've all been subject to harsh criticism at some point in our lives, professionally or personally. Warranted or not, we felt hurt, embarrassed and, in some cases, livid.

To truly understand how to deal with criticism gracefully, we need first to dissect the situation into four elements: context, content, source and recipient.

1. The Context

"Receiving criticism can feel like a physical blow to the body," says Beth Tunis, a licensed psychotherapist based in Los Angeles. "The conversation can quickly become stressful. Yellers may yell, and those that become frozen will freeze."

You need to review the contextual setting within which criticism is doled out before assessing how to handle it. Are you being criticized in front of others? Is it being delivered in a sarcastic style or inappropriate tone? When you're being criticized publicly, chances are the criticizer has ulterior motives besides your personal growth in mind.

"It is good practice to learn to manage your initial response when you are under stress," Tunis says. She suggests practicing basic phrases such as "I need some time to consider what you are saying" or "I'll get back to you on that." Cookie-cutter responses buy you time, allow you to remain professional and help you further evaluate the other three elements.

2. The Content

Can you distinguish between constructive feedback and personal attacks? Is it about a specific incident with supporting facts or a broad sweeping critique of your person?

Putting ego aside to parse out harsh words is crucial. "Criticism stings,

whether you are the CEO of a large company or the clerk at a retail store," says Renessa Boley, a lifestyle and success coach based in Washington, D.C.

Instead of pretending words don't bother you, she suggests acknowledging that they do. Don't retaliate verbally, but let the other person know you recognize the situation and are equally bothered.

Next, consider the source.

3. The Source

Do you get the same criticism from various individuals or from a sole individual multiple times? Most people can smell a "hater" from miles away—someone whose sole purpose in life seems to be discrediting every move you make.

"Whether the criticism is coming from a friend or an adversary, avoid the temptation to get hung up on 'who does she think she is?'" Boley says. "There's often a modicum of truth in every criticism, no matter how it's delivered, so separate the message from the messenger or you will never find the gift in the criticism."

This brings us to you, the recipient.

4. The Recipient

The key to handling criticism with grace is to see it as a gift. Becoming a better person means having more strengths than weaknesses. If weaknesses are constantly being pointed out, work on them. If they are intrinsic, for example, you're weak at negotiating but strong at planning, move into a different environment where your strengths will be utilized, instead of constantly getting reprimanded for being a weak negotiator.

If harsh criticism attacks your values, defend your integrity and denounce the insult civilly. If you've clearly crossed the line professionally or hurt the other party's feelings, apologize maturely.

As with every gift that's given to you, gratitude should be expressed. So thank the source for her criticism. The most successful individuals in life are those who've been able to take criticism objectively, learn from their mistakes, fix their weaknesses and grow. ♥

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