

Personal Development Resources

Quick Guide to Taking the Positive from Negative Feedback

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How do you react to criticism? For many of us, our first reaction is often one of anger. After all, nobody enjoys being told they haven't done well – and some of us go out of our way to avoid any kind of negative feedback!

When you respond to it with an open mind, however, you can use criticism to help you identify your weaknesses, grow, and become more effective.

This Quick Guide explains how to tell whether the criticism is fair or unfair, before offering tips on handling criticism well, and making it work for you.



How to Tell Fair from Unfair Criticism

You'll likely respond in different ways to fair and unfair criticism, so you need to be able to distinguish between the two.

Fair Criticism is given in a respectful, constructive and non-threatening way. It includes factual statements, and focuses on actions to be taken, rather than on the person responsible for them.

For example, your boss might say to you after a presentation, "Your slides weren't as effective as they could have been. If you'd had less text on them, people would have listened more to you, instead of just trying to read your slides. Some extra pictures would make it more interesting next time, too."

Fair criticism represents an opportunity. Keep an open mind and, where possible, be willing to own up to your mistakes and make efforts to recover from them. If the situation warrants it, always be prepared to apologise. Finally, try not to dwell too much on any criticism you receive. Instead, take any positives from it that you can, and then move on.

Unfair Criticism may be delivered in a harsh tone, using broad, unspecific terms or generalizations, and possibly in a public place where there are other people listening. However, what really marks out criticism as being unfair is when the criticisms "melt away" when you challenge them rationally.



Dealing With Your Initial Response to Criticism

When we're criticized, it's easy to feel immediately defensive. Other reactions such as shock, embarrassment, hurt, fear, or crying are common too. After all, criticism implies that we've done something wrong, or that we're not meeting the performance levels we should.

Your initial response is the most important one – it has the greatest scope for making things worse or better.

Here's our recommended approach for managing your emotions:

Step 1: Stay Calm

The first thing to do is remain calm, whether the criticism comes from a colleague or a boss. Negative criticism can give rise to anger or feelings of inadequacy. Expressing these emotions will only dig you deeper into a hole – and give your critic the high ground. It can also damage your reputation.

If you need more than a few seconds to calm down, then say so. Ask for some time to formulate your response and come back with it later.

Step 2: Repeat the Criticism

If the criticism is delivered face-to-face, simply and calmly repeat your critic's complaints back to them, to make sure that you've understood them properly.

Make steady eye contact, and in a non-aggressive tone say, "So, what you're saying is..." and put the criticism in your own words. The goal here is to take the focus away from your reaction and place it squarely on substantive issues – without accepting or denying them.

A truly aggressive critic might be hoping to goad you into a fight, or at least to make you betray anger. Or they may be expecting you to cave in and accept defeat.

Be factual and avoid exaggeration. That way, you'll come across as a reasonable person keen to resolve the matter.



Dealing With Your Initial Response to Criticism continued

Step 3: Open Up Both Perspectives

Establish respect as a key element of the conversation. For example, you might say, "I can see how you might get that idea, but I probably haven't explained properly." Do this and you'll show that you're willing to see things from your critic's perspective. And you'll give them the opportunity to return the favour.

If the person offering criticism isn't being specific enough, then ask questions to find out what the real issue is. If your boss says, "I didn't like your last report," then get details. What didn't they like about it?

Use active listening to really understand what your critic is saying, rather than nodding along, while waiting to come in with your next response.

Step 4: Move on Politely

If, despite your best efforts, your critic holds firm, then it's time for a graceful exit from the immediate situation.

You might say, "That's certainly something to think about going forward, and I appreciate the feedback," or something similar. This presents you as someone genuinely trying to do the best job possible – and places the focus on future interactions.



Following Up on Your Initial Response

Now you've bought some time. If you still don't think that the criticism is fair, here are some steps for resolving the situation in the longer term:

Step 1: Consider the Source

Is your critic a respected voice within the company, or do they continually attack others to shore up their own lack of self-confidence?

If it's the latter, you may have already solved the problem by calmly repeating the criticism during the meeting. However, your critic's opinion may carry weight within the organization. Worse still, they may be your boss. We explore how to approach that situation, below, in the section Handling Criticism From Your Boss.

Step 2: Suggest a Follow-up Meeting

One good idea might be to suggest a meeting to hash out your differences. Even if you find your critic's reasoning flawed, don't discount the chance that you might have something to learn. The two of you might come up with an improved strategy together, and you'll emerge from the interaction with a reputation as a team player who pursues the best interests of the company.

Step 3: Ask for Help From an Authority

If your critic persists, and you're convinced that they're wrong, you might consider looking for buy-in from a manager or HR. (This is particularly important if you think you're being bullied.)

Be careful not to launch a personal attack. Instead, accurately portray both sides of the argument, and explain that you understand their point of view, but that your side is better.

Be calm and rational. Even if your boss sides with your critic, you'll come off as someone who's measured, and open to a range of perspectives.

Providing you and your critic both keep in mind the goals of the team, rather than your personal or professional differences, you should be able to agree on a positive way forward.



Handling Criticism From Your Boss

What, though, if your critic is your boss? First, schedule a meeting, and hear them out. If they make sense, then cede the point, and adjust your approach appropriately.

If you remain convinced that their criticisms fall wide of the mark, and they persist with them, graciously try to bring them round to your view. Failing that, you might request a meeting with someone higher up the ladder or in HR.

Recognize, though, that you risk undermining your position further. Always make your case as calmly and rationally as possible.

Key Points

There's a big difference between fair and unfair criticism, but sometimes the line between the two is hard to see. Fair criticism can help you to grow and learn, while unfair criticism can drag you down.

It's natural to react strongly to unjust criticism, but this is rarely a wise career move. Stay calm, get your critic to repeat the comments, and show that you understand them. If the criticism is based on a misunderstanding or a different perspective, you should be able to resolve the problem.

In more complicated situations, particularly when your critic is your boss, you should schedule a meeting to discuss the criticism in full.