

# Receiving Personal Criticism

## APPLICATION

*Very Broad.* Any open conversation can turn into the opportunity to receive personal criticism.

## INTRODUCTION

Building and maintaining good relationships is very dependent on open communication. How you handle personal criticism is an important component of this. This is important as evidenced by the fact that 70% of engineers fail in their jobs because of personal and interpersonal factors. (I-EEE) If you handle criticism well, you will often get useful feedback and build the relationship as well. If you don't do this well, people may see you as defensive and probably withhold information that you may need to know. Learn to do this sincerely and well. Let's face it, for most of us, there are plenty of opportunities to practice this. Start at home, then with your friends, then at work.

## IMPORTANT TIPS

- A. How do you know if others think you welcome criticism as useful feedback? One big indicator is how often the people around you give it to you. If they haven't recently and don't very often, then this is an indicator that you need to work on this skill. (*Unless you are a perfect person – in which case you don't need criticism!*)
- B. To improve your work and personal relationships, first you will need to change your mindset about criticism. Whether it is accurate or not does not matter – it is the perceptions of others that you need to understand. Welcome this as productive.
- C. One way to begin changing your relationships is to frequently reach out and ask for it. That's right, seek the negative. When you get it, listen for understanding, don't disagree or debate, and walk away wiser. You will now have more knowledge of how people perceive you. This is powerful.

## KEY POINTS

1. **It's not a weakness.** First, recognize that the acceptance of criticism is not an admission of fault or weakness, or even of agreement. Acceptance means you understand the other person's perspective. It means they know you value their feedback. It means you care about the relationship.

2. **When receiving criticism, tell them it is OK.** Grant others permission to have a different perspective of a situation. Tell them, even if you are uncomfortable, that you think this is important for you to know how they think and feel. Say it. "Ouch that hurts a little bit – but tell me more. I need to understand you."
3. **Seek new information.** Your goal is to move information from the hidden arena to the public arena where it can become knowledge. (See Johari Window in business solutions - papers)
4. **If you think the criticism is manipulative, use the "Fog Bank."** This technique allows you to make vague statements that let them know you hear them, but without taking a position. Key example phrases include "you might be right" or "you have a point there." By not taking a position or becoming defensive you are like fog, you can't be grabbed in order to be manipulated.
5. **Ask for more information.** The more negative the information, particularly if it is laden with strong emotion, the more you need to keep asking for more information. This is counter-intuitive, but very powerful to diffusing strong emotions. "You mean I did that? Tell me more!" A personally powerful person will help others to dump their emotions. (See Business Solutions section – Readings and Papers for Verbal Jujitsu)
6. **Use self-disclosure.** If you are surprised, say so. Disclose your reaction, but in a positive way - otherwise you will seem defensive.
7. **Take ownership for the problem.** Apologize for not knowing how the person feels. "I'm sorry, I didn't understand you felt this strongly about my behavior" or "I guess I should have known this" can be very powerful. Why? Because you just indicated you value the relationship. That is the fundamental point after all.
8. **Suspend disagreement until the end of the conversation.** First recognize you need to earn the right to disagree by listening and soliciting all the negative feedback. They took the initiative; it probably wasn't easy for them. You didn't "step up to the plate," so you have to earn the right to respond. Then you can share your point of view, in a positive way.
9. **Make a life decision.** Which is better? Winning the argument, or knowing more how others think and feel? Make the decision to be the more personally powerful person. Knowledge is power. Behaving in a way that causes people to not tell you what they think is a weakness, sometimes a professionally fatal one. BTW – Do we believe people really win arguments? This is faulty terminology.
10. **Finally, thank them.** At the end of the conversation, even if you disagree with the criticism, or thought it was unfair, thank them for their openness. Even if you screwed up and got defensive. Win it back. Tell them you think their feedback is

very important – even if it stings a little bit. Thank them for their honesty. Honesty deserves a reward.