

A Critical Look at Criticism

“Criticism, like rain, should be gentle enough to nourish a man’s growth without destroying his roots.” ~ Frank A. Clark



We can all be critical from time to time. It is often a knee-jerk reaction to something that we do not agree with or do not understand. But does an occasional criticism make us a hardcore critic? Fortunately, no! However, even one harsh criticism of another person can have serious consequences and unchecked criticism can become habit forming. So we need to be aware of our criticism of others and its impact on relationships in our lives.

A true critic is someone who frequently finds fault or unfairly judges others. A critic does not offer his/her thoughts in an effort to constructively address an area of disagreement or to engage in healthy debate. Rather, a critic shares opinions as a way to condemn and belittle others or to highlight potential flaws of a new or opposing idea. A person may use criticism as a tool to impede progress, to deflect responsibility, or to try to better position themselves.

By learning to accept change, become accountable for our own actions, and abandon our ego, we can quickly relinquish the critic role. It is okay to hold opposing viewpoints, but we should seek to fully understand different perspectives and ideas before passing judgment. We should be able to debate respectfully, express needs assertively, and choose our words thoughtfully. When we become a fan of new ideas and opportunities for growth, we move from being a critic to being a problem-solver. Who doesn’t want to be known for that?!

Destructive vs. Constructive Criticism

Not all criticism is necessarily bad. Essentially, there are two types of criticism – destructive and constructive.

Destructive criticism has little value. People giving destructive criticism typically do so without interest in helping another person or improving the situation. They may not even fully understand the person or situation they are criticizing ... and they may not care to. Destructive criticism builds barriers and weakens relationships. It can damage the reputation of the person giving it, who is often viewed as difficult, negative, and a complainer.



In contrast, constructive criticism can be very valuable. Constructive criticism offers a different perspective, but in a way that is encouraging and respectful. People giving constructive criticism typically take the time to fully understand the thing that they are criticizing. They offer specific feedback, are not dismissive, and do not speak in generalities such as, “That will never work ...” or “The whole thing is a mess ...” Constructive criticism explores both the limitations and possibilities of opposing ideas and is offered with the intent to help another person grow or improve.

People who regularly offer constructive criticism are seen as being objective, fair, and genuine. They get a reputation for being good problem solvers and valued team members. So commit to providing constructive criticism – it is beneficial to others and yourself!

Before you criticize another person, take a moment to reflect ...

- Do you fully understand the other person's position or the situation which you are about to criticize?
- Could the need to criticize this person originate from your dislike of him/her – rather than a true opposition to the idea or event?
- How do you feel your criticism will be received by the other person? Is there anything you can do to increase the chances of it being positively received?
- If the roles were reversed, how would you like to receive feedback?
- How do you feel when someone criticizes you?

A Passion for Compassion

Criticism often creates barriers in our relationships with others. When we choose to criticize others, we risk having them withdraw from us, dismiss us, or become resentful of us.

If we are aware that we have a tendency to criticize and wish to break ourselves of the habit, we should consider developing a passion for compassion. Compassion is an active desire to alleviate another's suffering. When we practice compassion, not only do we enhance our ability to connect with others, but we also reinforce the belief that we can make a positive difference in our world by helping others.

The first step to becoming more compassionate is to display empathy for others. Being empathetic means taking time to acknowledge and understand another's feelings, emotions, and needs. It means taking the proverbial walk in another person's shoes. When we pause to consider what others may be experiencing, we focus less on our own interests or perspectives.

Next, take your newfound understanding of others' feelings and needs and use it to respond with words and behaviors that are supportive of their feelings and help them fulfill their needs. This is compassion in action!

Being compassionate helps us to build relationships with others. It establishes trust, cultivates good will, and encourages honest dialogue between individuals. Compassion combats the natural critic in us and helps us to create a more peaceful working environment.



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