



How Mature Leaders Respond to Criticism (Part 1 of 2)

Being criticized can be good if you make the most of the opportunity

Tim Stevenson

IF YOU ARE a leader, you will be criticized. It simply goes with the territory for those who lead a group of any size: A corporation, company, office, PTA, little league baseball team, or den of Cub Scouts.

What many would-be leaders do not recognize, however, is that the criticism itself is not the biggest issue. How the leader *responds* to being criticized is often far more impactful to their success or failure. Responding wrongly to criticism can sink the progress of otherwise highly-gifted individuals.

You can rant, protest, deny, or fight it, but there's a better way: **You can learn to see criticism as an opportunity and turn it to your advantage.**

It's all about how you respond

Mature leaders *think* differently about criticism than average people. They have accepted the inevitability of criticism, and they have learned how to respond and turn it into a benefit.

Notice two key verbs: They have “accepted” and “learned.” No one naturally likes being criticized. How much it bothers us varies greatly. Some are thin-skinned and can't help reacting in hurt and anger. Others are thick-skinned and tempted to blow off criticism as nonsense. Either way, nobody enjoys it. That's the first fact.

Why is being criticized “good”?

Let's start by answering the question likely generated by the subtitle of this article: Can you really view criticism as “good”?



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The answer is yes, but not because all criticisms are in themselves good. It's because the *opportunity* afforded by criticism can be turned to your advantage.

Criticism is really too broad a term to be designated good or bad. Criticism includes:

- Valid and important information you really need to know about and fix
- Much ado about little; points valid, but not that important (“majoring on minors”)
- Trivial nit-picking (you painted a whole room alone, but “missed a spot”)
- The voice of envy: someone who feels inferior to you and tries to compensate by taking you down a notch or two
- The tactical strike of a rebel, competitor, or enemy; an outright attack

Notice that only one of the five types is designated “valid and important information.” Why consider the others at all? Because *how you respond can be more important than the criticism itself*. This is true regardless of the validity or truth of the message.

For one thing, if you respond harshly and negatively to a trivial criticism, it can ding your leadership credibility in a lasting way. You appear small, oversensitive, and touchy.

Second, responding properly to criticism can actually *raise* your leadership credibility. You grow in people's eyes through demonstrating maturity and wisdom. Observers gain a greater sense of confidence and security when they see a leader who's not easily shaken.

Even in a message that is 80% invalid, there is that 20% of truth we can and should learn from. **This is a mark of a mature leader: The ability to listen non-defensively to a critical message, sift out and benefit from what's valid, and dismiss the rest.** Immature leaders, on the other hand, tend to dismiss the entire message because part of it isn't true.

ASK

Process for responding to criticism and turning it into a benefit

Tim Stevenson

A = Attitude

- Your attitude is most important. Be *open* and *non-defensive*.
- You want to learn and improve, and you want to keep channels of communication free and clear.
- Open criticism is an opportunity: you can learn and make positive change, or you can put invalid criticism to rest.

S = Spotlight

- Turn the spotlight on the criticism itself. Bring it into the light.
- Ask the person to elaborate.
- Take time to gather details.

K = Knowledge

- Positive change begins with *awareness*. Seek understanding.
- Sift the criticism. Identify what's valid and discard the rest.
- Thank them for bringing it to your attention. Share your conclusions when appropriate.

Leaders can learn to respond to criticism wisely with **awareness** and **effort**. In this two-part series, I'm going to introduce a process to help you called **ASK**. It is a simple way to describe how effective leaders think and behave when criticized.

A = ATTITUDE

S = SPOTLIGHT

K = KNOWLEDGE

We will look at the first point here, and consider the other two points in my next article.

A = Attitude

Your attitude is most important. It begins with the knowledge that nobody's perfect. If nobody's perfect, it logically follows that everyone has room for improvement.

You may wonder why I'm wasting inches on these obvious points, but think about how many people react when criticized. They get surprised, offended, angry, and defensive. They defend their behavior, deny their faults, give multiple excuses, and attack back. They give every evidence of thinking they're perfect and beyond questioning.

If you ask them directly if that's what they think, they say, "No, of course not." They know they're not perfect. But they sure *act* like they think that way!

The foundation of a proper attitude is the comfortable awareness that you have imperfections and limitations, and the desire to improve and grow as you are able. The great thing about such an attitude is that there is then no need for defensiveness.

When you have this attitude, an open, non-defensive response makes perfect sense. After all:

- ***You want to learn and improve***

When you're teachable, you are open to suggestions and corrections. Yes, there's a sting when you first hear them, but your desire to improve overrides instinctive reactions.

- ***You want to keep communication channels free and clear***

Remember that many people who criticize you are taking a risk, especially if you are in a position of authority or power: They're risking your anger, rejection, or retaliation. If they care enough to bring you a negative message intended for your good, you want to encourage that behavior. Shutting them down only means

they'll be reluctant or unwilling next time — to your detriment.

Add to that: Encouraging upward challenge is of critical importance for any group. Often, it's the lone, small voice of an honest and courageous individual who keeps an entire group from going wrong together. Those voices must be encouraged and protected or they go silent.

- ***If there are negative impressions about you out there, it is to your advantage to know about them***

You can't do anything about a problem of which you are unaware. Leaders who become removed from what the people really think are in jeopardy.

- ***If the criticism is valid, you can do something about it***

If someone has brought something to your attention of which you were unaware, he or she has truly done you a favor. Now you can solve the problem, fix the fault, or correct the wrong direction.

- ***If the criticism is invalid, you can correct the impression***

If there is an untrue negative message about you being believed by others, it's to your advantage to know about it so you can take steps to address it. You can correct misconceptions or misunderstandings before they grow and harden into a reputation.

The currency of leadership is credibility. Many otherwise effective leaders diminish their leadership credibility by responding negatively to criticism. This is important subject to consider carefully.

Choose to be open and non-defensive. We'll continue working through the process in my next article. **L**