

## OPINION

# The better way to deal with criticism at work

---

**MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI**

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED 3 HOURS AGO

**FOR SUBSCRIBERS**

---

*Merge Gupta-Sunderji is a leadership speaker, consultant and the founder of leadership development consultancy Turning Managers Into Leaders.*

Criticism stings. Sure, it is sometimes couched as gentler “feedback,” or offered as “advice,” or even presented as a “pointer.” Yet criticism it is. And most of us respond with one or both of two reactions. First, we indignantly and completely discount both the message and the source. And second, we get upset and sometimes dwell on it for days, even weeks. But if you want to grow as a valued professional and a respected leader, it is to your benefit to evaluate with an open mind the criticism you hear, even if it hurts or it isn’t what you believe to be true.

Does that mean that you need to be receptive to anyone who has an opinion on what you say and do? No. The key lies in finding a way, first, to evaluate the criticism that you receive and then thoughtfully respond to it based on that assessment. In my one-on-one mentoring work with leaders, I teach a simple two-dimensional tool to help them both consider and decide what to do with what they hear. I call it the “valid and important” model.

### **THE “VALID AND IMPORTANT” MODEL**

Here’s how it works. For every criticism you hear, ask yourself two questions. First, is it valid? In other words, is the criticism true? Not whether you like hearing it, but is the commentary factually correct? This may require you to

deliberately step back and force yourself to be objective. Second, is the feedback important? Importance is directly related to whether the issue can impact your principal goals, results or achievements. And often, importance is closely tied to who is giving you the advice. If it's coming from your boss, then the critique is likely important, if for no other reason than your boss has the ability to significantly impact your success.

The answers to these two questions will allow you to assess the criticism you have received and, just as importantly, determine what to do next. If the feedback you have been given is valid and important, only then should you take any action; for any other alternative, the criticism should be gracefully acknowledged, but then promptly ignored. The best way to understand this tool is to consider some examples.

#### **NOT VALID AND NOT IMPORTANT**

Let's say a co-worker, in an informal discussion at the water cooler, points out that your socks don't complement your shoes. Quite frankly, you know that not to be true; in fact, you know that your sense of style is significantly superior to his. In the past, this sort of unsolicited commentary might have upset you and immediately made you defensive. But using this model, you can assess the statement as not valid and not important. Simply offer a graceful response such as "I can see why you might think that," and then let it go.

#### **VALID, BUT NOT IMPORTANT**

Another co-worker criticizes you for several spelling errors in an e-mail note you sent her. In this case, the spelling errors are legitimate as you were in a hurry and didn't proofread as well as you should have. Fortunately though, the e-mail note was not widely distributed. Here the feedback is valid, but in the large scheme of things, it is not important. Again, offer a poised response such as "Thanks for letting me know". And then move on.

#### **NOT VALID, BUT IMPORTANT**

Your boss questions the data in a recent report you have prepared, referencing information that you know to be outdated. Even though you know the criticism is not valid; because it is coming from your boss (who has the ability to impact your career), it is best to assess it as important. Don't let your boss frustrate you. Instead, simply acknowledge him with a "Let me investigate further", and then move on to other pressing issues.

### **VALID AND IMPORTANT**

Your supervisor shares several critical observations about the recent presentation you made to an important client. When you are able to calmly consider what she told you, you realize that she is correct. This feedback is both valid and important. And this is the only type of criticism that you should consider and invest energy and effort into understanding and acting on.

*Stay ahead in your career. We have a weekly Careers newsletter to give you guidance and tips on career management, leadership, business education and more. Sign up today.*

---

© Copyright 2019 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved.

351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher