

How to differentiate helpful from unhelpful negative criticism

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Criticism can be hard to take. Even if it is well-meaning, it can hurt. And if it is unkind, it is even worse. What should you do? React or ignore it? Respond or walk away? Act on it or disregard it? All compelling questions, but not always easy to consider in the emotion of the moment.

The reality is that only a portion of the criticism you receive is actually valid, and even a smaller fraction are things you should actually follow through on. The key to not letting the criticism get to you lies in separating these latter few from the rest. Here is a great two-step process to evaluate the criticism you receive so that you can decide what to do next.

Ask yourself two questions

- Is the criticism coming from someone you know or someone you don't?
- Is it your work or actions that are being criticized, or is it you?

Based on your responses to these two questions, the people criticizing you will fall into one of four categories.

The supporters

These are the people who know you and are giving you feedback on your work or actions. These are the ones that want to see you prosper and thrive, and actually care about your accomplishments. If they are criticizing you, then it's because they want you to improve and develop further. You should listen to them, because making the changes they suggest will often set you up for further success. If you're inclined to dismiss their criticism, it is usually for one of two reasons. It's either because disapproval from those we like and admire tends to hurt, which means that we often respond emotionally. Or it's because they haven't quite mastered the art of being gentle in their negative feedback, which also leads to an emotional retort. Either way, embrace the emotional reaction, get over it, and then deliberately consider and act on what you've heard.

The fake friends

These people know you, but they aren't really interested in seeing you succeed. Their criticism isn't about your work or your actions, it's really about you. The irony is that because they know you, they also know what your triggers are, and therefore, how to say things that really hurt. At work, they usually take the form of jealous co-workers; on the personal front, ex-partners often fall into this category. Their criticism can take the form of backhanded comments. Examples of situations where the criticism is directed at you, and not really at your work, are: "This is really good work, it's way better than your usual stuff," or, "These pants look great on you, they hide your big belly really well." What should you do when the fake friends criticize? Simply say, "Thank you," or give them a non-committal response such as, "Thanks for letting me know," or, "I can see why you'd say that." And then move on.

The experts

These are the folks you don't know, but may actually have expertise in your field. They're taking a close look at your work, and have input to offer. Their criticism is worth an unemotional second look. Often, they'll pick up on things you might have missed, or offer perspectives you might not have previously considered. Because they're focusing on your work, you know it's not personal, so it's definitely worth reflecting on what they have to say. While, "Thanks, I appreciate your feedback," is not an easy response, it could lead to a valuable opportunity to collaborate in the future.

The trolls

Ah yes, the trolls, the unknown people, usually hiding behind their keyboards, who feel the need to question your intelligence, your sexuality or your ancestral background. Unfortunately, whether it's climate change, COVID-19 vaccine mandates, politics or gun control, our world has become increasingly polarized. Growing numbers of people are either "for it" or "against it," and your attempt at thoughtful discussion will often trigger a deluge of hate mail, sometimes from both camps. The solution to the trolls is easy. Delete or ignore. If you can, laugh out loud first.

Remember, not all criticism is bad. The key to your sanity is being able to separate the useful from the useless, and knowing how to deal with each.

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