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5 Ideas for Handling Criticism Well

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Dealing with criticism, especially angry criticism, can be a big challenge in all our relationships. Many times people on the receiving end just shut down and go away; still others will "return fire" and find themselves in a full-out argument. Neither response is helpful.

So what can you do if you wind up getting criticized? Here are 5 ideas for your consideration:

1. Listen for the emotions under the anger; it often means the person feels hurt in some way. Anger is frequently a secondary emotion. Think of it as a reaction to a softer, more primary emotion underneath. The person may feel shame and humiliation as well as hurt. Remember: People get hurt first, then, they get angry. When you listen for the vulnerable emotion underneath, it's easier to feel sympathetic toward them. Consider what button you might have pushed and promptly apologize as necessary.

2. Comfort them with kindness. Use empathy and compassion to soothe their anger, hurt, and other softer emotions and help them return to reasonable mind, the state of mind in which they can listen to you and respond more appropriately. You may even get an apology! Imagine how someone confident and poised would handle the situation. Once you're through the situation, give yourself credit for handling it well and taking the high road.

3. If you're just the messenger, agree with the critic. If you're getting attacked for something beyond your control, say something like, "I know! You're right, it stinks that _____ happened. I wish it had worked out better, too." This is redirecting the anger away from you and toward the situation. This can also open up new avenues for problem solving.

4. Don't get defensive or blame others. Defensive arguments don't sound logical or reasonable, they just make a person sound tiresome and difficult. Blaming others is even worse; don't throw someone under the bus.

5. Remember, it's often not what the other person says, it's what we hear that causes us problems. If a critical comment pushes a button for you, ask yourself: "What does this comment mean about me?" Many times, the answer will have little or nothing to do with what the other person actually said. Avoid speculation and over-interpretation; they just make us feel worse. Besides, they may be acting out of pain or confusion that has nothing to do with you, or maybe they're just plain wrong. Remember that criticism frequently says more about the critic than it says about you. Someone's judgmental remark doesn't mean the criticism is true, it just means the person is "judgey." Unfortunately, this is an all-too-common human foible, one that we all have, at one time or another, fallen into ourselves.

It's never comfortable to be the target of criticism, whatever form it takes. The next time you find yourself in front of a critic, try out one or more of these ideas. Then, with all the patience and forgiveness you can muster, do your best to be a healing presence in that interaction.

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