

Dealing with Unfair Criticism

Responding calmly and rationally to unwarranted criticism

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You're presenting the draft marketing plan for a new product at your team meeting. As you talk, you notice the encouraging gestures of your colleagues and supervisor. But one colleague withholds approval, listening with a steely stare. After you finish, he proceeds to deliver a withering critique of your ideas and approach – each point of which, you feel, is patently wrong. As he talks, you feel the blood rise to your face and your heart pound. Now all eyes are on you. What will you say?

Or another scenario: For a year, you work hard toward meeting your professional goals. Things are going well, you're meeting your targets, and team morale is high. Then the hammer drops: At your one-on-one annual review, your boss expresses disappointment in you. Despite all indications to the contrary, you're suddenly in the hot seat – and your boss is telling you so to your face.

What we've seen here are two cases of unfair criticism – one from a colleague, one from a boss. What do you do now? How you react to it can have a tremendous impact on your career. Emotionally charged, your instincts may not be the best guide to follow.

So now what? Easy does it.

Dealing with your initial response

Your immediate response is the most important one – it has the greatest scope for making things worse or better. Here's our recommended approach to overcome the natural urge to express your anger or fight back.

Step 1: Remain calm

The first thing to do is remain calm, whether the rhetorical slap comes from a colleague or a boss. Negative criticism can give rise to anger or feelings of inadequacy. Expressing these emotions will only dig you deeper into a hole, and give your critic the high ground. When the hammer drops, react with courtesy – and a pause. A couple of deep, quiet breaths will help settle you.

Step 2: Have the point repeated

Don't pressure yourself to think of the perfect response on the spot. You probably won't. Instead, try this: Simply and calmly repeat your critic's complaints back to him, to make sure that you've understood him properly. Making steady eye contact and in a non-aggressive tone, say: "So, what you're saying is.," and put his criticisms in your own words. The goal here is to take the focus away from any personality clash, and place it squarely on substantive issues.

And if what he's saying is truly ridiculous, this tactic may shine a harsh light on his critique. Be very careful to be factual and avoid the temptation to exaggerate. If he claims your sales strategy will deliver mediocre results, **don't** say, "So what you're saying is, my sales strategy will bring the company down". By overstating his case, you'll come off as someone who's defensive and looking for a fight – rather than a reasonable person who's genuinely looking to get to the bottom of the matter.

If you manage to pull this off, you will have performed the equivalent of turning the other cheek. A truly aggressive critic might be hoping to goad you into a fight, or at least to make you betray anger. Or he may be expecting you to cave in, accept his critique, and slink off, defeated. Instead, what you're doing is taking the focus off of your reaction and putting it back onto his criticisms – without accepting or denying them.

Step 3: Open up both perspectives

The objective repetition tactic may set him off-balance, and inspire him to backtrack. If so, now is a good time to open a real discussion of the critique. If you choose this route, a smart tactic would be to couch your response in language like "from my perspective", or, "I can see how you might get that idea, but I probably haven't properly explained that." This establishes respect as a key element of the conversation. You will have shown that you're willing to look at things from his perspective, and you can see how he might have reasonably drawn the conclusions he has. Now you'll give him the opportunity to return the favor.

Step 4: Move on politely

If, on the other hand, your critic holds firm even after you repeat his complaints in his own words, you'll need some time to develop a good response. You've shown that you've understood "where he's coming from," and hopefully you've done so without betraying anger or shame. Now it's time for a graceful exit. "That's certainly something to think about going forward, and I appreciate the feedback," you might say. This presents you as someone genuinely trying to do the best job possible – and places the focus on future interactions.

Responding to a critical colleague

Well, you certainly have been given something to think about, and now you've bought some time. The best possible response will depend, of course, on whether your critic is a colleague or a superior.

If it's a colleague, the first thing to do is take the time-tested advice: "Consider the source." Is he a respected voice within the company, or someone who criticizes others in a desperate attempt to shore up his own flagging reputation? If it's the latter, you may have already solved the problem by calmly repeating his criticism during the meeting. "There he goes again," other team members quite likely will have thought.

However, if your critic's opinion carries weight within the company, it's worth doing some damage limitation. One good idea might be to suggest a meeting to hash out your differences. Even if you find his reasoning flawed, don't discount the chance that you might have something to learn from him. The two of you might together come up with an improved strategy, and you'll emerge from the interaction with a reputation as a team player who pursues the best interests of the company.

So if you think he's wrong, be open-minded but stick to your guns – graciously.

If he persists, and you are convinced that he's wrong, you might consider looking for buy-in from a superior. Be careful not to launch a personal attack – accurately portray both sides of the argument, and explain that that you understand his point of view, but that your side is better. Again, even if your boss sides with your critic, you'll come off as someone actively looking out for the company's best interest.

Tangling with the boss

What, though, if your critic is your boss? This is a knottier problem. First, schedule a meeting, and hear him out. Are you sure his criticism isn't valid? If he does on balance make sense, then cede the point, and adjust your approach appropriately.

If you remain convinced that his criticisms fall wide of the mark, and he persists in making them, try graciously, through one-on-one meetings, to bring him round to your view. Failing that, you might request a meeting with someone higher up the ladder. In doing so, though, recognize that you risk undermining your position further. Again, make your case as calmly and rationally as possible.

Providing you and your boss both keep in mind the goals of the team, rather than your personal or professional differences, you should be able agree a positive way forward.

Rational discourse really is the best antidote to unfair criticism. More often than not, it wins out in the corporate world, providing the people involved are open and willing to finding the best course.

Maintaining your self-esteem

Being subjected to unfair criticism can easily be a bruising experience, however well you handle your critic. So it's important that you don't let the experience damage your self-esteem or self-confidence.

The main thing to remember is that we're talking about unfair criticism here rather than constructive feedback. Sometimes the criticism is unfair because it's simply incorrect. And on other occasions it's unfair because it's about something that has no bearing on how you do your job. Either way, remember that it indicates shortcomings in your critic rather in you.

If you find you continue to dwell on it, though, use the techniques of **thought awareness, rational thinking and positive thinking** to clarify in your own mind that you, your skills and your actions did not deserve the criticism they received.

Key Points:

It's natural to react strongly to unjust criticism, but this is rarely a wise career move. Instead, manage the immediate situation by remaining calm, getting your critic to repeat the comments and then clarifying that you understand them. You may spot that the criticism is based on a misunderstanding or a different perspective, in which case it is reasonably straightforward to iron this out. In more complicated situations, particularly when your critic is your boss, you will need to schedule an "offline" meeting to discuss the criticism.

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