



When Criticism Hurts Most (And How to Stop the Hurting)

“No sadder proof can be given of a person's own tiny stature, than their disbelief in great people.” -Thomas Carlyle

Some of the greatest leaders in history were the most criticized. Odds are if you aren't being criticized you aren't doing anything of value. Mohandas Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela and Alexander Solzhenitsyn all were leaders who were criticized - and jailed for their words and beliefs. My Executive Coach says that if you are making a difference then you are being criticized. She says in the words of Elbert Hubbard, “To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing.”

Last month I was speaking to a large audience and during a break I downloaded e-mail on my web phone. There, embedded in the many SPAM messages I found a lengthy treatise criticizing a presentation I had given to an audience of about 450 executives several weeks earlier. What made this stand out was that the critic remembered my presentation very well but not that I had gotten a rousing ovation afterwards. He criticized everything from my introduction to my accent and the words I chose in between. He criticized my newsletter and said many people shared his view. What made this interesting was that I gained over 320 subscriptions from this audience of people who supposedly didn't like me or my program.

I have learned through time that you have to not only weigh your critics but the direction the criticism is coming from. Don't misunderstand me; criticism hurts. In fact I have a list of the circumstances in which criticism hurts us most:

1. Criticism hurts when it comes from someone over us. A friend of mine supervises several hundred people in a large facility. She was hurt when a supervisor tore into her after a lower level manager had told lies about her management style. It hurt most of all that her supervisor was someone she respected and she couldn't believe that the miss-statements about her leadership were being believed. It doesn't hurt as much when a subordinate said things critical of your leadership - unless they go over your head with it. You have to have the support of those over you. You need to spend time filling your bank of assets with “change in your pocket” as John Maxwell says. Doing the right things often enough so that when a

- bad day comes your superiors are willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. My friend had a lot of change in her pocket, although the criticism still hurt because it came from above.
2. Criticism hurts when it questions our motives. We can have the noblest aspirations but when someone accuses us of doing the right thing just to grab all of the glory. It stings; especially when it isn't true. Negative people enjoy bringing others down to their level. My daughter wanted to be an Egyptologist when she was in elementary school. She became an authority on King Tutankhamen and other Pharaohs of ancient Egypt. She took the abuse of classmates and teachers alike for wanting to do something out of and above the norm. She went to a career day festival at school her fifth grade year dressed as an archeologist. When she couldn't find a booth for Egyptology or Archeology the teacher told her to set her sights lower and go to the Cosmetology booth. I am sure the Cosmetologists didn't appreciate that remark either!
 3. Criticism hurts when it is continual. I worked for an organization that had several professional critics. I was one of the only ones with a graduate degree in leadership yet these were untrained individuals who thought they knew my job better than I. They made it their duty to evaluate every step I took, and of course I always fell short in their judgments. There is a saying that goes, "Everyone who has never killed a giant will tell you it is impossible." Most critics are unwilling to step up and do the job themselves. A critic is one who points out how imperfectly other people do what the critic does not do at all. Jackie Collins said, "The biggest critics of my books are people who never read them." They probably never wrote a book either. There are some people in life you just can't please.
 4. Criticism hurts when it comes from people who have known us for a long time. Sometimes your family and friends can be the harshest critics. I was going through some personal trials several months ago. Those are times when you can find out who your real friends are. They are the ones who stand beside you, no matter what. The ones who turn and criticize at the first sign of difficulty you are going through weren't on your side to start out. The remarks of one person really hurt for several weeks until I realized that he held beliefs that wouldn't have allowed him to face the same trials I was facing with his critical solutions. The first sign of a crisis is when you have a major problem and no one tries to help you solve it constructively.

Remember these three areas of origin for criticism when it comes your way: You must get over the critics who are over you emotionally, positionally and ability-wise. They will always bring you down to make themselves look taller. Claude Helvetius wrote, "Harsh counsels have no effect; they are like hammers which are always repulsed by the anvil." You can be the anvil repulsing the critical remarks. You can easily determine the strength and depth of a person by the amount of criticism it takes to discourage them.

There was a time in my life when the remarks the angry gentleman wrote me that day would have devastated me. It would have reached into my gut and torn my heart out. I would have gone into a corner and hidden from view. But instead of retreating, I first

wrote him back thanking him for his comments and offering to take his name (which he had voluntarily submitted) off my mailing list. I wished him a great day. Then I used it as an example to my audience that day of how you can't let negative people get you down in life. Use your harshest criticism to make you better. Find a way to turn it into a positive in your life. Let it be alike a warning light on the dashboard of your life. If it is accurate, make the necessary adjustments. If it isn't, then follow the example of Bill Cartwright, former professional basketball player: "I remember when I was in college, people told me I couldn't play in the NBA. There's always somebody saying you can't do it, and those people have to be ignored."
You will be better in the long run!

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