



The Hazardous Communication: *Criticism*¹

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In the course of professional and social life each of us encounters situations in which we must communicate critical comments and appraisals to others. Teachers comment upon pupils' work; administrators work with staff members toward improvement of instruction; parents deal critically and correctively with their children.

We Are All Critics

Many aspects of society are built upon the good that comes from working critically and cooperatively together, prodding one another toward greater achievements. Indeed, in our culture it is accepted practice to direct our most severe criticisms toward the highest leaders. Criticism is a part of life. The *art* of criticism must be learned.

Some Can Take It . . .

Criticism is the most difficult of all forms of communication. It is necessary to project an idea about potential improvement from your mind into the mind of another. You must give him credit for trying, see his problems and point of view, listen to his "defense," support him in his own thinking, and yet help him gain a wider perspective and see new goals ahead.

In many cases you can assume that the person has already realized her weaknesses or problems and that she will welcome positive suggestions. Indeed, to show respect for the ability and intelligence of the one you criticize, you should allow for the possibility that she may already have proposed *for herself* a plan of action which is better than the one you intend to suggest!

. . . Some Can't

As in any social skill, problems arise because people are different. Not everyone can be expected to accept a criticism graciously just because some people can. It is necessary to know as much as possible about the person you are criticizing. You must use words and ideas appropriate to his characteristics. You must know how sensitive he is and how much he is concerned about your status. You also need to be sensitive to his reactions to criticism, encouraging him to discuss the criticism with you.

Silence Isn't Always Golden

Silent argumentation is one of the more serious communication blocks. It appears most frequently in status-loaded situations. If the person under criticism sees her critic as a superior in status, rank, or social class, she may avoid "having words" with the superior. This leaves a residue of resentment and frustration: resentment, because she sees the criticism as another unwarranted privilege of rank; frustration, because she does not comprehend or accept the criticism.

¹ Ted Ward. The Hazardous Communication: Criticism. *Education*. Vol. 80 (2) October 1959: 97-99

Is the Other Afraid of You?

Silent obedience isn't desirable either. Perhaps the student is content to assume the teacher is right and that he can gain more by listening than by arguing. He complies with critical suggestions, but with neither comprehension nor conviction. You may be able to change a person's behavior, but you won't help his understanding and attitude if you criticize while he is afraid of you. Since a behavior change based upon fear or suspicion is unhealthy, it is inadvisable to criticize until a threat-free relationship can be attained.

Teachers, administrators, and counselors recognize the value of informal procedures in counseling. Free discussion across a cup of coffee or a soft drink does more good than twice the amount of time spent telling the counselee what she should do. The critic must be a good listener, able to "draw out" the person into an open analysis of her own actions and ideas.

Are Others Afraid of Themselves?

Personality problems are a plague upon communication. Criticism of an insecure person is extremely difficult—often impossible. Suggesting improvements with one hand while lifting the person's spirits with the other is a difficult juggling operation. It is doubtful that direct criticism can help an insecure person. Ordinarily, she is already too critical of herself—and her self-condemnation makes her continually more disorganized. The first thing she needs is counseling toward seeing herself in a clearer light. Her perspective is distorted if she sees only her weaknesses. Before you can suggest improvements you must help her recognize and describe some of her own qualities or abilities.

Have You Won Respect?

Respect is not an automatic by-product of status. In fact, status can hinder respect. It is often harder for principals to show that they are "on the teachers' side" than it is for the custodian! The principals' legal—and rightful—responsibility makes it difficult for them to approach teachers on a professional peer basis. Compensating by becoming too casual with teachers is just as bad as remaining aloof and superior. Neither extreme stimulates respect.

Respect comes slowly. Principals must work consistently, loyally, and patiently with their staff. In a period of time, confidence and respect can be won. Then they are in a position to be a critic. Teachers, too, face the necessity of earning respect. Happy are the teachers who enjoy the loyal respect of pupils who recognize that they have strengths and weaknesses, good points and bad points, but can be depended upon to be fair, firm, friendly, and frank.

Is "Constructive Criticism" a Myth?

In any suggestion or critical comment is the implication that improvement is possible. Whether in anger or in kindness, whether strongly worded or veiled, recommendations for change can always be interpreted as criticisms. You may suggest to your neighbor that when he gets ready to buy a new car he should consider one like yours. Here you are communicating the primary information that you like your car, but you are also suggesting that his car is not so good as your car. This secondary information is the little gremlin who often gets us in trouble with sensitive neighbors and friends!

Actually "constructive criticism" is not useful terminology because the critic has so little control over whether the criticism she offers is constructive or destructive in its ultimate effect upon the person criticized. The idealist who sees herself as always being a "constructive" critic sooner or later faces the reality that many people don't like to be criticized at all—to some, any suggestion for improvement is destructive criticism.

Don't Be Silly!

In an attempt to be cautious and to circumvent controversy, some critics use ready-made starter phrases. To launch a criticism without the favorite phrase is unthinkable. "I may be wrong, but . . ." probably does more to confuse the issue than to serve as an effective introduction. It immediately focuses attention on the *wrong* and adds the embarrassing suggestion that the criticism itself will ultimately prove that one or the other person was wrong.

"I don't mean to criticize, but . . ." is the close relative of "Don't take it personally, but . . ." These phrases do not take into consideration the basic problem: the sender has little control over the perceptions of the receiver. The importance of the situation must be evaluated by the critic. *If it is not important, one should not criticize.* Perhaps the hearer will not see the same degree of importance in the situation, but this is beyond the critic's control. An intelligent person ordinarily *wants* to find a personal implication in any comment or suggestion—he or she is seeking clues to self-improvement.

Move positively into a critical suggestion or comment. It is possible to develop a straightforward approach to even the most sensitive situation. Try not to insult a person's intelligence by clumsy attempts to hide your criticism.

Don't Knock—Lift!

Criticism need not be disguised, but it must be carefully designed. Skillful teachers first build a mutually communicative rapport with others, analyze the students' self-confidence and operational security, assure themselves that criticism is necessary, and then select words and a manner through which to communicate.

The critic makes suggestions in a kind tone of voice, using grave frowns only when absolutely necessary to communicate a seriousness where severe problems have been discovered. Critics avoid compounding criticism with trivia; they know that it is best to focus attention on a small number of specific suggestions, rather than to recite a long list of observed weaknesses. They phrase their suggestions as questions whenever this is feasible—for example, "In what ways might you be more effective in your work if you practiced being a skillful critic?" Well, what do you think? This question is for *you*?