

# Handling Criticism

There are important differences in how you should respond to fair and unfair criticism, so you need to be able to tell them apart.

**Fair criticism** is given in a respectful, non-threatening way. It includes factual statements, and focuses on actions to be taken, rather than on the person responsible for them. For example, your boss might say to you after a presentation, "Your slides weren't as effective as they could have been. If you'd had less text on them, people would have listened more to you, instead of just trying to read your slides. Some extra pictures would make it more interesting next time, too."

**Unfair criticism** may be delivered in a harsh way, using broad unspecific terms or generalizations, and possibly in a public place where there are plenty of other listening ears. However, what really marks out criticism as being unfair is when the criticisms "melt away" when you challenge them rationally. see our article, "[Dealing with Unfair Criticism](#)", for more on how to handle this.

## **Some constructive responses to reasonable criticism.**

**Adjust your Attitude:** Start by looking at criticism as an **opportunity** to learn and do better. The person offering the feedback is usually keen for you to improve your performance. You can make sure that the conversation starts on the right note by approaching the situation with an open mind, and by having a sense of gratitude that someone's taking the time to help you. **Resist the temptation to be defensive!**

**Disconnect:** It's important to realize that fair criticism is about something you've done or said, not about you personally. Try to disconnect your personal feelings from the criticism, so that you can see the truth in what the other person's saying.

**Really Listen:** Make sure that you actually listen to what is being said. It can be easy to just nod in apparent agreement, while, in reality, you're busy thinking about what you're going to say as soon as the other person has stopped talking. That isn't really listening: you need to listen actively in order to understand just what it is that they're saying.

**Don't Respond Immediately:** Always take time to formulate your thoughts, and make sure you're calm before you say anything. When we fire back immediately we often say things we regret, and which make us look unprofessional. If you find that you need more than a few seconds to calm down, then say so. Ask for some time to formulate your response, and come back with it later. And if the criticism was received by e-mail, don't press the Reply button straight away!

**Paraphrase the Criticism:** Repeating what the person just said in your own words is a great way to make sure you've understood them fully. Use a non-aggressive approach here. Remain calm, and rephrase what you think they've said in a unthreatening way. You might say, "So if I'm understanding you correctly, you think that..."

**Find the Facts:** If the person offering criticism isn't being specific enough, then ask questions. It's important to find out what the real issue is. If your boss says, "I didn't like your last report", then get details. What didn't she like about it?

**Admit Mistakes:** People who own up to their mistakes are respected and admired. When you freely take responsibility for something that hasn't worked out as you would have wished, you're demonstrating professionalism and maturity. If you're in the wrong, admit it and apologize. Agreeing with your critic puts you both on common ground, and can often foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and open communication.

**Learn from the Experience:** Fair criticism can help us improve our performance, if we take the time to learn from it. So, spend some time thinking about what happened, and what your critic said. Come up with a plan for how you're going to fix the situation and avoid the same mistake next time.

**Be Thankful:** After you've gained perspective on the experience, thank the person for taking the time to give you feedback. Many people feel uncomfortable giving criticism, just as many people are uncomfortable receiving it. Explain how it has helped you, and what you've learned from the experience.

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