

Three Principles of Handling Criticism

The day you learn to handle criticism without getting angry, you will find yourself at the eternal shore of peace, revelling in bliss

Our mind looks upon criticism as intrusion. This is the truth. Especially when negative feedback from the other end is unsolicited. Often, the seed of hostility in any relationship sprouts when criticism, which is inevitable, is either expressed or processed unkindly.

Thereafter, even constructive feedback is rejected as a biased opinion of the other person. "Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things." These are the words

of Winston Churchill beautifully summing up how one should look upon criticism. Nevertheless, to be open to criticism remains a rare quality only few possess.

Numerous times people ask you for honest feedback, stressing the word honest, but when you actually do offer it, they become defensive. But, criticism is an important aspect of our lives and we can only gain from learning how to take it positively. Those who learn to handle criticism with discernment live in less conflict and command more respect wherever they go.

Here are three golden principles of being at peace in the face of criticism. Next time you have to handle disapproval, justified or otherwise, reflect on these principles and you will remain mostly unperturbed.

Is it beneficial?

Often when we are criticised, ego raises its hood and most of us become defensive even before fully listening to what the other person has to say. We tend to believe that we know absolutely everything about us and that we know what we are doing. And anytime we are challenged, it shakes our self-belief, it rattles us.

Some people react sharply and some withdraw, but the best thing to do is to ask yourself this question: Is it beneficial? When their criticism or advice, however unsought or negative, is actually for your benefit, it is only prudent to pay attention to it. You don't have to take their feedback personally; simply listen to it and once done, mull over it and decide if there's merit in it. You can then make a conscious choice of accepting or rejecting their views. This approach allows you to handle criticism in a non-violent way, without feeling bad.

Is it true?

When criticism is not beneficial or constructive, it can sound like a scathing attack on you, your credibility and your talents. Our natural tendency is to shut down completely or react violently in the face of negative criticism. We are quick to dismiss the criticizer as our adversary and write him off.

But, what if they are actually right? And, this leads to the second question we should ask ourselves. Is it true? If what they are stating is the truth, however unpleasant and bitter, we should shut up and listen rather than react and reject. The other person is under no moral obligation to sugarcoat their statements. Even when their criticism does not sound beneficial but is true, we can't go wrong by reflecting on it.

At any rate, it is food for thought that may help us get better at what we do.

Is the Intention Noble?

Sometimes their criticism is neither true nor beneficial. It's a tricky situation and a particularly hard one because you know they are being unfair.

Well, to keep your peace, examine their intention. If their intentions are not bad, if they are your well-wisher, then let's choose

compassion over reaction and let it go. This is not the time to make them understand your perspective. You can revisit it after the storm has passed.

Further, just remember that if their intentions are not noble then their criticism doesn't really matter. Why take it personally when we know it's not true? And if they do mean well then rather than taking it personally, let's act on it instead.

Negative Feedback

At the fundamental level, criticism is a violent expression. But then again, at times we may have to give negative feedback. How to go about it, you may ask? Well, there's a difference between condemning the other person and highlighting their shortcomings.

For example, if a tennis player has been trying hard but has failed to win any tournament, violent and non-beneficial criticism may sound like: "You never win. What's wrong with you?" Constructive criticism will be more like: "I think you really need to work hard on your backhand. You lost many points today because of a weak backhand."

And, positive feedback will be: "Your forehand strokes were phenomenal today. We could do

with some improvements in serving, but, most importantly, I think we should really practise backhand lot more. The opponent scored 14 points because of that."

Mulla Nasrudin's friend had to attend a funeral for the first time in his life. Not knowing the protocol, he approached Mulla for advice. "Where should I be in the funeral procession, Mulla?" he said. "At the back, in front, or on one of the sides?"

"It matters little where you are, my friend," Mulla said, "as long as you are not in the casket."

Handling criticism is no different. It doesn't matter how you take it, so long as you don't let it wreck your self-esteem, you are okay. The day you learn to handle criticism, honest or otherwise, in a non-reactive, non-violent way, you'll reach a new shore of bliss. Resistance, conflict and criticism won't be able to affect your peace then. You will discover the new you.

Om Swami practises intense sadhana in the Himalayan woods involving complete isolation and solitude for months. He has his asram at Kotla Barog, Himachal Pradesh.