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Criticism: Does it Really Help?

Handling your desire to criticize another person.

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This handout is aimed at people in close relationships, such as marriages and families. But the principles can also be applied to the workplace. Look at it broadly and see how you may apply the principles in a variety of situations.

Criticism: censure, condemnation, disapproval, or reproach. When you criticize someone, you are condemning or disapproving of them. Naturally, they are less than happy about that as a general rule, and will try to defend themselves, a perfectly understandable reaction.

Criticism implies that you are in a superior position to the person being criticized. People have a tendency to resent anything that makes them feel as if they are losing freedom; criticism implies that by suggesting that you are the authority over that other person.

So criticism is a very dangerous activity in relationships, since it leads to defensiveness, which leads to more criticism on your part. It is like you are saying, "They just aren't getting it, I'll say it some more." The more you criticize, the more they defend or attack you, and the situation deteriorates.

If you doubt this, review in your own mind when other people criticized you. How did it work? Were you glad or perhaps defensive and angry? Review your times of criticizing others. Where they thrilled to get your input, or perhaps angry and defensive? What about when you criticize yourself? Do you feel empowered and enthusiastic, or defective and depressed?

Steps toward productive criticism:

(1) **Try to get over it by yourself.** This is the most important and useful way to handle this. Change yourself and you will find more power and joy in life than if you are trying to change other people.

See if you can overcome your own tendency to criticize. *After all, your first job in a relationship is to enjoy the other person.* If you are thinking critical thoughts, you cannot enjoy that person. You can enjoy that person more if you can find something positive about the problem situation. Sit down by yourself with a sheet of paper and do this exercise:

(A) Recognize the problem is not the other person, it is your own critical thoughts.

(B) Describe the situation that you object to. This may be difficult because you might notice as

you try to describe the situation you also throw in your own judgments. Try to keep it a description of behaviors, things you can see and hear.

(C) Describe your own judgment about the situation. Again, it is your judgment, not the situation itself that can be changed.

(D) Now try to discover something positive about the problem. Look for some way you might be benefiting from the very problem you object to. Look for a more compassionate or understanding way of understanding the situation.

EXAMPLE: My wife/husband is cool and distant and irritable with me.

(A) It's my problem, with my own thinking: My wife (or, husband) is who she is, and my irritation is really my own criticism of her. Maybe she is only cool and distant at times, not always, and my own thinking makes me miss those times.

(B) The situation: She looks away when I talk to her, and seldom hugs or touches me.

(C) My current thoughts: I do so much for her, I am loyal to her, but she won't show warmth to me.

(D) How is this actually a positive? Why not look at it just as the way she was raised, with more reserve and distance? And it can help me to learn to be less dependent on how people treat me; I can learn to be happy and cheerful without having the crutch of someone else supporting me emotionally. I can treat her with warmth whether she is warm back or not. I can notice times she is more warm.

"What if I can't find any way to be calm about this?"

(2): **Negotiate.** If you can't get over it by yourself: Here is an idea that may help you: We really have no right to criticize each other. When you criticize someone, you are acting as if you are superior to them. All people have a right to dignity and to criticize someone without their permission robs them of dignity.

(A) Ask permission to criticize: "I have a problem I need your help with. It involves something you are doing. May I talk to you about it?" If that person won't give you permission, you have to do a great deal of fence-mending or strengthening of the relationship so it will be more natural for the person to accept your complaint.

You should also ask the person to hear you out completely before he or she says anything about your complaint. Ask him to give you time to completely explain your position.

(B) State the criticism in "video description" language: What would you see on a videotape showing the problem happening. Stick to what you can see and hear; don't talk about your judgment or opinions about the problem, just the problem itself.

(C) Tell what that videotape would look like if the problem were gone. What would you see instead? What would be present? How would that help you?

(D) Release the problem: “I realize I cannot force you to do this, it is something that I would like but it may not be something you are willing to do.” If you release the problem then you release your tendency to want to control the other person, and he or she will notice that. It will help.

(E) Listen: Find out what the person thinks about your request. Do not interrupt, especially if it sounds like the person didn’t understand. Just listen, and keep listening until the other person is through talking. Find things you can agree with. Ask intelligent questions. Listen.

As this discussion proceeds, put your energy into taking turns talking. Ask the other person not to interrupt you, and do not interrupt the other person. Be patient and listen carefully until the other person is through talking. Polite fights, where you each take a turn at talking, are more productive than rude ones in which each interrupts the other.

Even if the other person interrupts you, you are not justified in interrupting him or her. Manners are most important here, and the other person not having good manners doesn’t mean you should join in rudeness. Some people find that actually timing the conversation helps. That is, each person talks for a specific amount of time (usually seven minutes) while the other just listens; then the other person talks while the first person listens. Allowing the other person dignity is vital, especially when the other person has bad habits of communication and doesn’t seem to “deserve” good treatment.

“But what if the other person never gets through talking, they just go on and on?”

The best response to that is to spend hours, if necessary, just listening, and not trying to change that person. Their continuing to talk means something, but we don’t know what it means until we listen for a long time. So practice good listening skills. You might consider that this is an opportunity to learn to be a much better listener than you ordinarily would be.

You might ask the person why they continue to talk. What will tell that person that you have been listening to them? How will they know when they can rest assured you have understood?

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