

How to Receive Critical Feedback

Learning to receive critical feedback is a significant piece of Cornell's environment whether it's part of an annual performance dialogue, a classroom discussion, or a research proposal review. Although a normal and essential ingredient in most successful relationships, critical feedback is not always easy or comfortable to hear. Fortunately, receiving critical feedback with discomfort or even fear doesn't have to be inevitable if you're adequately prepared to hear it.

Why is critical feedback so difficult to hear for many people?

It's possible that there are as many answers for this question as there are people who are uncomfortable receiving critical feedback. There are some common themes, however:

- We all have a shared, ingrained need to be on the lookout for perceived threats to our safety and comfort; our brains are constantly "trolling" for this data. Because much of our motivation driving our social behavior is governed by an overarching principle of minimizing threat and maximizing reward we may simply and instantly and automatically perceive any and all critical feedback as a threat.
- Some critical feedback we receive isn't communicated very well. Who needs nagging, nit-picking and negativity? Nothing makes most people bristle more quickly than unfair, unskillful, or unsolicited criticism, and so we may be hard-wired by our bad experiences to duck for cover when we know that critical feedback is on the way or it's arrived.
- We're unsure of intentions. Is the person offering critical feedback intending to help, mentor, teach, guide, or, is the person intending to make us look bad, dump his or her bad day on us, or are they micro-managing?
- We filter in only the negative in what the person is saying without hearing positives and appreciating opportunity that comes from being noticed.

Critical Feedback – Best approach to achieve best outcome

- Invite valid criticism. Valid criticism: (a) addresses behaviors, (b) is timely, and (c) is specific. Vague, broad labels that loosely define character, position, or performance are problematic. It's fine to ask for undesirable behaviors of yours that are not detailed behind "not useful" or "poor attitude" or "rude."
- Recognize the value of constructive criticism; criticism can improve relationships and productivity.



- Engage in perspective-taking or role reversal. Try to understand the perspective of the person offering criticism.
- Listen actively. Even though criticism may hurt, seek to understand accurately the criticism being presented.
 - Paraphrase what the other is saying.
 - Ask questions to increase understanding.
 - Check out nonverbal displays (check your perceptions).
- *Work hard to avoid becoming defensive.* Defensiveness is often a reflection of insecurity. It tends to distort questions into accusations and responses into justifications, it may start a fight. Resist any tendency to want to dismiss criticism or retaliate, your critic is normally not an enemy-type person you must defend yourself against.
- Learn to welcome and embrace criticism rather than fight it: although this approach is a long haul change goal that we might need help with, we can begin to shift our pattern of fighting or fearing criticism today and days following. In order to embrace criticism we must leave our ego at the door so we stop hearing all critical feedback as a personal threat or an attack on our 'self.' Critical messages are easier to hear, and embrace, when we hear them as assessments of our behavior and NOT condemnations of our ego and center of our very being.
- Maintain your interpersonal power and authority to make your own decisions, i.e., if your critic is not clearly specifying behavior of yours that they find problematic then you have the right to speak up. When criticism is incorrectly directed at one's 'self' our resolve and voice may be weakened. Speak up and focus the other's criticism of you on your actions by asking for clarification, a clear description of behavior, and examples of undesired behavior.
- Seek constructive changes to the behavior that prompted the criticism, i.e., learn what new or different behaviors are desired by the other person that will meet with their expectations.
- Invite valid criticism. Valid criticism: (a) addresses behaviors, (b) is timely, and (c) is specific. Vague, broad labels that loosely define character, position, or performance are problematic. It's fine to ask for undesirable behaviors of yours that are not detailed behind "not useful" or "poor attitude" or "rude."
- Communicate clearly how you feel and think about the criticism and receiving criticism. Use "I" messages.

Some specific listening techniques that may help when critical feedback is hurtful

- Fogging. Fogging is a tool in which you don't agree with your critic but you agree with the possibility or probability that what they say is true. You aren't saying that they are right. You're saying that the odds are that what they're saying could be correct at some time or somewhere in this universe. Anything could happen once, right? You remain calm. Fogging allows you to unhook from criticism on a gut level and to listen. At the same time fogging allows the other person to feel heard.



- Negative Inquiry. You do exactly the opposite of what you naturally feel like doing in the face of criticism... you ask for more negatives. Some stock phrases to help you do this are, "What is it about that that bothers you?" or "Tell me more about what it is that you don't like." This skill is great for smoking out the real issue that is bothering your critic.
- Negative Assertion. Negative Assertion - Use negative assertion to agree with your critic when the criticism is valid. For instance, "You're really forgetful!" Your response might be, "That's true, forgetting to order those supplies was a big mistake. I agree." This response unhooks you from the criticism by being specific and limiting the scope of the criticism. Agreeing also defuses the critical moment so that the situation will not escalate. You remain in control and the ultimate judge of your own behavior. You can allow yourself to make mistakes.
- Disagreeing with Facts. You have a right to disagree with criticism based on facts. For instance, your supervisor criticizes you for taking months to develop a template. Your response might be, "I have to disagree, I was given the assignment three weeks ago and sent you a draft yesterday."
- Accept Praise. People who have difficulty with criticism often have difficulty with praise. We usually react to praise by denying it or by false praise in return. Either way it becomes uncomfortable for both parties involved. Next time try, "Thank you." Praise is scarce and criticism is rampant in our daily interactions with others and ourselves. Try a little "positive assertion" and see if you feel differently. Compliment yourself on the things that you have done. Give others positive comments about the work they have done.

Seeking help

If you have difficulty listening to critical feedback then you're not alone. It takes work and dedication to overcome automatic fear and avoidance of critical feedback conversations when we think we're under assault, but we're really not. Should this difficulty interfere with your relationships, job performance, or sense of personal emotional security, and then take advantage of FSAP's experience and professional expertise in these relationship areas. We can be reached at 255-2673, 8:30-5:00, Monday through Friday.

Hours:

In-person consultation	
Monday-Friday	8:30 am-5:00 pm
24/7 phone consultation	607-255-2673

Faculty and Staff Assistance Program	
409 College Avenue, Suite 201	
Ithaca, NY 14850	
www.fsap.cornell.edu	



Cornell University