

Constructive Criticism: A Tool For Improvement

Dr. Ken Petress

All of us render judgments about others' beliefs, values, and behaviors. Some of our judgments are well thought out; yet, others are more spontaneously offered. At times, judgments are made [not always intentionally] to belittle or demean receivers. Other judgments seem rendered to make critics appear superior or powerful rather than to support or enhance receivers.

Constructive criticism is judgement given for the purposes of: (a) offering receivers external views of their performance to compare with self oriented views of their work; (b) helping the receiver recognize or interpret ways to improve past performances and/or ways to improve on future attempts; (c) demonstrating to receivers that their efforts merit judgment [as opposed to being ignored or distorted]; (4) showing genuine interest and appreciation for a receiver's effort; and (5) being encouraging, affirming, and supportive for the purpose of building confidence.

An example of this kind of constructive criticism came from a colleague whom I asked to review a first draft of this essay. My colleague commented: "...The ideas discussed in the essay seem useful to our students. I would suggest some

further specific examples as given [in a specific essay section]." This suggestion pointed out a potential deficiency while adding a perceived positive view of the work. A less constructive criticism of the writing could have been phrased: "You don't use enough examples."

While the *content dimension* of constructive criticism is vitally important, context, real or attributed motives for criticism, and timing also carry considerable weight. Critics need to carefully consider judgment context. By offering assessments publicly, in too loud or harsh a voice, in a condescending tone, or inappropriately juxtaposed with non-related messages, critics may diminish, contradict, or obfuscate well meant criticism. Constructively offered criticism, to be more likely interpreted positively by receivers, must be produced in a **voice** that conveys genuineness and sincerity or it likely will fail and be interpreted as insincere and not genuine. Like all our messages, criticism needs to be prudently timed. Criticism given tardily, prematurely, or too rapidly can predictably lessen a receiver's appreciation for the judgment.

My dissertation advisor was a master critic. He managed to phrase most positive comments by suggesting they were personal attributes while phrasing work that needed improvement as work qualities rather than author

characteristics. He phrased his comments as means to improve both the immediate product [my dissertation] and my long term writing and research skills. His criticism was specific [detailed] rather than general or vague. Rather than suggesting I "use fewer prepositional phrases," he might comment: "Have you considered the benefit to readers of being more direct in your writing?" Perceived shortcomings in my work were relayed to me privately; they were offered as suggestions rather than demands and were offered in an encouraging tone of voice. When written comments were offered, my advisor inevitably interspersed positive comments among the constructive suggestions for change.

Critical phrasing and style can enhance or hinder critical reception. Critical *provisionalism* usually aids in reception. A statement such as: "It might be helpful if you considered taking a general stance here rather than staking out exclusively personal positions" would usually be preferred over: "You take too many personal positions; try more general ones." Keeping criticism focused on ideas, values, or behaviors, **not** on the performer, is strongly urged. Judgments of others' personhood usually is not constructive.

So far, this criticism discussion has primarily focused on the critic. Receivers, too, must play a complementary role to the critic for criticism to be optimally useful. Receivers must resist being dogmatic, rigid, or overly ego involved with their work. Dogmatism includes characteristics of: imperiousness, stubbornness, and superiority. Rigidity is manifested by an unwillingness to change, adapt, or embrace flexibility. Superiority is seen when others' judgments are ignored, dismissed, or evaded based on the receiver's assumption that the person whose work is being critiqued knows better than any critic(s).

Too often, people instantly reject an idea, phrasing, or strategy without truly listening attentively to the entire comment. Sometimes, critical receivers hear what they want to hear or what they expect to hear rather than what was, in fact, said. This is why tone and perceived critical motive are crucial: to allow greater opportunity to calmly listen to criticism.

Sometimes critical discourse results in statements like: "This is not what I want to do" when offered suggestions. All suggestions do not have to be followed; however, when the critic is a thoughtful, representative member of your eventual audience, it is wise to give added weight to implicit

messages that your premise, intention, or strategy may be flawed. Remember, your work needs to be **audience centered**; and what you want to do or how you plan to do it will be ineffective if they are not consonant with audience needs, expectations, and abilities.

If one asks for criticism, that request needs to be honestly sought and graciously received. Receivers are never obliged to alter their beliefs, values, or behaviors; criticism is to be offered, not forced upon receivers. Receivers, like critics, need to pay attention to the tone, timing, and context of the critical act.

Constructive criticism, in its best sense, is a way to solicit and provide others with measures of success, with ways to improve on past or future performances, and with affirmation, support, and encouragement. Quality constructive criticism implicitly recognizes worth in receivers' work; it also builds a positive good will bond when improvement assistance and support are offered; and it adds to performers' credibility by demonstrating willingness to adapt, to be flexible, and to be concerned with audience expectations and needs.

Criticism is vital to build a reciprocal, symbiotic, and respectful community. Critics need to be honest, direct, and

civil; receivers need to be flexible, adaptable, and audience centered. When these qualities are present, idea sharing is indeed pleasurable and utilitarian.