

The Smart Social Skills Course

→ **Week 9: How to Give and Receive
Criticism in a Helpful Way**

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How to Give and Receive Criticism in a Helpful Way

Welcome to week 9 of the Smart Social Skills Course!

This week and next week we will take a look at two issues that hold people back not only in their personal social life but at work, in school and in other areas.

Next week we will explore how you can handle negative, difficult and even toxic people and how to handle conflicts in more helpful way.

But before we get to that we will spend this week on criticism.

We'll spend a little time on how to give criticism in a smart way. But mostly on how to handle criticism you receive in way that helps you, in way that makes you less fearful of it and does not hurt your self-esteem and self-confidence too much when you receive it.

How to Give Kind and Helpful Criticism

So let's say that you have to give someone a bit of criticism to help them improve something.

How can you go about it in a way that is less likely to hurt them or put them in a defensive position? How can you criticize in a way that helps?

A few guidelines that have helped me are these:

Avoid being mean-spirited or angry at the time.

Do not go into the situation with the intention of hurting that person. And if you are angry or upset, wait until you have calmed down a bit to give the feedback in a more level-headed and calm way.

Avoid personal attacks.

Don't attack someone's character. That makes them angry or defensive. Focus on a specific action or habit they can improve instead. Do not say that they should be less lazy, more productive or fix something you perceive as a character flaw.

Kindly suggest instead of criticizing.

Instead of being harsh and tough, try to be a bit gentler. Go in with positive mindset, go in with a mindset that says: we can solve this.

Phrase it in a positive and constructive way.

Instead of saying...

"You should do this and that because you are not doing a good job right now"

...say it in a more positive and helpful way.

Say:

“One thing that would make your website/work/school project/etc. even better is....”

Or: “You know, one thing I’d just love to see in your fitness program, essay, report, project, book etc. is...”

Go small.

As mentioned during the week on asking for what you want, people don’t like a whole bunch of things thrown at them at once. And the overwhelm of that could lead not to things getting fixed, but to procrastination.

If possible, use examples like the ones above and just give one suggestion. Then you can give another suggestion a little later on.

How to Receive Criticism in a More Helpful and Less Hurtful Way

Now, let me run through the steps I use to keep my self-esteem and self-confidence up when I receive criticism and how I get something positive out of it.

So, let's start with step one.

1. Take some deep breaths before you reply

It is very easy to become riled up, angry or defensive when you receive some criticism. This is not a good position to be in to fire away a reply if you don't want to wind up making the situation worse.

And to lash back at the one giving the critique or to not be the better person here can really hurt your self-esteem. It might feel good for a while to do so but it is a dirty high that comes with a hangover of feeling worse about yourself and subtle or not so subtle self-destructiveness.

So this is about your own well-being to a high degree.

Instead of replying right away, focus on your breathing for a few moments to calm down your mind and body and to regain a bit of your balance at least.

Then reply to what was said. Or look closer at the email or other kind of message you received.

2. Really listen to the criticism

Instead of attacking the other person for his or her words and building a hostile atmosphere try to calm it down. Try to remain level-headed, open and figure out how this message can help you.

Ask yourself questions like:

- Can I learn something from this piece of criticism?
- Maybe there is something here that I do not want to hear but that could help me to improve?

3. Remember: the criticism isn't always about you

This is a very important step to remember to keep your self-esteem up and to reduce fear of criticism.

Some criticism is certainly helpful. Some isn't that helpful or just simply attacks. What can you do then?

Well, in such situations I remember that criticism isn't always about me. It would be nice if all criticism that one gets comes from level-headed place. But in reality people will have a

bad day or week. Some will hate some part of their life. Some might not be all that well at this moment and you are coincidentally in the wrong place at the wrong time.

So they lash out at you to release pent up negative emotions. In school, at work or at home. It's not fun. But it happens.

To lessen the sting of this criticism or these attacks I try to be understanding. I think that based on the message I got – often really angry or overly critical about some pretty minor thing – this person isn't feeling too good right now and is overreacting or need to release some pent up emotions.

By being understanding of this it becomes easier to just let such messages go instead of feeling bad or becoming angry too.

Use the questions you learned last week to tap into the more understanding frame of mind.

4. Reply or let go

If you reply then try one or a few follow-up questions if you think that could help you.

And even when someone blurts out something not too constructive or vague like “Your work/blog/product isn't very good” you might want to ask a few open-ended questions to get more specific and constructive information.

Questions like:

- What part of it did you not like or did you not find helpful?
- How can I improve it?

When I reply to a critical email for example I try to keep my attitude positive and kind no matter what they have written.

I thank him or her for what he or she wrote and brought to my attention. I do not apologize if I have not made a mistake. Do not apologize or say that you are sorry just because someone has a different opinion or viewpoint than you. That will only lower your self-esteem and the other person may see it as invitation to attack you (since some people do such things for one reason or another to people they perceive as weak or unassertive).

Also, you do not have to explain yourself every time if you do not want to. People do not have a right to demand an explanation (in most cases of course, so use common sense). They are not your parents and you are not 5 years old. Your life is yours to live.

Anyway, after I have thanked him or her for the message I may add a question or two to get more clarification. Then I send the email.

Sometimes I will then get a much more level-headed reply where they actually help me to improve what I am doing and although I may still feel a bit hurt it also feels good to be the better person in this situation and to create a constructive conversation. If they won't answer your questions then they are probably just lashing out. And so it is time to let go.

I really don't reply to all emails though. Nasty attacks are for example most often just put in the junk mail folder. I have more interesting things to focus on.

Three additional tips for receiving criticism in a healthy way

I have a few more general tips that I use besides the four step strategy described in the previous pages.

Work in a relaxed way.

Extra stress makes you more susceptible to the negative messages and to overreacting to criticism. Be sure to take breaks every hour if you can and to single-task what you do to keep yourself as relaxed as you can while working.

Manage the 3 basic fundamentals.

That means to eat properly, to get enough sleep and to work out a couple of times a week. Keeping the balance of your physical fundamentals makes you mentally stronger too.

Avoid replying via email if possible.

Since words are a small part of communication it may be wise to not reply to criticism via email if possible. It's probably better to get the person who sent such an email on the

phone or go see him or her in person. This can help you to avoid creating a whole mess of misunderstandings.

Avoiding email is also useful to keep in mind when you are about to criticize someone.

The Action-Steps for This Week

Here's a quick summary of the action-steps to take this week:

1. Day 1: Find one situation in your life where you would like to give a piece of criticism this week. Use the worksheet to prepare and when you give the criticism then follow the guidelines from this guide. Then follow up with writing down what happened when you gave the criticism.
2. This week: Use the four step strategy as best you can when you receive criticism this week.
3. Day 7: Use the worksheet to explore how things went when you received criticism during the week.