

Learning To Handle Criticism

Despite what people might say, most of us are awful at handling criticism. In fact, nothing makes people bristle more than being told they didn't do or say something well. The first response typically is to defend yourself and explain why you did or said what you did. In your head you are thinking, "If I only put this in the right context then he will know why I did that and will acknowledge that I was right." Yeah. Right. That's not likely to happen-at work or at home.

Peter Bregman, CEO of Bregman Partners, a global management consultancy, had an interesting take on this topic in his blog at Harvard Business Review . He used his own reaction to criticism he received in 1990 to explain his point of view.

Yes, it happened to him 20 years ago. That's the other thing about criticism - we never forget it. I, for example, still fume over criticism I got 28 years ago that totally demoralized me and led me to seek another job. (That actually turned out to be the best thing I ever did for my career.) But I digress.

Bregman relates the impact that surprise comments from two co-workers about his leadership style had on him 20 years ago. He thought things were going well at a course they were leading on outdoor leadership, but his colleagues thought he needed to be quieter and listen more. After this confrontation Bregman became self-conscious and started second-guessing all his interactions with students.

That's the problem with taking criticism too personally. It causes you to lose perspective. The other downside, as I mentioned earlier, is that it can lead you to defend yourself and try to explain your actions and prove that the person providing feedback is wrong.

Bregman suggests that when you are faced with surprise criticism you need to take a deep breath and do three things:

- Look beyond your feelings. Notice and acknowledge them to yourself, then put them aside so you can hear what's being said to you.
- Look beyond their delivery. Not everyone is good at offering criticism. So even if the feedback is handled poorly, it doesn't mean the message isn't valuable.
- Don't agree or disagree. Just collect the data. If you don't feel you have to respond, you'll reduce your defensiveness.

Later on, he explains, when you have some distance from the remarks you can decide what, if anything, you want to do about them. It might lead you to change your behavior or to change the environment you are in. But criticism, whatever it's form, is worth considering. As Bregman notes, "Criticism can be an incredible gift, a field guide for acting with impact in the world. All we need is enough patience and presence to read it."

How well do you handle criticism? What's your method of dealing with it?