

7 Characteristics of an Effective Critic

A few days ago I had a long conversation with a critic of me. Actually, it would be better to say that he is a critic of a decision I made. He would not want to describe himself as a critic of me in the general sense.

Rare is the person who actually enjoys criticisms. I certainly would not be among that unique group. But this man made the criticism tolerable. And he certainly gained my respect by the way he handled it.

Immediately after the conversation, I began to think through how he had approached me. I thought about his words, his body language, and even his preparation for criticizing me. I realized I had a case study on effective criticism. I also was able to note seven of the characteristics of this conversation where he criticized me.

1. **He had no pattern of having a critical spirit.** Some people are perpetually critical. Their negativity is known and often avoided. Such people have little credibility. Even if they have something worthy to say, it is often ignored because of their patterns in the past. That was not the case with this man. He was not known as a negative person. He did not speak or write in a critical way on an ongoing basis. Because of this pattern, I was inclined to listen to him.
2. **He prayed before he criticized.** In fact, this man prayed every day for two weeks before he ever approached me. He asked God to stop him if his mission was not meant to be. He did not take the moment lightly. To the contrary, he treated it with utmost seriousness.
3. **He communicated concern without anger.** This critic did not once raise his voice. His body language did not communicate anger. He was passionate in his position while maintaining his composure.
4. **He avoided any ad hominem attacks.** My critic wanted to be certain that I knew he was not attacking me personally. He affirmed me in many ways. He voiced respect for my character. But he did not waver in his expressed concern. Never once did I feel like I was under attack personally.
5. **He asked for my perspective.** Frankly, most of my critics through the years have not expressed any desire to hear my side of the story. They are so intent to communicate their position that they leave no room for me to speak. Such was not the case with this critic. He asked a surprising question early in the conversation: "Thom, why did you make this decision? I really want to hear your thoughts straight from you."
6. **He listened to me.** Undoubtedly you've been in those conversations where the other person really does not indicate any desire to listen to you. Even while you are speaking, it is evident that he or she is formulating the next response rather than hearing your words. This critic not only asked for my perspective, he really listened as I spoke. The only time he interjected was to ask clarifying questions.
7. **He was humble.** One of the primary reasons we get defensive when we are criticized is the attitude of the critic. They often seem to have an all-knowing and condescending spirit. To the contrary, my critic was genuinely humble. He was not a know-it-all. He did

not act like the smartest man in the room. Frankly his humility was humbling to me.

You can't be a leader without being criticized. Leaders have to make decisions, and it's rare that everyone will agree with your decisions. While dealing with critics is not the most pleasant part of leadership, it is a necessary part. Sometimes leaders must discount the message because of the lack of credibility of the messenger. But, in my case, I heard from a critic who truly made me pause and consider his position. Not only did I hear his position, though, I learned even more about being an effective critic and recipient of criticism.

For those reasons, this fallible leader is very grateful.

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