What to Do when the Boss Criticizes

It’s Bound to Happen Some Day ... Here’s Some Sound Advice About Taking Advice and Using It to Your Advantage on the Job

By Richard G. Ensman Jr.

If you’re like most people, you don’t like criticism very much, but you get over it fast—unless the criticism is from your boss. The boss, after all, is the individual who sets the standards of quality and performance under which your efforts are judged. When your supervisor isn’t satisfied with your work you can’t help but wonder about your skills, capabilities and, yes, even value.

Yet criticism from the boss is part and parcel of today’s workplace. Most managers would even suggest that the ability to accept—and use—criticism is essential to advancement and success.

Want to learn how to constructively accept criticism from your supervisor? Here are some suggestions you can use next time your work is criticized:

Remember that your boss doesn’t like to offer criticism. Chances are he likes criticizing you as little as you like receiving his criticism. You may have even noticed that he seems a bit uneasy delivering criticism, or has difficulty expressing the criticism in concrete terms. Supervisors are human beings and, like all human beings, they don’t like delivering bad news.

Distinguish between your behavior and your worth. When you receive criticism from your supervisor, you’re usually receiving a critique of some specific action or behavior, not a critique of your fundamental value as an employee or as a person. Criticism is ultimately intended to help you disregard unproductive habits and learn more successful ones.

Avoid emotion. A calm, rational demeanor on your part makes discussion of a criticism much easier. Avoid displays of anger, outrage or disgust. These emotions only cut off conversation and reduce the likelihood that you’ll be able to come to an agreement about what you did wrong and what you should do next.

Encourage your supervisor to talk. The first part of the “criticism conference” should be a time of listening. But don’t listen passively. Whether you agree with his comments or not, let him know that you understand what he’s saying.

Listen with your whole body. Productive communication involves “whole body listening.” To keep the criticism conference running smoothly, maintain an intent but relaxed posture. Nod your head when your supervisor makes an important point. Use gestures to indicate that you’re actively listening. Equally important, avoid inhibiting gestures like squinting, sneering or shaking your head.

Ask for specifics. Criticism is almost always based on specific incidents or behaviors. If you don’t under-
stand something your supervisor says, ask—in a non-threatening, neutral tone—for an example or two. The more tightly you can define the problem, the easier it will be to solve.

**Repeat key comments back to your supervisor.** When the listening phase of the conversation draws to a close, summarize—in a few sentences—what you understand to be the main issues. Ask for clarification on anything you don’t understand. By repeating critical comments back to your supervisor, you’re affirming that you understand his comments—and that the dialogue can proceed to the next step.

**Explain your actions, if necessary.** If you’re criticized for a particular course of action, let your supervisor know why you took it. And remember: An explanation is not an excuse. While you may have acted inappropriately, your explanation can help you and your supervisor agree on new and more positive courses of action in the future.

**Don’t get angry.** If you feel your supervisor is in the wrong, unfair or unduly harsh in his criticism, you have the right to express your opinion. Your supervisor probably wants you to express your opinion. But if you do so, avoid expressions of hostility or rage. Explain your objections to the criticism calmly and logically. Then, repeat your willingness to work with your supervisor to overcome similar problems in the future.

**Ask for time to think about it.** If the criticism under discussion is complex, you can—and should—address the factual issues during your conference. But if you need to research detailed answers to your supervisor’s questions, dig up statistics or obtain background information from other people, ask for time to do so. If you’re genuinely surprised about the gravity of the problem, your supervisor will appreciate you taking whatever “exploration time” it deserves.

**Offer constructive action plans.** After you’ve had the opportunity to listen to your supervisor (and, perhaps, reflect on the criticism he’s offered), don’t sit back and simply resolve not to let the problems recur. Instead, offer a concrete plan to address the problem head-on in the future. Your plan might be as complex as a 10-point program or as simple as a change in personal procedure. Whatever your plan, let your supervisor know—in clear and precise terms—what you intend to do to make the problem a thing of the past.

**Decide what you can learn from the criticism.** More important than preventing future problems is your willingness to learn something from the criticism your supervisor offered by your supervisor. Ask yourself: What specific knowledge did I acquire after discussing the problem? What skills should I seek to improve in the future? How can I generalize the lesson I learned to other areas of my work life? Your willingness to identify professional weaknesses—and seek out new opportunities for skill development—can be a crucial element to future success.

**Invite reaction and criticism in the future.** Let
your supervisor know that you welcome feedback on your strengths and weaknesses in the future. Invite your boss to gauge your performance in the months ahead and don't hesitate to “check in” with him when you’re dealing with issues you’ve discussed. Make no mistake about it: Your supervisor will appreciate the opportunity to help you become a more effective and valued team member.

Criticism usually hurts a bit. But only through criticism can personal and professional growth occur. One sage said it best: Time will always cure feelings, but by itself, can never cure failings. Look, then, at criticism from the boss as an opportunity to overcome failings and set the stage for future growth. 

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