

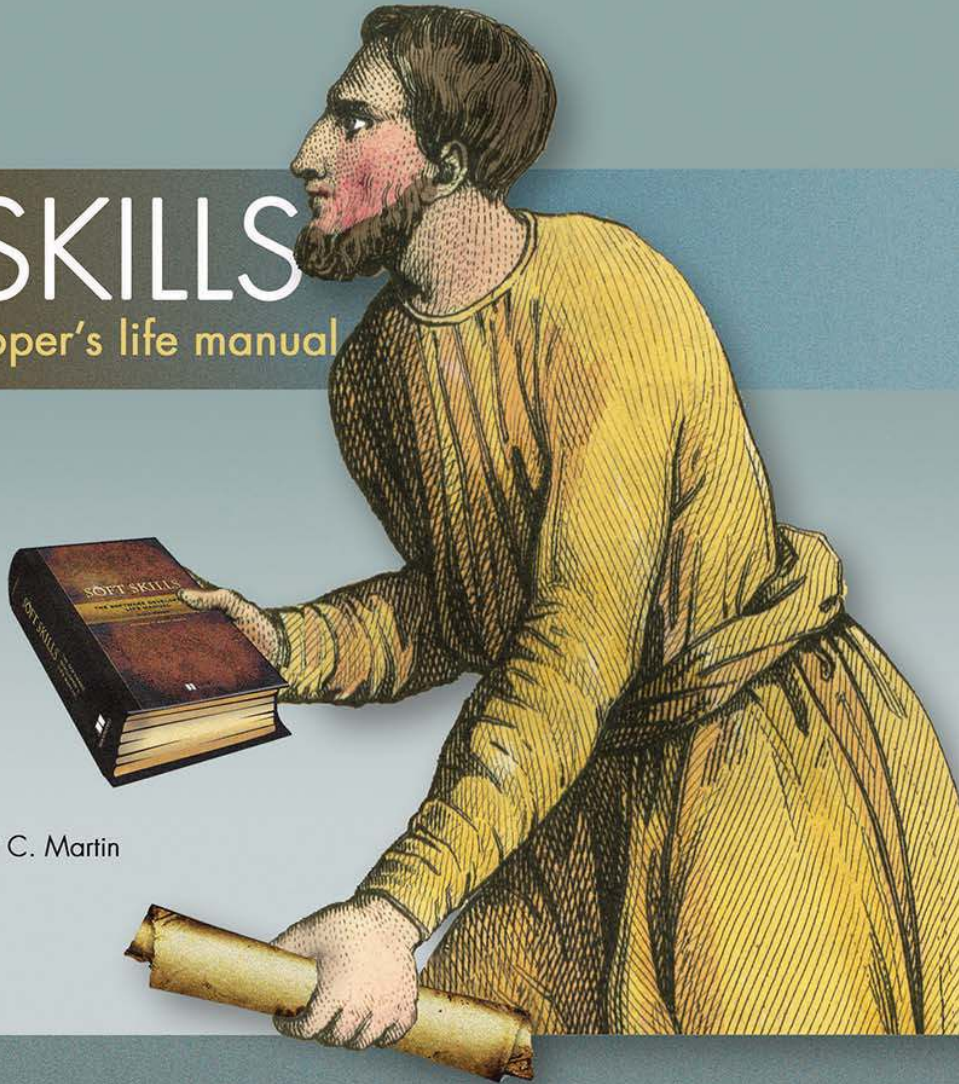
BONUS CHAPTER

SOFT SKILLS

The software developer's life manual

John Z. Sonmez

Forewords by
Scott Hanselman and Robert C. Martin



MANNING



Soft Skills

by John Z. Sonmez

Bonus Chapter

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Bonus Chapter

Dealing with critics

To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing.

—Elbert Hubbard

People don't particularly like to see other people try to make a better life for themselves—to try and improve. It makes them feel threatened. It makes them feel like they should be doing something better with their own lives. As Steven Pressfield put it in *The War of Art*, “the highest treason a crab can commit is to make a leap for the rim of the bucket.”

If you decide to make a “leap for the bucket,” you'll undoubtedly be met with criticism. But criticism is nothing to fear—and not all of it's bad. Some criticism is actually good for us, but a large portion of it should be simply ignored. That's what this chapter is about—dealing with criticism and knowing when to accept it and when to reject it.

Haters gonna hate

The first step to dealing with criticism is realizing that no matter what you do, you're going to have to face it. There's no point trying to stay in the middle-ground. You can't remain neutral in this battle. No matter how chivalrous you are, how apt, how smart, how kind, or how sincere, you'll unavoidably ruffle someone's feathers.

As Elbert Hubbard said, the only way to avoid criticism is to do nothing. And if you do that, you won't even avoid criticism, *because I'll criticize you*. The solution isn't to do nothing, it's to learn to deal with other people's negative opinions of you.

Try to think of a historical figure or any well-known person who hasn't faced criticism. Even Jesus faced criticism, and he went around healing the blind and sick. Heck, there's a Wikipedia page called "Criticism of Mother Teresa" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_Mother_Teresa). So, unless you think you can outdo Jesus, Mother Teresa, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and everyone else on the planet, you're going to have to face the fact that if you do something—especially if you do something great—you'll face criticism.

There's no sense crying about it

Yes, criticism hurts. I'm not going to pretend like it feels good to get slapped in the face and told how foolish your idea is or how you're destined for failure. The truth is, one stinging criticism can hurt a lot more than a hundred accolades of praise. That one refund request I get on my "How to Market Yourself as a Software Developer" course hurts much more than the hundreds of developers telling me how much they benefited from the course.

But it doesn't have to be that painful. Instead, it can just be a thing that someone said or someone did. It's only when you decide to attach meaning to it and internalize it that it hurts. This doesn't mean that you should simply ignore *all* criticism—we'll get to that in a bit—but it means that you can only be hurt if you choose to be hurt.

Think about that for a second. Let it sink in. You can only be hurt if you choose to be hurt. (Mentally that is—a wooden club coming down on your head is still going to hurt no matter what you choose to think about it.)

If you want to deal with criticism appropriately and effectively, you need to start thinking of it as data ... feedback. It's not personal, even though it *feels* like it is. In fact, it's the most personal, nonpersonal thing you'll ever experience in life. Confused? Let me explain.

When someone criticizes you, most of the time it has nothing to do with you. Most of the time it has to do with them. Especially if it's the stinging kind of criticism that seems to be the most painful. Most people who criticize you—especially on the internet—don't know you

personally. They don't know what you're really like. They're simply reacting to something you said or did. Oftentimes, they feel threatened by your actions, because of a lack within themselves.

Now, I realize this isn't always the case. When someone close to you criticizes you—oh, and believe me, they will as soon as you try and improve yourself in some way—they do know you, so it can seem a lot more personal. But, again, most of the time the criticism comes from the threat your change represents to them.

People are resistant to change. The truth is, deep down, we don't really want our friends or our spouses to succeed. I know I'm a horrible person for saying this, but if you look deep within yourself, you'll probably find that it's true—at least to some degree. I'm not saying we can't overcome this tendency, but I'm just saying it's natural.

Some data is good, some of it's bad

Instead of being hurt by criticism and letting it discourage you, you can use criticism as a tool to help you improve, gauge your effectiveness, and steer your ship in the right direction.

Once you detach yourself emotionally from criticism, you can see it for what it truly is: data. That doesn't mean it's all useful. But with a clear mind, free from emotion, you'll be in a much better position to judge which criticisms are useful and which ones aren't.

I much prefer the sharpest criticism of a single intelligent man to the thoughtless approval of the masses.

—Johannes Kepler

The first thing you need to think about when evaluating criticism is the source. Where did the criticism come from? As Kepler said, the criticism of an intelligent person is much more valuable than the praise of the masses.

When you think about that, it means that you should probably be disregarding most criticism. Most criticism is just going to be noise. If some random person on the internet tells you that you're a stupid idiot

and that you don't know what you're talking about, you should probably just disregard that data—it's not very useful.

On the other hand, if some well-respected members of the community have some criticism about what you're doing—even if they lack the tact to express it properly—you should probably pay attention. That doesn't mean they're right. It just means that the data warrants a second look. It's worth taking your time to read between the lines and see if there is some value and perhaps some truth in what they're saying—as painful as it may be.

Besides the source of the criticism, you should also evaluate the content. If someone calls you a stupid, brainless, idiot, regardless of who they are, it has no value to you. As “The Dude” in the movie *The Big Lebowski* would say, “Yeah, well, you know, that's just, like, your opinion, man.” Best to just ignore comments like that and be on your way.

On the other hand, if you receive some specific criticism in regards to what you're doing or how you're doing it, you might want to pay that criticism a little more attention. If someone tells you that your website font seems to be difficult to read or that your variable names don't seem to convey what they represent very well, again, it doesn't mean they're right, but you should probably pay attention and consider that criticism—especially if you're getting it from multiple sources.

Again, I'd stress that it's not how it's put, but what is said and what the source is that matter. Some of the smartest people I know offer amazingly powerful advice in the form of violent slaps in the face. It's difficult to be objective and see through the insults, but you'll be a better person if you can.

Don't let it stop you

The key thing is not to let criticism stop you. Ignore it if it doesn't have any value, or pay attention to it if it will help steer you, but don't let it stop you from moving forward, from executing on your plan.

In fact, many times criticism is a good indication that you *are* on the right path. People don't criticize what they don't pay attention to. So, even if

you're getting negative feedback, it's still feedback, it still means that people are paying attention to what you're doing. You just might need to shift your strategy a bit, but it's a whole lot better than being ignored.

If I let criticism stop me in life, I'd have never accomplished anything. I guarantee you at every step of the way, at least one person told me that I was crazy or stupid. When I first proposed the idea of this book, plenty of people said it would never work, that my topics were too broad, that I can't presume to know anything about life that would be useful to someone else. There are plenty of people who still think that, but I'm not going to let them stop me and neither should you.

Criticism and you

So, what then should be your attitude toward criticism? You should welcome it with open arms. Be glad that people care enough about what you're doing to criticize it—to criticize you. Be glad that you're not sitting in an echo chamber only hearing the sound of your own voice.

If you truly want to improve as a software developer—as a person in general—you need to be open to criticism. Again, it doesn't mean that you just accept what anyone has to say about you and your work, but good, sincere criticism is valuable data that can help you succeed.

When I fail I want someone to tell me what I'm doing wrong. I want to learn. I don't want to be ignorant and think that I already know it all. I want someone to tell me when I'm wrong and I don't care how they deliver the message, because that isn't what's important.

So, stop avoiding criticism and embrace it. Look for it. Ask for it. Don't be afraid to peer into the mirror. It's really difficult to shave when you can't see what you're doing.

On the flip side of the coin, you should know that criticism isn't usually an effective way of expressing your own opinions and influencing others. Rare is the person who responds to criticism appropriately and uses it to improve. I'm hoping you'll become that rare kind of person, but don't expect others to.

Instead, you should avoid giving out criticism as much as possible — because most of it will be wasted anyway. Only give criticism to those who ask for it and only to those people who you know can take it and will act on it accordingly. And regardless of who you give criticism to, make sure you do it in the nicest way possible. Some people take great pride in their honesty and lack of tact. I implore you, don't be that kind of person. A kind and gentle spirit will wield much more influence than a sharp and biting tongue.

Think about how you'd like to be told of a fault of yours or a misstep that you took and phrase your words in a similar manner. Even then, think carefully before giving any criticism at all. It's much more likely to hurt you and very unlikely to help you. It may seem a bit strange, but I reserve most criticism only for my finest friends.

Taking action

- ⚙ The next time you're given some criticism, focus on not reacting. Actively try to not let your emotions get involved. Ignore the way the criticism is phrased and think of it as just data.
- ⚙ As you go throughout your day, try to identify any time you criticize someone else. Try to understand why you're doing it and if you actually expect that it will have any positive effect.

SOFT SKILLS

The software developer's life manual

John Z. Sonmez

For most software developers, coding is the fun part. The hard bits are dealing with clients, peers, and managers, staying productive, achieving financial security, keeping yourself in shape, and finding true love. This book is here to help.

Soft Skills: The software developer's life manual is a guide to a well-rounded, satisfying life as a technology professional. In it, developer and life coach John Sonmez offers advice to developers on important "soft" subjects like career and productivity, personal finance and investing, and even fitness and relationships. Arranged as a collection of 71 short chapters, this fun-to-read book invites you to dip in wherever you like. A Taking Action section at the end of each chapter shows you how to get quick results. *Soft Skills* will help make you a better programmer, a more valuable employee, and a happier, healthier person.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- Boost your career by building a personal brand
- John's secret ten-step process for learning quickly
- Fitness advice to turn your geekiness to your advantage
- Unique strategies for investment and early retirement

John Sonmez is a developer, teacher, and life coach who helps technical professionals boost their careers and live a more fulfilled life.



"Useful, practical, and actionable advice on a wide array of topics."

—From the Foreword
by Scott Hanselman

"Conveys a message that every software developer (and everybody else, for that matter) ought to hear."

—From the Foreword by
Robert C. Martin (Uncle Bob)

"Stop coding for a few hours and read this book! Your code—and your life—will be much better."

—lonel Condor, SDL

"A pragmatic and holistic view of software development."

—Javier Muñoz Mellid, Igalia

"A career coach in a book."

—Heather Campbell, Kainos

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US \$34.99 | Can \$36.99

ISBN-13: 978-1617292392
ISBN-10: 1617292397



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