# How to give and receive criticism

*The art of being in control in difficult situations*

**By James McDermott Davidson**

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## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

This might be the most difficult of all communication tasks for many people. It is evidenced by the number of times we avoid confrontation. A kind of non- communication takes place. When critical issues are avoided, they don’t go away, they just go underground and then raise their heads in all sorts of ugly fashions. This will be addressed in a subsequent section about handling conflicts.

Our objective here is to learn how to give critical messages and receive them from others. In order to do this, there are certain misconceptions that we need to dismiss. One is that if we give a critical message to someone, we are criticizing him or her. This isn’t the case for one very important reason; a critical message really says more about me, the giver, than it says about you, the receiver. If I give you a critical message because I’m upset, the fact is that it is because I’m upset that I’m talking to you in the manner that I use. We will develop this thought.

Another reason for withholding so-called critical messages is fear of the other person's reaction. Maybe he or she will be hurt, or defensive, and so on. We will seek to lessen these responses, but think of what happens if we remain silent. Yes, a worse situation ensues.

Likewise, we avoid being criticized. Who wants to hear that they are thoughtless or stupid or worthless? Even if we harbor such feelings about ourselves, we dread having them announced by others. Hurt can run very deep within us and when it does it turns to resentment. It’s then that we want to get back at the one who made us feel this way.

What if we could say what we need to say and listen to what others need to say without fear or hurt? *Wouldn’t that be nice?* Well, that’s what we are going to achieve.

Here’s the key: Criticism isn’t criticism at all! I’ll explain as we go on.

## 1. The language of negative power

Destructive, accusing language is powerful but not to win friends. Only those who are ignorant of what is good engage in destruction which includes both themselves and others who have not yet learned how to handle them. Whenever we use the language of destructive behavior, we can identify it because it has a clear and singular message. Here it is: *There must be something wrong with you!*

Let’s look at a few statements and see if you can hear *there must be something wrong with you* ringing in the background.

You should be able to tie your shoe laces by this time……I guess you're progressing, somewhat……We should listen better, shouldn’t we? ....... What time is it? It’s time you had a watch…….Isn’t the dinner ready yet? ……What you just said isn’t exactly right……not a bad job for an old man……That dress is far too young for you.

We can take any of these and a million other statements and the message will be the same. For example, Isn’t the dinner ready yet? There must be something wrong with you, you’re so slow. Of course, you don’t hear these words audibly but you hear them internally. You walk away and maybe you can’t articulate what happened but you know you were put down. The feeling is one of sadness or bewilderment or hurt or resentment.

What makes a critical message particularly painful is that you hear something thrust at you. It is YOU writ large! It is traditionally called *the YOU message*. But it's going to cease being a problem because we're going to learn how to deal with it. However, right now I’m going to assume that it might be a problem.

There are three possible responses you or I might give to a YOU message. Here they are:

         *Withdraw*. In withdrawal you seek to slink away. You might apologize or simply say nothing. “I told you not to do that” might be met with “I’m sorry” This kind of way of reacting to the YOU message appears to be weak but you might turn into a wolf in sheep’s clothing. By this I mean, you withdraw from any confrontation to gather your forces together to “get back at that S.O.B.” One day you might lose a memo that is valuable to him/her. You watch your boss run around in a tizzy. Of course, nobody knows you disposed of the memo.

         *Defend*. Here you try to defend yourself with whatever armour you can muster. “I told you not to do that” is met with “But I did what I thought was best. You were gone and I couldn’t reach you.” The problem with defense is that it provides the attacker with similar ammunition. “This is your problem Bob, your best isn’t good enough. You’re not in this company long enough to know what’s best. You could have talked with Alice. She, at least, knows what she’s doing.” Oops, another YOU message. Are you going to try defending again? Not a good idea.

         *Fight*. This isn’t for the faint hearted. Let’s see how it might go: “You never tell me anything.” You are ready for this one, countering with; “Do you know what my problem is? I tell you too much, you deaf sod!” A battle royal is beginning. Where will it lead? Who knows, but it isn’t likely to be good.

Whether we withdraw, defend or fight we have, maybe unwittingly, *bought into* the negative power of the criticizer. There’s no winning for anyone involved. To put it in other words, it can’t be a win-win scenario. We will take a different route soon for both the criticizer and the criticized, but further on. We must become more familiar with the language of criticism.

The YOU message has many forms and disguises. We must know them. The following are common.

         The “WE” message. “Honey, we have a problem with Johnny” This may be true but “Honey” has heard this before. The WE is a disguised YOU. The message giver soon dissociates him/herself from the problem. Perhaps like, “Well, you know I spend a lot of time with him and you’re gone a lot. (The YOU is beginning to appear). Of course, the so-called problem with Johnny might be that he is just growing up and nothing to do with either one of them. Familiar with this disguise?

         The CLOSED message. “Clearly, that isn’t right.” A closed message is a categorical statement which doesn’t invite response. To do so would be followed by another YOU message of some description. For example, a reply like, “That’s nonsense, I checked the figures myself” might be greeted with, “When I say it’s not right I mean it’s not right.” So, it becomes clear that a closed message is virtually another YOU message.

         QUESTIONING. “Why did you do that?” could be interpreted two ways. It could be information seeking but then again it could be a “there must be something wrong with you” message. This would depend on the situation and/or the tone of voice used by the questioner. A reply like, “Do what?” with an irritated tone would indicate that the receiver heard it as a YOU message. We are set for a critical dialogue that will lead to dear only knows where.

         SARCASM. “That’s what you managed to do in two weeks? I guess that’s pretty good for a college boy like you.” I grew up with a heavy dose of sarcasm. I had an uncle that specialized in it. He was to be avoided like the plague. Let’s try a defensive response. “Well, sir, I tried my best. Do you want me to continue?” By now you are realizing, I guess, that responding to criticism with withdrawal, defensiveness or fighting is pretty futile.

         JUDGEMENTS. This includes words like ought (not) to, should, must, never, always, and terms that indicate what is obligatory. “Patients must always report to the Administration Department” doesn’t seem too offensive in a hospital lobby but, “You should never do that again. Do you hear me?” is quite irksome. A pathetic “I’m sorry” response would indicate withdrawal, like the respondent is trying to get away quickly.

         NAME CALLING. “I think you are showing your stupidity” is likely to get a strong response. Who wants to be called stupid? The list in name calling is endless. Dumb, silly, arrogant, crazy, hopeless, incompetent, foolish, obstinate, ignorant, etc. Remember, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me”? I wish it were true, but it isn’t. No, we usually respond in kind. “Who’s calling who stupid, you asshole?” Ah, that felt good!

         HIDDEN MESSAGES. “Let me do that” which means unspoken, “You are so brain dead that you can’t get anything to turn out right.” These messages are meant to confuse and can be particularly nasty. “Oh, no, it’s O.K., I can do it” is a possible reply by one who doesn’t know what’s really going on here. We will address this in the book, Handling All Sorts of Conflicts where we will tackle complexity in relationships, but for now, let’s note it. “There must be something wrong with you” is clear even if the hidden message isn’t.

These are some of the classic YOU messages that form criticism. Recognize them? Recognize them in yourself? If you want to give critical feedback to people, don’t start out with these forms or any others that will elicit resistance. If you want to tell people that there is something wrong with them no matter what the response might be, then you are harboring a lot of resentment, but if you want to be positively powerful, you can be by totally refocusing from YOU to I. Let me explain.

## 2. How to give critical messages without criticising.

By way of introduction, half a century ago a behaviorist called Thomas Gordon crystalized for us how to talk with children in his then famous book, Parent Effectiveness Training. Strange as it may seem, what he was advocating became applicable to adults. I’ve noticed over the decade that even revolutionary ideas and processes have a way of being popularized for about a decade then need to be superseded by something new. What is truly meaningful is resurrected in different forms and a good bit of plagiarism takes place. So, what I’m about to present to you is from the findings of Thomas Gordon. I have added some of my own findings which I think enhances the process.

The “trick” is, when you need to give a message that could easily be construed as criticism,  to take your focus off the other person and put it on yourself. Here is the genesis of the process; you ask yourself……  **“What’s going on with me?”** instead of “What’s going on with him/her?” The focus shifts from the other person back on to me. This totally and completely changes the dialogue. In reality when we look at communications in this fashion, there’s no such thing as criticism.

Let’s see how it works.

“What’s going on with me?” gets broken down into 5 parts.

         What do I feel?

         What problem do I have?

         What do I want/need?

         What am I ready to do?

         How do you feel/think about what I just said?

*What Do I Feel?*

We will work with an example for the sake of clarity. Your partner isn’t saying much to you these past few days and you are bothered. Your usual message would be a YOU form, like, “What’s the matter? Why aren’t you talking to me?” So now we’re going to change this accusing message into one that involves no hint of criticism.

There is no more honest nor more message of depth, than revealing what you feel. Based on studies from Myers Briggs, the world is divided into feelers and thinkers. This means that when people come to make decisions, they do so based on what is valuable to them as opposed to what seems logical. This is totally O.K. It’s just that feelers are more comfortable in expressing feelings than thinkers. It’s not that thinkers don’t feel; of course they do, and equally with feelers. I mention this in opening to expose the difference. To those of you who are uncomfortable in sharing a feeling, I would ask that you attempt it. Think about which feeling would be appropriate ahead of time to give yourself the opportunity of becoming comfortable. “Can’t I express what I think?” Sure , and that will be contained in the next point, “What problem do I have?”

OH, I almost forgot to say, the women aren’t all feelers and the men aren’t all thinkers. The studies show roughly an equal number in each category. So, men, don’t assume…you know what!

Let’s concentrate on the feeling message. Look at the options below.

         I feel you are avoiding me.

         I feel a bit angry with you.

         I miss our conversations.

         I’m scared about losing you.

The A approach is simply a disguised YOU message. You can’t get away with sticking an “I feel” in front of your criticism. “I feel that you’re an idiot” still translates into “You’re an idiot.”

The B message sounds like it is a true feeling message because it has a feeling word in it, namely, anger. The problem with anger and its cousins, resentment and frustration, is that anger comes over as a YOU message. “Angry with you” brings the other person into focus. “Why, on earth, should you be angry with me?” might be the reply which doesn’t move the conversation along.

While I was going through a clinical training program away back in 1975, my adopted mentor, H.D.Johns, leader of the Transactional Analysis center in Washington, D.C., in a real way saved my life. At that time I was very angry, so I listened to him very carefully when he demonstrated that anger was a secondary emotion built on one of two emotions (or both). These are the twin emotions of Fear and Hurt.

Let me illustrate. You’re driving along the highway minding your own business and, lo and behold, a crazy knucklehead darts in front of you almost sending you off the road. Your reaction is one of anger. “Who the ---- do you think you are?” you scream. Of course, he can’t hear you but you scream anyway. You are pretty unglued and it takes you a few minutes to gain your composure.

Once calm, you dig deep into yourself and, for a moment, forget about the knucklehead, who by now, is 5 miles ahead of you. What is lurking there?

FEAR is lurking, that’s what. “Gosh, he could have killed me” goes through your head. Once you have dwelt on that, a second fear comes to mind. “If he had hit my car, what a mess I’d be in for the next two or three weeks….insurance papers, police reports and no car for a while.” How you hate to spend hours on end on things as unproductive as that.

But further down into the abyss you find another well hidden emotion; HURT. No, it’s not physical hurt, but emotional hurt. How many times have you been disregarded, discounted, passed over and ignored? It hurts. The strong man in you says it doesn’t hurt but he is lying. It hurts. The knucklehead treated you as if you didn’t count for anything. “I’m O.K., You’re Not O.K.” That’s what he was saying in so many words.

So what happened? You ignored your fear and hurt. In fact, you are so used to ignoring them that you clamored for your very familiar Anger which focused on him and not you. The idiot!

Now for the good news. Anger is a secondary emotion which bi-passes the primary emotions of fear and hurt. But when you become aware of fear and hurt behind anger, you own your problem. “I’m angry with you” becomes “I don’t know what’s going on, but, to tell you the truth, I’m scared at the thought of losing you.” What a different message. Instead of accusing, you are inviting your partner in to help you. Hmmm, quite different.

The C message, is a true I-message. The difference between “feel” messages lie in whether or not the feelings expressed are feelings that are mine directed at me or are feelings that are used as accusations directed at others. “I miss our conversations” is inviting, not critical.

The D message is also a true I-message. “I’m scared about losing you” is no criticism. It also is inviting and probably healing.

Here are examples of expressing feelings both non-critical and critical:

*Non-critical.* Fear, Hurt, Pain, Loss, Sadness, Confusion, Apprehension, Left out, Relief, Concern

*Critical.* Anger, Resentment, Frustration, Disappointment, Displeasure, Annoyance

There is no guarantee the person with whom you are dealing will cooperate. “I’m scared of losing you” might be met with “You’re a bit late with that kind of talk, don’t you think?” When this happens you will need to stop using your I-message in order to shut up and listen because you are being resisted. Don’t try to battle through resistance. We will address this later.

*What Problem Do I Have?*

After identifying your non critical feeling you can then switch to your thought processes. The “thinkers” will have no problem with doing this! Don’t take the word ‘problem’ too literally since it maybe just a rational observation you wish to communicate. Always bear in mind that  you are inviting the other person “in” so that cooperation takes place. Let’s continue with two of the lines that we started with above as our model.

*“I miss our conversations. When we don’t have time with each other I seem to lose track of all that’s going on and this means I lose out on the latest news.”*

*“I’m scared about losing you. Sometimes I sit down and think to myself that we have such different interests in our lives, like we don’t have enough in common.”*

Conversations happen to take place quickly and we don’t have time to analyze but here we do. The idea is to learn the process of communicating so that it becomes more natural when we don’t have the time to scrutinize every word.

Keep checking that each part of your communication isn’t a criticism; that there is no *there must be something wrong with you* message.

But aren’t we beating about the bush here? Why not be frank like, “We’re not talking enough.” O.K., because when you have a strained relationship, every word is interpreted differently than when the relationship is good. Remember, “We’re not talking enough” can be understood as *“You’re* not talking enough.” But more importantly, you’re not saying anything about yourself that tells your partner or associate what is going on inside of you. Appreciation of what a person feels and thinks means that the other gains insight to you. Over time this enables a more solid relationship to develop.

Let’s go to the business arena:

Bob, I’m not comfortable pursuing this project. I just don’t have the information. Actually, it’s not all available yet.

I’m sad that I can’t promote you. I simply don’t have enough justification to advance staff members during these difficult days.

I’m fearful we will lose the Johnston account. I can’t take any more risks.

What do I want/need?

This is the third “I” and you might be wondering why there’s so much emphasis on myself, and that would be a valid point. One reason is that in a critical situation you do not want to bring the other person into focus because this usually leads to defensiveness. This, we have noted, but the other reason is that the I-message is closest to the truth. “That’s not right!” is debatable but “I have a hard time supporting that idea” is a reality, or, at least, one person’s reality. It’s very hard to argue with a feeling or a perspective on something. It is what it is. Therefore, it isn’t conflict prone.

“What do I need or want?” is an attempt to tell the other person what you want for you rather than for him or her. “I want you to listen to me” isn’t what we’re after because it is a disguised YOU message. Here are examples of true need/want statements;

“I want to be your friend……I need your support……I would value time with you……I want your input……I need time out……I’d like to see a positive result…..I think I need to be more involved.”

Putting the first three “I”s together…..

“Jill, I’m worried about our daughter. The differences (already established) we have on how to raise her is affecting me at work, and I really would like to see some agreement on how we communicate with her.”

“Harry, I’m disturbed over the late shipments. I see them contributing to the bottom line in a negative way. I need to see a 20% improvement this month one way or another.”

“I’m sad you want to leave. Right now I don’t know how to cope. I’d really like if you would stay another month.”

Please note that what you want or need for yourself that involves the other person isn’t a criticism of the other. You are attempting to gain cooperation. If the recipient of your message hears something you didn’t intend, like, “Are you blaming me for the late shipments?” you have to switch to listening to his resistance which we are going to address further on.

What am I willing to do?

Sometimes there’s nothing you are willing to do because you have said all that needs to be said in the first three parts. “I will miss you. I’m going to struggle for a while, but I want to move on with my life.”

But the “willing” part can be very important. Yet be careful… “I’m willing to put up with you” isn’t what we need at this point. It can’t be a condescending willing.

Let’s take an example from above just to see how the “willing” part is often needed.

“Harry, I’m disturbed (feeling) over the late shipments. I see them contributing to the bottom line in a negative way (problem). I need (want/need) to see a 20% improvement this month. Man, am I all ears to hear what you can tell me”(willing).

In this case the willingness is expressed in your openness to be instructed by Harry. However your willingness might be something you are willing to do or grant…..

“I’m sad you are leaving. Right now I don’t know how to cope. I’d really like if you would stay another month, and I can give you an extra $1,000.” Remember that these are conflict situations. Your other form of communication could have been “Look at the mess you’re leaving me in. You are a proper bastard for not giving me adequate notice.” You might be justified in such sentiments but it could get an answer like, “You call me a bastard? Do you want me to tell you what kind of boss you’ve been?” If you are sorry he/she is leaving, despite everything, and you are in a pickle, and his/her staying an extra month will save you $5,000, what’s the value in criticism? It’s like, “cutting off your nose to spite your face.”

In essence, the “I am willing” message is meant that you are going to be part of the solution.

Please time how long it takes to say the following message…….

(Father to son who are in constant conflict over the son’s different lifestyle) “I’m really very un happy, not so much that we have differences, but more that obviously I’m not communicating well with you. There’s nothing more in the world that I would want than to have a good relationship with you, share things, go fishing, and do all the things father and son should do. I’m willing, for once, to shut up and listen to you without any criticism.

I timed this message as 25 seconds. You can say a lot within 30 seconds. Don’t belabor your message. You can expand it in the conversation that hopefully will follow.

How do you feel/think about what I just said?

With the feeling oriented people, you use feel, and with the thinking people you use think. And if you don’t know whether they are feelers or thinkers, use feel.

It is time for you to stop and get the response you wish for but can’t guarantee. However, if your communication in the past has been negative or accusing or defensive, you are likely to hear a different response. Because you have told the other person you’re feeling, problem, want and willingness without any criticism, your chances of moving towards a better understanding is greatly improved. If you get a critical, uncooperative response and you want to pursue your dialogue with this person because you have cause to do so, then please see the material on how to receive criticism below.

“How do you feel about what I just said?”

“Dad, I feel good about it. I just don’t know how to get along with you and I would like to.”

Let me tell you the story behind this. I was teaching this material in a military organization. The seminar lasted two days. I arrived at my usual half hour ahead of starting time on the second day but I wasn’t the first there. One of my students, in full uniform, awaited me. He asked for my time and then proceeded to tell me his story.

“I have a 16 year old son and over the past two years we have a heated conversation now and again, but so as not to have them, we just pretty much avoid each other. Without going into details, I’m a disciplinarian and he is so unlike me. He dresses like a hippy, plays loud music which I hate, and he has friends that I think are undesirable. I feel a failure as a father in more sense than one.”

He continued, “After class yesterday I thought about what you said. I mean, I really thought about it deeply. In regards to my boy, I asked myself what I felt, and I felt very sad. I identified my problem in terms of not understanding him and anything that was outside of my world. To respond to what I wanted, was easy. I just wanted us to get along with each other. And, I was willing to stop the war between us by hearing him.” As you can see, what he said is capsuled above.

“I went home last night, sat down with him, and related what I was learning in class and I then told him what I was feeling etc. To my surprise he responded positively. We then talked for three hours telling and listening with no accusations.” At this point he became quite emotional but he forced back the tears. Then he said something that stuck me. “Here I am, 45 years old. How could I possibly have lived this long and not known how to communicate in such a way? It’s not that hard when you try it.”

It really was a moment of discovery for him and I told him that I was grateful to be the messenger that helped him to talk in a new way. He was right to ask why it took him so long to say what, after all, is something straight forward. He was lucky because most people never learn; they are endlessly caught in a circle of accusation, justification, defensiveness, and counter accusation. What a life!

Words are, indeed, power. Use them in their constructive order and you see how they influence for the better. This, in turn, makes you a powerful person, not *over* others but *with* them.

## 3. How to handle being criticised

Few of us enjoy being criticized. I guess you’d be a masochist to enjoy negative feedback. That being said, we all have benefitted at one time or another from input that we first considered to be negative. If we hear only the positive things about ourselves we will go around in a dream land. The trick is to hear the message by blocking out the way in which it was delivered. “You are an idiot!” doesn’t tell me much that is helpful but what made the person say this to me might be worth hearing.

The first lesson to learn is whether a person is giving you a YOU message or an I-message. Consider that the sender is talking about him/herself and not you. “I love you” clearly shows that the sender is saying something about him/herself. If someone says “I hate you” the same is happening only it is a disguised YOU message. “I find it hard to get along with you” might be the message behind the hate. In either case when we give positive messages or negative ones, we are describing ourselves much more than we are describing the recipient of the message.

Recently a friend told me she thinks I am brave because I’ve taken a lot of risks in my life. I don’t consider myself to be brave so when someone praises me it is based on that person’s perception. In this case the message is about herself because, as she told me, she has a fear of change. Similarly, when I visited Florida in the U.S. a year ago, I commented to a friend on how many obese people live in Florida. He took offense, perhaps because he lives there, or he likes overweight people. My message to him is really about me and not overweight people just as his rebuke to me is a message about him and not me! We are like mirrors to each other.

As a reminder, what happens when we hear a message that says “There must be something wrong with you”? The exact opposite of what I’ve just described; you hear the message is about you and not the message giver. When you do that you are almost certain to make one of three responses….

         Withdraw

         Defend

         Fight

It doesn’t much matter which you choose, you will be in the negative power of the sender. So, when you are criticized justly or unjustly fighting back or defending yourself or withdrawing are only ways of buying into the criticism. We have to find a better way and it’s not all that difficult.

Before we go there, I do want to address a couple of questions that used to come up fairly regularly in my seminars.  The first is “Is there a time when defending yourself is legitimate and even necessary?” and the answer is a yes. It’s a question of timing. When someone is beating on you your most reasonable defense, as we have noted, can be fuel for the fire for your attacker. “I didn’t have time” maybe true, but as a response, it is open to further criticism. The best way I know is to wait until another time and talk to this person with an I- message. What you want is to avoid competition. When the road is clear, go to the person concerned and say something like this, “The time issue is something that concerns me. The problem I have is sorting out conflicting priority issues. I need clarification. It’s not that I’m not unwilling to do the work as you well know. What do you think?”

The other question is, “I’ve been taught to apologize but you see that as withdrawal. Isn’t it good to say you’re sorry?” This is a tricky one. Apology can be a mouth stopper causing frustration for the other as in the example above. “I’m sorry; you don’t hit a man who is sorry, do you?” is the hidden message. Using apology in this case isn’t smart. On the other hand, apology can be legitimate when you know when you’ve hurt someone. I find the actual words, “I’m sorry” to be thread bare through constant usage so I prefer to use different words like, “What I did has really upset you. I can see that now and I wish I had done otherwise.” (See the skill of Feeling Feedback below).

In order to deal with criticism you must fully realize that the one doing the criticizing is the one who owns the problem. IT’S NOT YOUR PROBLEM! Keep the problem where it belongs; with the other person. Think of yourself as one who can address his/her problem. Also, think of yourself as equal in power as the other even if you are the subordinate. Communicating well is the great equalizer. Gain confidence through proving that you are in control of your own response.

Now let’s consider alternatives to fighting, defending and withdrawing. There are 6 well proven skills

         **Acknowledge any truth in the accusation.**

Most criticisms have at least, a grain of truth. “You don’t tell me anything” may or may not be true. Let’s suppose that you don’t communicate with this person as much as you could, or as much as he/she would like. In this case, you could pick up on the possible legitimacy with, “Gees, Mary, I don’t give you the attention these days like I should.” You can then wait for Mary’s reaction or continue by using another skill below.

Don’t you dare acknowledge a statement that isn’t true!! “You are a knucklehead” If you say, “This is true” it will add to your problems. In an attempt to placate the other, even a reply of “That’s right, I don’t tell you things” will signal Mary that you’re easy meat to beat up on whenever she wants. Limit you acknowledgement to only what is the case.

         **Cause your attacker to become descriptive.**

This is a very effective skill because the nature of description is rational. You will be causing the criticizer to become more explanatory, enabling you to understand more about the problem in his/her mind. You are also likely to hear a change of tone from the other if he/she becomes descriptive; the voice usually lowers.

Let’s continue with Mary. “You don’t tell me anything” can be addressed with “Mary, tell me what it is that I’m holding back from you.” If Mary begins to tell you, you will have more options in addressing Mary’s difficulty. If Mary feels uncooperative because she still wants to beat on you she might try to frustrate you with “Well, everything.” You could press for more information with, “O.K., but please tell me what is uppermost in your mind.”

You have different options with the skills that follow. Your judgment as to what skills you use and don’t use will largely depend on the person you’re addressing. And when one doesn’t work  you can try another. You will need to learn these 6 skills and have them as ready arrows in your quiver.

         **Guess at the problem.**

You can use this when you have a good idea what the problem might be. Experience has told you. Now you might answer Mary with, “Ah, It’s the Johnston case, isn’t it? I haven’t filled you in on that.”  Mary might say, “Yes, it is.” If you guessed wrongly, it doesn’t really matter because what you will have done is to focus Mary on what is uppermost in her mind. “No, not that; it’s about the meeting that’s taking place in less than an hour.” Now you’ve got it and the criticism has ceased. However, this will not likely end the hostility Mary has towards you. At an unstressed time you would need to sit down and talk with Mary to find out more what’s going on with her, regarding you. It might be complex. Please check out number 3 in this series entitled, “Handling Conflicts Isn’t That Hard.”

         **Make a suggestion.**

When Mary says, “You don’t tell me anything” you have the option of replying with a suggestion. It could be like, “Are you free for lunch when we can catch up?” Again, you have to know the person. Mary might consider this to be an adequate response if such lunch meetings in the past have served her purposes. On the other hand, Mary might think you’re putting her off.

Making a suggestion at least redirects the criticism towards problem solving. Another example might help; let’s go to the home environment. “You said you’d fix the stove. It’s still not working right. Why can’t you do what you say you’ll do?” That’s a heavy criticism and it involves the issue of trust. You can make a suggestion like “What if I do it now (honey?)” but you would need to do more than that. Later you would have to talk about the larger issue of your partner’s lack of confidence in you.

         **Ask for a suggestion.**

“You don’t tell me anything” can be met with, “O.K. Mary, I know we have to talk so please tell me when we can connect today, or do you have another suggestion? I simply can’t do it right now.” If you choose to ask for a suggestion you normally need to put a limit on it. “What do you suggest?” by itself isn’t likely to do the trick. “What do you mean, what do I suggest? It’s obvious that I want you to talk with me.”

Often when someone criticizes you, he/ she already has the solution, so you would be opening the door for the solution. “Phyllis, when, on earth, are you going to finish this project?” could be met with an acknowledgement of the truth to begin with. “I’m all too conscious that you are right. Do you see a quick way to do it that I’m missing?” Now Phyllis is about to show her superior knowledge by telling you, but that’s O.K.

         **Provide feeling feedback.**

This skill is very special because it goes beyond stopping the criticism and gives the attacker a message of care which he/she isn’t likely to expect. “You don’t tell me anything” can be met with “I hope you haven’t been too anxious” or “I haven’t wanted to keep you in the dark, Mary” or “You’ve been so patient.” Of course, it needs to be followed up with one of the other skills so as to work at a resolution. When Mary hears “anxious” or “in the dark” or “patient” she probably will relax a bit. Not much, but a bit and enough to alter her tone.

What you are doing is telling the person who is critical that you have a sense of what they are going through. Just a hint of empathy can work wonders. “I know how you must feel” isn’t a good idea because folks hear that as empty and patronizing. “No you don’t!” is a likely retort.

In a more intimate setting, words with a deeper contact can be used. “I guess I have been thoughtless. I don’t want to hurt you, honey. I should communicate more.”

You don’t need to be right on with the feeling feedback. “I can see you are anxious” might not be correct but because you have used a feeling message, the other will find it easy to correct you. “It’s not so much that I feel anxious; it’s that I feel left out. Kind of hurt, I guess.”

**Tone of Voice and Body Language**

Whether you give an I-message or are handling criticism you don’t need to worry about your tone of voice or body language because your intention will bring these into line with your words. However, paying attention to the voice and body of the other person is important. We would need a separate book to go into all the aspects of body language so the following is a crash course. I touched on this in the Introduction to the series. Just to expand a bit, consider the following:

         Take note when the other’s tone or body is uncharacteristically different. If, for example, someone is quiet spoken and he/she is normally louder, it indicates something unusual is going on in that person’s mind. It tells you of dis-ease.

         In particular, note the voice becoming louder, and the body becoming bigger. The latter shows itself in folding arms or positioning arms on hips or crossing legs stiffly while seated, and similar pronounced movements. When someone stands back from you it means he/she feels threatened and if he/she comes closer it is to threaten you but this is because this person is feeling threatened.

         Usually tone of voice, body language and words “agree” meaning one doesn’t cancel out the others. When the tone or body doesn’t agree with the words, forget the words since the real message being sent is in the tone and/or the body. For example, if someone says, “Everything is just fine” but the tone is curt or short and the face is stern, then everything isn’t fine. Instead of saying, “Are you sure everything is fine?” (they will answer “yes”), it would be better to say something like, “This gives you some discomfort, doesn’t it?” (feeling feedback). In this way the other knows that you know he/she isn’t being truthful.

In order to bring all of this together, the following two dialogues might help. The first is from a home setting and the other from the business arena.

**Trouble with the car**

Alice: Mom, I need to take the car today

Mom: Oh, I’m sorry, Alice, I need it to go to the library.

Alice: I’ve got to go to class. Dad is taking too long to have my car fixed. My class is more important than the library, is it not?

Mom: You’re right. What if I drop you off at school and pick you up later?

Alice: No way. Why don’t I drop you off at the library?

Mom: That would be fine, honey, but how could I get back home? I don’t want to wait until your class is over; I’d be waiting three hours?

Alice: (defiantly) You could take a taxi.

Mom: Sit down with me, Alice. You must be feeling lost without your car and I know you need to go to class. All I want is for us to find a way to satisfy both of us.

Alice: It’s all dad’s fault. He’s taking his own sweet time getting my car fixed.

Mom: Tell me more about all this, Alice. What’s going on? There’s nothing more that I want than for you to be happy and for us to work things out when there’s a problem. What do you think about that?

Alice: I don’t know. I guess I’m just unhappy at not having my car.

Mom: Sure, since you passed your driving test, I’ve noticed you’ve become more independent and more contented. That’s great. Now, I’m anxious to get on with my day, and there is only one car, and I need to go to the library and you need to go to school, so I’ll drop you off and pick you up. O.K.?

Alice: I guess.

Mom: And let’s talk to your father when he gets home. You want your car and I want to use mine when I need it so I’m asking you to hold on for a couple of days. Will you do that?

Alice: Yes, I will, I reckon I’m being unreasonable and you’re being understanding…….as usual!

**Conflict under pressure**

Donald and Ken are working on a project together. Donald is the senior of the two.

Donald: What’s up, Ken? You’re not pulling your weight.

Ken: Tell me, Donald.

Donald: I’ve told you before.

Ken: I guess I’m missing something. Is there something in particular that isn’t happening ?

Donald: Yes. Manufacturing hasn’t passed on their report to us. I thought you were keeping on top of that.

Ken: Then I will do. Helen returns at 2 o’clock so I’ll check on her then.

Donald: I guess.

Ken: You’re right about this project. It’s not coming together as it should. Allow me to suggest that we talk about it early each morning so as to keep all our ducks in a row.

Donald: That’s not a bad idea. 7 o’clock is good for me.

Ken: Me, too.

## Summary

Understanding the examples above, together with the key points which I've explained in this book, can really help you get better at criticism. My bet is you're going to get a whole lot better at it, starting immediately.

*Good luck and let me hear from you!*

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Books | http://fleefundamentalism.com/jims\_procrastination.html