CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM: A Handbook

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Many thanks to Marshall Rosenberg, Ph.D., who developed these guidelines for communication and conflict resolution in the first place.

Introduction

I have a vivid memory of the time I first got an inkling of what constructive criticism is and why it's so important. News of the U.S. invasion of Cambodia had just hit St. Louis, and I had hurried to a big anti-war meeting on campus, determined to do whatever I could to help stop the new military offensive. I left the meeting three hours later unnerved and downhearted. The dynamics in the room had been dreadful. Of maybe forty people who spoke, nearly all were white men. A few of the men confidently flexed their intellectual muscles before the crowd, using sarcasm to bludgeon other people into accepting their ideas. Ironically, these men were able to play such an elitist role precisely because of the antileadership tendencies in the room. Since there was no structured presentation of the issues—"We don't need a lecture," the line ran, "we need some participation"—only those who already had a grasp of the situation could find a way through the chaos. Predictably, a tiny group of old hands, all men, were the only ones who could take an active role in shaping decisions. Worst of all I felt I had been there before—like maybe a hundred times during my student days. "Damn," I groaned to myself as I headed home, "How are we ever going to change this country if we can't even change ourselves?"

The U.S. invaded Cambodia in 1970; today nearly two decades have passed. After a long dry spell, a new generation of activists is springing up, many galvanized by the struggles in Central America and South Africa, others organizing around nuclear weapons or lesbian and gay liberation and the AIDS crisis. Of course things have changed, but many of the old dynamics are eerily familiar.

Sometimes we feel that maybe the women's movement never happened, *or* was just a nice dream. At meetings and demonstrations men are pontificating, dominating and competing, leaving most women feeling alienated and left out. At best, in the mixed movement, lesbian and gay liberation is the subject of a polite silence, if not the object of contempt by homophobic left groups who dismiss gayness as a product of bourgeois decadence. Relationships between women and men have moved to the right along with the whole political landscape—some movement men go in and out of personal relationships with one woman after another, leaving hurt, anger, and division in their wake. Other couples find themselves settling into relationships that bear an uncomfortable resemblance to Mom and Dad's, except she goes to work too, while he does (some) more childcare.

Racism has become an invisible issue. On university campuses and in progressive circles, affirmative action and the comfortable middle-class image of the Bill Cosby show convey the illusion that "the race problem" has been solved. Yet for the vast majority of Black, Latino and Native American people, all indices of poverty, unemployment and infant mortality are at record high levels. Things are *worse* than they were at the time of the Watts rebellion in 1965. But within the predominately-white movement, activists move in a world where we rarely even see the misery that's endemic on the other side of the freeway—the hopelessness of a young generation that has barely any prospect of ever landing a job; the fear in communities flooded with drugs; the tension in neighborhoods where police brutality is a daily occurrence. The struggle against racism becomes a distant reality. So an anti-intervention movement that condemns oppression in Central America may remain silent about oppression in an

American city like Detroit, where the infant mortality rate in the Black community is as high as that in Honduras. Or a student movement organized to fight apartheid in South Arrica/Azania may fail to mobilize against racist violence occurring only a few minutes away from campus. This blindness prevents us from understanding that movements of Third World peoples are historically and potentially the most powerful force for change here in the United States.

We grew up here, so probably it shouldn't be a surprise that many of the values of an oppressive society are very much alive inside ourselves and our movement Yet to be able to work and live together, to be able to build a movement capable of making fundamental changes, we have to be able to change ourselves and challenge the oppressive attitudes we've internalized. To create a new society, we have to turn ourselves into new men and women as we go.

In the sixties, many activists found inspiration in the example of the Chinese revolution. We learned about a process called criticism/self-criticism being taken up on a massive scale. After meetings, or at the conclusion of a work project, people would evaluate the work as well as the strengths and weaknesses of individual people. We read stories of the Chinese people using criticism/self-criticism in peasant cooperatives, local governments, workplaces, and families. It made perfect sense that since everyone had taken on old ways of thinking and relating, people would need a conscious, collective process of self-reflection and transformation.

We also learned about criticism/self-criticism being applied in many other situations. In 1966, Amilcar Cabral of Guinea-Bissau insisted that the topic be discussed at the first meeting of the Tri-Continental Congress, which brought together revolutionary movements from Latin America, Asia and Africa (Havana, 1966):

> Our agenda includes subjects whose meaning and importance are beyond question, and which show a fundamental preoccupation with struggle. We note, however, that one form of struggle which we consider to be fundamental has not been explicitly mentioned

> in this program, although we are certain that it was present in the minds of those who drew up this program. We refer here to the struggle against our own weaknesses. Obviously, other cases dlffer from that of Guinea-Bissau, but our experience has shown us that in the general framework of our dally struggle this battle against ourselves-no matter what difficulties the enemy may create-is the most difficult of all, whether for the present or the future of our peoples . . . We are convinced that any national or social revolution which is not based on knowledge of this fundamental reality runs a grave risk of being condemned to failure.[1]

It was exciting to hear about criticism/self-criticism being used by peasants in China or liberation movements in Africa. But it was hard to do ourselves. Too often confficts would be buried until bitterness and frustration led to "trash and self-trash." At the beginning we often approached "struggle sessions" with the subtlety of an oncoming freight train and the delicacy of a meat cleaver. Later, as the movement declined in the early seventies, criticism/self-criticism degenerated into a form of movement encounter group, becoming more and more internalized, with endless discussions of ourselves and our relationships, removed from the context of building a movement to change the whole society.

In 1974 I wrote this book as a way of combining some of my understanding of dialectical materialism, the guiding philosophy of most revolutionary movements, with practical guidelines for communication and conflict resolution developed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg. I wanted to concretize some of the principles of dialectical materialism, and to politicize some of the useful insights of psychology. My book *Constructive Criticism* was published by Issues in Radical Therapy in 1976.

More than a decade later, I very much believe that criticism/ self-criticism is an urgent necessity for those of us who want fundamental revolutionary change. I hope that many of the organizations springing up today will experiment with the process of criticism, and that these guidelines will be useful.

In this 1988 revision, I changed the old edition's emphasis on China as a modeL While I stifi believe that Mao Tse-tung is one of the great revolutionaries of our century, I also believe that China is heading away from, not towards, socialism. So in this edition, I moved the discussion of the history of criticism/self-criticism in China to Appendix B.

We'll start off by talking about the goals of criticism, and then take a brief look at the underlying approach, dialectical materialism. Section Two gets us into specffic practical guidelines for giving and receiving criticism in the most constructive way.

Enjoy.

Part One

Goals and Principles of Criticism and Self-criticism

The overall goal of criticism and self-criticism is to help us transform our character, attitudes and way of living, so that our movement increasingly embodies the values of the non-exploitative society we want to create.
There are two ways in which criticism can help us meet this ambitious goaL First, it helps us distinguish oppressive attitudes we've internalized from revolutionary attitudes. Second, criticism gives us a method of struggling to reach agreement on what we should do and why, bringing us together to carry out political work.

Ideology

Let's take a longer look at this business of sorting out oppressive ideas from revolutionary ideas. When I was a child,

it was pretty easy to figure out right from wrong—I just looked to the nearest parent or teacher for guidance. About the time I was twelve or thirteen, I figured out that this way of operating didn't make it; a lot of what the authorities said was right for women seemed wrong to me, and it didn't take any account of what I was learning about racism and poverty in the North Side of St. Louis. So for several years I decided that there really *wasn't* any right or wrong, that every person had to see by her own lights and march to her own drummer. I'd be damned if I'd end up sitting in judgment on people, the way all those authorities had sat on me.

But as I began to study Marxism, I got a whole new angle on what right and wrong were all about. Of course Right and Wrong *weren't* written up in the sky in big golden letters. But the more I studied the experience of revolutionary movements, the more I realized that some ideas *were* right and others *were* wrong. On the strategic plane, some ideas led liberation movements into bloody defeats or gradual sellouts. On the more personal level, some ideas perpetuated old power imbalances, while others did not. The Chinese had a way of saying it: "Every idea is stamped with the brand of a class."

Every social class has an ideology—a system of legal, political and ethical ideas—which reflects its own interests. People see the world differently according to their frame of reference. if someone has a foot on my face, the world will look different to me, lying there on my back, than it will to the person looking down on me. The same thing holds true for social classes. Workers see the world from one general perspective, capitalists from another, and small business people (the petite bourgeoisie) from still another. We can learn the general characteristics of how different classes view the world, and then look for particular expressions of those class ideologies in our own thinking. That's how we can get our bearings and decide which ideas are on the right track and which have to be scrapped. So let's look at the ideologies of the three main classes in the U.S. today: the capitalist/imperialist class, the working class, and the petite bourgeoisie.

The keystone of capitalist/imperialist ideology is domination-submissiveness. Certainly in a country like the U.S., white supremacy is completely woven into bourgeois values. We live in a country that grew "from sea to shining sea" through a process of conquering one people after another. During slavery, an estimated hundred million Africans were kidnapped, with half of them dying during the hellish Middle Passage. Native American nations were decimated. In California, the Native population was almost totally destroyed in only fifty years. The Second Cavalry went from village to village killing Native American men, followed by vigilante groups which took advantage of a law stating that any white person could legally enslave any Native American woman or child living without a man. In 1848 the northern part of Mexico was conquered and annexed outright. During the imperialist orgy that created the borders of the United States, such actions were justffied by pseudo-religious ideology—"Manifest Destiny", the superiority of the white race. Today, after decades of anti-colonial struggle, "our right to rule" is justffied in the name of a more "modern" ideology, anti-communism. And imperialism often is dominated by the new religion of science and "progress"—"the underdeveloped [read: primitive] peoples can't make it without us—when America came in we brought them jobs and schools."

A second aspect of capitalist ideology is possessive individualism, which says that the common good will be achieved through the selfish scrambling of each of us, a scramble governed by the "unseen hand" of the market, or the neutral regulation of democratic government. Possessive individualism teaches us that "people are naturally selfish," that freedom means the exercise of the individual ego, and that happiness lies in the accumulation of material things and status symbols ("my beautiful wife").

In contrast, working class ideology expresses the interests and aspirations of the people who produce society's wealth through their collective labor. The ideology that expresses the long-term interests of the workers has collectivity at its core.

Living precariously between the big capitalists and the

workers is a social class called the petite bourgeoisie—literally the small capitalists. This class is composed of independent professionals and craftspeople, merchants and small manufacturers. Some definitions also include middle managers in this group. The petite bourgeoisie may be characterized as owning and indirectly producing their small-scale means of production, sometimes with the help of family members. In general, they hire no, or only a few, additional members.

I grew up in a professional family, and am all too familiar with petit-bourgeois ideas. My daily life experiences bombarded me with the idea that "if you work hard, you'll be better than the rest." At school, we so-called "smart kids" were groomed to see ourselves as better than the "greasers" and "sluts" (the working-class boys and girls). Along with this went a male supremacist attitude of contempt for women, those boring people who always had their hands in a sink full of dishes, who didn't appreciate lofty ideas and political debates; somehow the women always seemed to be cooking dinner while the men watched the news, and taking care of children while the men read and discussed.

A second feature of the small owner's consciousness could be called "the philosophy of the happy face," as expressed in such mottos as '¶ you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Petit-bourgois ideology puts its highest priority on the appearance of pleasantness and gentility. This injunction to "keep 'em smiling" is a reflection of the objective class position of the petite bourgeoisie, whose existence in the age of monopoly depends on winning customers and clients in order to survive.

A third aspect of petit-bourgeois consciousness is the unwillingness to work in a disciplined and collective style. This value appeared in the hippie movement and flourished in the personal growth "biz" under the slogans "Do your own thing" and "If it feels good, do it." Within the revolutionary movement, this ideology takes on an anti-leadership character. In the early years of the (predominantly white) women's movement, many of us remember how all leadership was trashed as being "male"

or "heavy." Petitbourgeois individualism also surfaces in a fear of discipline, or in ultra-democracy—in my desire to be present in person when *every* organizational decision is made, even though this cripples the effectiveness of the work. Historically, the fiercest advocates of loose, amorphous revolutionary groups have been independent intellectuals and professionals, who wanted a form in which they could be r-r-revolutionary without cramping their style. From these examples, it isn't hard to see how petit-bourgeois ideology ultimately serves the ruling class. It's useful to recognize that ideologies reflect real power relations in the world. In a society like the U.S., that's built on colonial domination of Black, Mexican and Native American people, it isn't surprising that white-supremacist ideology dominates much of the white population. Throughout hundreds of years of U.S. history, white people of all classes were able to get access to land that had been stolen from Native Americans and Mexican people. Many white working class people worked their way up by acting as overseers and supervisors over Black and Latino people laboring at the most dirty, dangerous and tedious jobs. The much-vaunted "highest standard of living in the world" is built on internal colonies whose conditions of life closely mirror the abysmal conditions of the Third World. Furthermore, in a male-supremacist society where many men grow up being served by women, from their (unpaid) mothers to their (underpaid) secretaries, it is not hard to see why male chauvinist attitudes would be so intense. Ultimately, these backward ideas will be decisively uprooted only as the real power relationships in society change. But a movement that's serious about liberation needs to practice its new values—now.

Criticism, then, is a method for analyzing the ideological roots of our action. When an individual or organization repeats an error again and again, we can ask ourselves: "Whose interests are served?"

Unity and Struggle

Besides helping us reach ideological clarity, the second purpose of criticism is to achieve unity. Facing a system that is more powerful than the liberation movements, unity becomes the strength of oppressed people. Unity and struggle exist in a dialectical relationship: I only bother to struggle for unity with an organization or an individual when my political analysis tells me that we have some initial basis for coming together. But unless we develop our unity by struggling through the problems and disagreements that inevitably arise, we find that our unity is too superficial to allow us to work together when the chips are down.

Defining areas or principles of agreement is called establishing the basis for unity. Having a clear basis of unity is very important for organizers and even for relationships, because it provides the reference point for deciding what's up for struggle and what's out of bounds. For instance, in a loose coalition with a broad level of unity ("Peace, Jobs and Justice"), I am expected to engage in struggle on a fairly narrow range of issues directly related to the purpose of the coalition. In contrast, if I were a member of a highly disciplined cadre organization, I would be expected to engage in criticism on many issues, including a wide variety of political questions, how I spend my time and money, and how I conduct my personal life. Similarly, some of my friends share an understanding that we are accountable to each other on a very wide range of issues, while other friends make it known that they are only willing to open up a few issues for discussion. So the depth of day-to-day criticism I take on is related to the amount of unity I have with the other person or group.

Criticism/self-criticism is a form of struggle that's used only among "the people," by which I mean those who have no fundamental interest in oppressing others. Problems that come up among the people are non-antagonistic, meaning we work them out through dialogue. On the other hand, some contradictions *are* antagonistic. For instance, the

Nicaraguan revolution didn't hold a dialogue with members of Samoza's National Guard—they **fought** the National Guard. (However, once *guardia* members had been captured and disarmed, the Sandinistas implemented a very humane program of rehabilitation and political education.) So criticism/ self-criticism is a way of working out non-antagonistic contradictions among friends and allies.

Now let's look into the philosophy of dialectical materialism, the basis for criticism/self-criticism. Here I am giving only the barest of outlines. I encourage everyone to read and discuss the resources on dialectical materialism listed in Appendix C.

Dialectical Materialism

Materialism is a philosophical outlook that is opposed to the philosophical school of idealism. (Both "materialism" and "idealism" are used here in a technical sense, not in such everyday senses as "crass materialism" and "starry-eyed idealism.") Materialism sees that our consciousness is decisively shaped by the experiences we have in the course of living and working in order to survive. Idealism, in contrast, explains people's consciousness by looking at influences of spirits, "nature", and ideas alone. Let me give an example to show the difference.

Suppose we're trying to explain the fact that many of the older women in our community organization don't speak out at neighborhood meetings. An idealist approach might yield explanations such as 'Women are just naturally more passive" or it's just women's instinct to be receptive rather than aggressive." A materialist approach, on the other hand, would focus its attention on the concrete experiences of women, experiences determined by the way labor in our society has been divided along sex lines. if a woman's daily life experiences consist mostly of doing unpaid housework

in the isolation of her home, we can easily see the material basis for her quiet behavior.

From the idealist viewpoint, our attitudes and behaviors are rooted in mysterious forces beyond our control—so how can I hope to change if I am "just naturaliy a shy person"? From the materialist perspective, my consciousness can be altered by changing my activity—for instance, if I practice speaking up in groups, my so-called "shy nature" can be transformed. The materialist perspective also emphasizes the fact that to change the consciousness of all of us in society, we must change the real power relationships between oppressor and oppressed nations, men and women, as well as workers and bosses.

Dialectics sums up the laws of how people and things change and develop. Here are some of the main principles of dialectics as they apply to criticism:

1. *Everything changes.* Everything is in a state of continuous change and development: "The world is not to be comprehended as a complex of ready-made things, but as a complex of processes."[2] Failure to see the world as a place of continuous changes can make me see my comrades as unchanging. Then one of two things happens: either I fail to raise criticisms—why waste the energy on someone who won't change?—or I struggle badly, trying to change people with a bulldozer approach which is guaranteed to mess up even the best personal and political relationships.

2. *Change is caused* by *contradictions.* A second principle of materialistic dialectics is that change comes primarily from the development of contradictions inside a person (although, of course, what's going on inside a person is heavily influenced by outside conditions). Everything is full of contradictions—for instance, there is a part of me that is courageous in bringing out differences, and a part of me that wants to preserve peace at any price. There are parts of my understanding that are firmly grounded and will remain consistent, but I also know that some things I think and write today may embarrass me three months from now. When criticizing a comrade, it is crucial to distinguish between her strengths and weaknesses, and to decide which is principal and which

secondary. If I fail to see both sides, I am likely to mistake her weaknesses as her dominant aspect and criticize in a way that demoralizes rather than helps.

By the same token, I need to identify the contradictions in myself. Before accusing a comrade of being too domineering, for instance, I want to take a critical look at the contradictions inside me. Besides seeing what *she* is doing that discourages me from taking initiatives, I should ask to what extent the obstacle lies in my own fear of stepping out. I need to pick apart the various aspects of the contradiction between myself and her—how does her incorrect exercise of leadership interact with my own unwillingness to initiate?

Because dialectics sees that change arises primarily from contradictions *inside* a person, it opposes the world view that people are like billiard balls, incapable of changing until hit by an outside force. In a dialectical view, changes can and should arise from an internal commitment on the part of the one who is changing.

3. Change is not smooth or steady. A third prindple of dialectics is that change is not always gradual and linear, but instead takes sudden qualitative leaps. When Charlene first started working on the newsletter, she was terrified of writing because of earlier humiliating experiences she'd had as a working-class girl. Initially it was agonizing for her to write even one paragraph, and she had to talk into a tape recorder to get herself to state her ideas. Gradually, through working with others and editing a number of articles, she became more confident. Her attitude toward writing took a qualitative leap after she successfully completed a lead article for one issue. "I can write," she thought. "All it takes is work."

4. *Everything* is *connected.* The last principle of dialectics is that everything is connected and mutually influential, that people and things cannot be viewed in isolation. This means that people must be seen as part of a whole system of relationships. If someone acts in an antisocial way, for instance, society must take part of the responsibility. The principle of interdependence was expressed this way by the writers of *Lessons from the Damned:*

> We found out that the old down-home saying "It takes two!" basically describes all our dilemmas. We couldn't have no master unless we agreed to be slaves. That applied to all relationships in the bourgeois system... The Man could not be the boss unless the workers permitted him to be. The farms, factories, and banks did not run unless the workers worked. The husband could be the breadwinner and so-called boss, but the house did not run and the children did not get born unless the women worked for the man and permitted the conception of children.[3]

How do these philosophical principles affect the actual practice of criticism/self-criticism? First, the dialectical materialist perspective stresses the active role of a person in her own transformation. To dialectical materialists, the world is knowable and changeable, and is not governed by mysterious forces outside human control.

One very interesting description of the use of criticism/ self-criticism was written by Allyn and Adele Rickett, in their book *Prisoners of Liberation.* The Ricketts were U.S. citizens who spied on the People's Republic of China while living there in the 1960s. The Chinese government exposed the Ricketts' espionage and imprisoned them for several years. During this time, the Ricketts engaged in criticism/self-criticism with their celimates and came to sympathize with the Chinese revolution. Allyn Rickett described how he benefitted from criticism/self-criticism. The occupants of his cell

> ... soon became conscious of what we called the direction of our thinking. We found that almost invariably if a serious problem, either individual or collective, had arisen, it was because we were thinking inwardly and negatively instead of outwardly and positively ... (For instance, when depressed, I would think) "There's no sense in talking about it. I'Il just have to work it out myself. What's the use of listening to my cellmates talk

> about the problem? They don't know
> anything about it anyway!"... By making a conscious effort to set our minds working ... outwardly and positively ... problems which had seemed insoluble simply ceased to exist ... I was able to shake off completely the fits of depression which had plagued me all during prison, and in fact, throughout most of my life.[4]

Dialectical materialism also teaches us to welcome struggle by showing that contradictions are in the nature of reality, and not to be feared—differences push our progress forward! Materialism reminds us that to achieve success, we need to bring our actions into correspondence with the outside world. Assuming that we do not have a seffish interest in hiding differences or difficulties, we will be eager to get contradictions out on the table so that we can solve problems and move things forward.

Finally, the dialectical method will lead us to approach differences in a problem-solving spirit, rather than with an attitude of blaming and punishing. Because oppressed people share fundamental common interests, our conflicts should not be a clash of one personal interest against another, but a cooperative effort to discover the resolution that will advance the whole. Rickett described how this attitude looked in practice.

> In our cell we tried to look at our differing points of view in a detached manner instead of each trying to force the other to accept his own ideas and win the argument. . . (My cellmate Han) learned to put himself completely outside any disagreement which arose. Concentrating his energies on solving the problem, his entire attitude bespoke a desire to convince me rather than batter me down. No matter how insulting I became he would not lose his temper. If I were not prepared to talk, he was willing to wait. When I ranted and raved he would ignore me. He kept plodding away with the determination of a small bulldog, only one thing on his mind, to help me reach the root of my trouble.[5]

Part Two

Practical Guidelines and Exercises for Giving and Receiving Criticism

Introduction

Now that we've described the goals of criticism and taken a brief look at the principles behind it, we can begin to focus on specific guidelines for how to give and receive criticism in the most constructive way. Before getting into the guidelines, though, I'd like to set them in a context.

I want to stress that the *content* of a criticism is more important than the form in which it's given. When I was newer to the movement, I didn't understand this at all. I thought the main point of criticism was to keep everyone feeling good and to keep things running smoothly. When more politically experienced people struggled over ideas, I nearly always thought that they were being sectarian or unkind. But the more I learned about the experiences of different liberation movements, the more I could see that

criticism had a more profound purpose. Movements that took wrong directions were defeated, or sold out. Movements that were able to learn from their mistakes were able to revolutionize their societies and change the lives of millions of people.

So in a very real way, our ability to give useful criticism/self-criticism depends on developing ourselves politically and ideologically. This means studying the experiences of different revolutionary movements and the history of the U.S., and collectively carrying out and evaluating political work.

At the same time, how we give criticism directly influences how well the content gets across. Well-expressed criticisms help clarify differences in ideas and make the content of different viewpoints more accessible to people; they are more likely to draw out the political issue and less likely to obscure it in a fog of personalization and defensiveness.

You'll find that these ground rules are mostly useful in the kind of criticism that goes on person-to-person in the course of daily living and political work. I touch very little on a more analytical and theoretical level of criticism, such as the kind of criticism one organization would make of another's political line.

When I reread these guidelines, they look embarrassingly simple or commonsensical to me. Yet I know that it is very difficult to actually apply these ground rules in tense situations. The contradiction between the *obviousness* of dialectical principles of thinking and the real difficulty I've had putting them into practice has led me to think about how my upbringing systematically drilled me in undialectical and unconcrete ways of thinking. So along with the presentation of Guidelines One through Six, I'll include some comments that begin to analyze how we learned to think this way.

The material goes quite minutely into specific words and phrases. This is not because I'm interested in word games, but because I think the language we use significantly influences what we think, how we feel, and what we are able to do. While learning to use these guidelines, I often felt as awkward and hesitant as a beginner talking a foreign

language. My old ways of thinking clung tenaciously, and the new ways started to feel natural only in the course of practice. I've included exercises at the end of each section for people who want a structured way to learn.

How To Give Criticism

Guideline Zero
Getting Your Head Together, or
The Importance of Having Good Intentions

The most important part of giving criticism happens before you ever open your mouth. It involves checking your head by asking yourself this question: Is my intention to protect and educate this person or is my intention to punish and coerce? A simple question, but everything depends on the answer. The emphasis in criticism should be to separate right ideas from wrong ideas so as to win both people to the right position; no matter how sharp the disagreement, the emphasis should *not* be on separating one person from another.

Adhering to this guideline is hard work: it takes patience and a willingness to live without always getting one's own way. Persuasion takes more time at first than strong-arming or guilt-tripping the other person. Then, too, trying to win someone over through the persuasiveness of a political rationale clearly takes mental exertion: I have to be able to deliver a clear, convincing argument as to why and how I think the change will benefit the person and the movement.

If I do not have a sincere commitment to the method of persuasion, the process of criticism/self-criticism simply won't work. All the guidelines in the world won't help if I am using them to disguise a real desire to punish and manipulate the other person. Without this commitment, the rest of the

guidelines in this book become mere word-tricks, and people can smell such tricks a mile away.

I recall one incident when a co-worker had to alert me that my commitment to non-coercive criticism had completely evaporated in the heat of struggle. Andy and I worked on the same project, but had come down on opposite sides of a debate about how to spend some of the organization's money. Andy wanted to spend a *few* hundred dollars now; I didn't approve of the expenditure and wanted the money to stay put until we needed it for something I considered more important. The decision on the issue was coming up the next night, so Andy and I decided to talk to see if we could come up with an agreement. As we talked, I began to feel worked up about the absolute superiority of my own position and the wrongness of Andy's. How could he really care about the group's needs? If we wiped out the kitty now, where in the hell did he think we'd get more money later? Surely he must be *kidding* to want to spend money on something as trivial as *that!* I was all revved up to throw in some choice remarks about Andy's class background when he interrupted me in a firm tone:

"Wait a second, Grace. Just hold it. Let me ask you something—I really want you to think about this. What do you want to be my *reason* for going along with you? Do you want me to do it because I see what's best for the project, or do you want me to back down because of the names you'll call me if I don't?"

Andy's question took the wind out of my sails. As I paused, speechless, I realized that I *had* stopped struggling from an attitude of mutual respect. I had stopped trying to educate and had fallen back into plain old browbeating (with a little guilt-tripping thrown in). So after stammering that he might have a point there, I said, "Look, I need to think about it. Why don't we cool out for a while and get together a little before the meeting tonight?"

As I thought about it, I was glad Andy had pulled me up short. I realized that I probably *could* have used my leadership role in the group to shame Andy into doing things my way. But I'd seen enough struggles like that to know

what would happen: Resentment would build, the relationship of trust would be damaged, and everyone would learn that it was dangerous to disagree with Grace. Besides, if I was actually interested in getting across any political points to Andy, my sarcasm and personal slurs wouldn't exactly help.

With this sorted out, I went to the meeting and began with a self-criticism. I then proceeded to stick by my original position on the issue (but with all the unprincipled digs omitted). I felt much more clearheaded about the debate, and together the group was able to really clarify our political and financial priorities.

So I try to make a habit of consciously checking my own intentions before going into a hot struggle. Am I really committed to protecting and educating, or is there some lingering temptation to punish the other person if I don't get my own way? When I notice myself feeling clutched up about the Absolute Necessity of getting what I want (this is the feeling that makes me ready to fight dirty), I ask myself another question: Is anybody going to die if I don't get my way? Is it really worth damaging our relationship to win right away on this issue? Usually, the answer is no. This helps me throw my energy into persuasion rather than coercion.

The Vietnamese give us an inspiring example of commitment to this spirit under extraordinary difficulties. David Hunter's article "Organizing for Revolution in VietNam" gives a detailed account of the central importance of criticism in building the relationship between the National Liberation Front and the Vietnamese people. In the words of a peasant:

> The Front's expansion was due to the fact that the people contributed their opinions to the cadres and informed them of many things that were going on. It was said that when the Front committed an error, the people contributed their opinions and, therefore, helped the Front correct these errors and serve the people better. The cadres worked in a democratic manner because

> they listened to the people and didn't order the people around arbitrarily, as the mandarins used to do.[6]

The NLF managed to pull through extremely tough times, says Hunter, largely because of the incredible patience and self-discipline of the great majority of grassroots cadres, who

> remained loyal to a mode of operation based on persuasion (even) when lack of response made this method appear ineffectual and even foolish. Since by then it was too dangerous to hold mass meetings to mobilize people, cadres carried on their persuasion through a multitude of small meetings. Cadres who were already strained to the breaking point by the amount of physical work required by the war, not to mention the pressure of keeping their own families from starving, now had to go to endless meetings, virtually house-to-house, to explain Front policies to the peasants. In the face of hostility and panic, they retained their commitment to the attitude of protecting and educating the peasants to win their support.[7]

If the Vietnamese can practice criticism/self-criticism under such conditions, surely we can, too.

Guideline One
Being Concrete

The first guideline involves separating subjective opinions from objective facts; in other words, I want to distinguish my *inferences* about people from the *actions* that led me to my conclusion. An observation about someone is a concrete description of something they *said* or *did*, rather than an abstract idea about what they *are*, *feel*, or *think*. Here are some examples that show the difference.

Subjective Interpretation

Helen is an irresponsible person, she doesn't value our time.

Tom thinks he's God's gift to the group.

The new members are a bunch of anarchists.

That organization is arrogant.

Objective Observation

Helen showed up for the meeting twenty minutes late.

Tom gave a fifteen-minute explanation of a Marxist term without asking if people wanted to hear it.

Four of the new people said they thought we should rotate leadership instead of electing a steering committee.

The organization turned down our proposal without giving specific reasons.

In giving and receiving criticism, why is it important to separate inferences from observations?

First, an observation is more likely to convey useful information to the person or group you are criticizing, and less likely to lead to unnecessary confusion and misunderstanding. Once I was asked to mediate a criticism session between two men who were finding it impossible to work together. I asked Ted to tell John his criticism.

"Oh, what's the point?" Ted burst out angrily. "1've told him four times already and he hasn't changed." After some discussion, though, Ted finally agreed to give his criticism:

"John, you're just too domineering."

After a moment of tense silence John replied, "Look, Ted, I still don't know what you're talking about."

At that point I asked John to try to guess at the concrete observation Ted might have in mind. "Is it that I talk more than other people in meetings?" John asked.

"Oh, come off it, John, *you* know what I mean," Ted snapped back. "Don't play dumb with me!"

"Well, is it the fact that I usually make up the agenda? Would you like us to rotate that job?" John guessed again.

"No, that's not it at all," replied Ted, beginning to see that John's "refusal to change" may have had a lot to do with the vagueness of his own criticism. "Look," said Ted slowly, "remember that big meeting we had a while back, when we all agreed on the spring work plan? After that meeting you just turned around and changed the plan yourself, without letting anybody know. Why decide things together if you're going to go off and change them by yourself?"

Once the men had grounded their conflict in a concrete action, rather than getting lost in an argument about a vague term like "domineering," they were much closer to solving their problem.

Because observations increase the amount of useful information that gets across, they clear the way for bringing out political differences. If a group criticizes the leadership of its organization for being "too power-hungry," no one knows exactly what the problem is or how to struggle through it. If, instead, the group gives a concrete observation—"At the demonstration, the tactical leadership overturned an organizational decision without consulting anyone"—then we can proceed to hash out our real political differences.

Another reason for trying to make concrete observations is to keep my own head working dialectically. The more I label people with abstract judgments, the more I tend to think of them as being incapable of change. Abstract character judgments also blind me to the ways that problems are rooted in systems of interaction, rather than in one person's character seen in isolation. An example: As long as I was labeling my co-worker Richard as a "weak person," it was hard for me to identify exactly what he was doing that I didn't like; and while my head was clogged with value judgments, there was no way for me to get clear on what I wanted him to do

differently. Also, I couldn't see how my own behavior might contribute to the problem. (Notice how a label like "weak person" locates all the difficulty with the other person.)

The next step in changing the situation was getting myself clear on a concrete description of the problem My observation was that Richard did things after I suggested them, but rarely initiated a project himself. The next step was to share this criticism with him: Somehow it seemed less scary to confront him with a concrete problem than it did to lay out a loaded and static judgment like, "Richard, did anyone ever tell you that you're a weak person?" After I had placed the problem on the table, Richard showed me that I too had contributed to the situation: "The way you come across, Grace, made me assume you were impatient with my inexperience, and that you didn't want me to bug you with projects that I'd need advice on."

Of course if we think about others in terms of static categories, we're likely to dose out the same medicine to ourselves. One woman described how she paralyzed herself politically by thinking of herself in isolation from the conditions that influenced her. "I'll be in a meeting," she said, "and I'll find myself feeling really competitive. Then I'll trash myself for feeling that! I say to myself 'You're so self-conscious! You're no good to anybody! You'll never change!' All my energy goes into grinding myself down. Then I want to just give up and hide in my room for a week." One-sided thinking leads us to blame and punish ourselves and each other for individual deficiencies, rather than seeing how our shortcomings are related to the system. It gives us a lopsided and inaccurate view of things, and saps the energy we could be using to solve problems in our political work.

By saying that it is important to know how to distinguish observations from opinions, I am *not* saying that we should avoid making judgments. If a leaflet seems racist, say that if an idea seems wrong, call it wrong. The point is that these opinions should be grounded in and explained by concrete observations.

The Politics of Judgment

Soon after I learned the distinction between inferences and observations, I decided to keep a list of all the vague judgments I made in a day. In the first eight hours of my experiment, I accumulated a list of over 100 abstract character judgments:

"I'm too passive," "she's such an uptight person," ... ad *nauseum.* It was easy to see how this kind of pigeonhole thinking kept me from seeing things deeply, and made it hard for me to give and receive criticism in a useful way. The length of the list led me to reflect back on the particular ways I had been indoctrinated in this kind of static and undialectical thinking.

I remember that in the first grade my teacher divided us into three reading groups. For all purposes, the groups might have been labeled the Bluebirds, the Redbirds and the Vultures, because everybody got the point: Some people were *dummies* and other people were *smart.* These labels were taken to be permanent character attributes—although there were frequent exhortations to work hard and get ahead, everybody knew that a Vulture was pretty much a Vulture for life. Two years later, we were tracked into completely separate programs, and were well on our way to becoming "greasers" and "school leaders." Ten years later, right on schedule, the Bluebirds went east to Ivy League schools, the Redbirds went to state colleges, and the Vultures went to trade schools if they were lucky. By this time we were all supposed to have been convinced that this arrangement was fair and proper. The superior character of the Bluebirds had manifested itself, and the Vultures had received what they deserved. In a million tiny ways, the Bluebirds had been taught that they possessed the abstract character traits that made them "leadership material"—entirely fit to rule. Hopefully too, the Vultures had learned their place.

In fact, this ideological molding *does* to some extent achieve its goal. In their book *The Hidden Injuries of Class,* Bennet and Cobb show how this works:

> In talking to older laborers who worked in large factories, we often heard them express anger (about the unfairness they encountered at work)... yet that anger was often turned around by final statements like "they must have good reasons" or ... "they're educated people, they must know what they're doing ... maybe there are things about this I don't know."[8]

Robert Lane drew the same conclusion from extensive conversations with fifteen working men:

> Although every one of the men ... agreed that class inequalities stacked the cards unequally, each made an exception of himself. "I just played around in school" "It's my own fault, I didn't develop myself like I could've." "If I had only worked harder and stayed in school, I could've got somewhere."[9]

This internalized oppression causes us to turn against each other and ourselves, rather than against an oppressive system. One writer sums it up this way:

> Objectification (through vague character judgments) serves in the main only two purposes: (1) as a defense against the other and as a defense against any possible responsibility for his or her situation (as in the terms "moron," "lunatic," "chick," etc.); and (2) as a precondition of and as an excuse for the oppression, and exploitation—or worse—of the "other." (As in the U.S. military's use of "gook" and "dink" to describe the Vietnamese.)[10]

Not only are the labels slapped on us by those who want to control us, but we also learn to wield them against each other as well.

Exercise on Guideline One
Being Concrete

Below is a list of inferences or subjective statements for you to translate into observations. If you're doing this with someone else, it's good to read the statements as though they were a criticism of the other person: "You're irresponsible!" The person on the receiving end can try to translate this into an observation, making up a context since none is given: "Is it because I didn't finish the list of phone calls on time?" You can help each other if anyone gets stuck.

To review this guideline: Observations refer to actions ("She *said* or *did* X"), not to abstract categories ("She is a Y"). An observation avoids any inference about a person's motives; for example, the observation "He *did not* return my phone call" avoids the inference "He *refused* to return my call." Giving direct quotes or concrete examples may help you express observations. For example, say "He says things like 'Don't be ridiculous,"' rather than "He puts people down."

Here's the exercise list:

1. She's irresponsible.
2. He's arrogant
3. This organization is too bureaucratic (said to a leader by a member).
4. You're acting like a heavy.
5. He's acting so *male* and *intellectual!*
6. He's totally flaky.
7. You're so together.
8. You're putting me in a passive position by the way you're chairing the meeting.
9. Your collective has a very sectarian style of work.

Guideline Two
Describing Feelings

The purpose of Guideline One is to push myself to be concrete and precise in describing what Jam criticizing. Next, it's often important to clarify the subjective part of the criticism-the feelings that go with it. Clarifying feelings can do several things: First, it can help me get a handle on my feelings, so they don't go underground, outside of my consciousness, where they could burst out in destructive ways. Second, by verbalizing things I can let the other person know where I'm at in a way that makes me humanly accessible to her. Describing my feelings encourages me to take responsibility for my own end of the contradiction, and avoid laying the blame entirely on the other person. (Notice the difference between giving my judgment, "You're arrogant," and explaining my feeling, "I'm frustrated with the conversation because you're doing almost all the talking.") Next, explicitly describing my feelings cuts down the chances that someone will misread my emotions. For instance, if I don't tell people that I'm *nervous* about chairing a meeting, they might think I am acting *cold*. Another reason to know my own feelings is that sometimes my negative feelings can tip me off that something is wrong or unjust in the outside world.

As people learn the importance of being able to analyze a situation objectively, they sometimes tend to see feelings themselves as the enemy. People who have been dominated by their emotions for too long fall into the trap of thinking the ideal is to have *no* feelings. The problem with trying to suppress or ignore feelings is that it simply doesn't work. One man I know operates like a revolutionary computer most of the time, but he has a breakdown every six months, when he has to drop everything to spend three weeks recovering in bed.

The opposite mistake is putting feelings in command. Many of us painfully remember the days in the women's movement when if someone felt *bad*, it was automatically assumed that she had been righteously aggrieved, and that

all business should cease until she felt better. In this way, feelings could be used as a club: One person says "I feel alienated," and a meeting of fifty people is expected to drop everything for however long it takes to deal with it. In fact, this is a way of succumbing to individualism, the ideology of putting the needs of the part before the needs of the whole. When we put feelings in command, we forget how thoroughly we have internalized oppressive ideas. Sometimes I feel bad because the competitive or self-centered parts of me are threatened. While I still want to acknowledge these feelings so I can get to the bottom of them and change them, it would be wrong to act on them in an uncritical way. The challenge is to bring our subjective feelings into correspondence with our objective understanding, neither letting our emotions run away with us or pretending that they aren't there.

I find that when I *know* my feelings, I am much less likely to let them lead me in blind ways. Unfortunately, though, there are two big obstacles to getting through to my feelings. One is the whole tangle of injunctions I internalized: "People will only like you if you keep smiling," "You shouldn't feel that way," "Don't be a wet blanket." The second obstacle is my own training to play the victim, to concentrate on what the other person is doing to me rather than taking any responsibility for how I respond. Notice that the following phrases do not describe emotions at all, but instead say what I *think* the other person is doing wrong: "I feel condescended to," "I feel that you're patronizing us," "1 feel rejected." Notice that if I *think* you're condescending to me, I might *feel* various ways—either angry, or hurt, or impatient, or whatever. So the first point is that we should learn to spot the difference between our feelings and our thoughts.

It's no simple matter to learn how to describe feelings—I was trained to be so cut off from feelings that I had hardly any vocabulary to help me communicate my emotions to others or to focus them for myself. I've included a list of Feeling Words in Appendix A for people who also find themselves speechless in this way.

Analyzing the Origin of Feelings

When I have a heavy emotional reaction, I generally want to sort out my own reaction before snapping into a criticism right away. Three elements come into play here.

First, *I identify the thought or value that caused the feeling.* Realizing that my feelings come from my values was a very strange idea to me, because I'd been drilled in the mechanical idea that feelings are forced on me by the outside world:

"He made me angry," or "They hurt my feelings." I was also taught that I could control the feelings of others: "Don't quit school or you'll make your poor mother miserable." This notion weakens me tremendously: If I believe that other people can create my feelings, I am at the mercy of what they say or do; conversely, if I think that I can control other people's feelings, I will be afraid to do anything to which someone might have a negative reaction.

In rejecting the mechanical notion that our feelings are thrust on us from outside, we come to the dialectical understanding that our feelings come from our thoughts and values (which themselves in turn are heavily influenced by a class-structured society, as we will see below). Let's contrast the two views on the origins of feelings.

A *Mechanical View of Where Feelings Come From.* The outside event *controls* my feelings. For example: They criticised my leaflet (event), therefore they *made* me humiliated (feeling).

B. *Dialectical View of Where Feelings Come From.* The outside event (1) is filtered through my thoughts and values (2) and I have a feeling (3).

(1) Event: They criticized my leaflet.

(2) Thought and value and (3) *Feeling:*
If I think they're trying to put me down and I think this is terrible, *I might feel embarrassed or furious.*

If I think they're trying to put me down and I see this as their shortcoming,
I might feel sad *about the state of the movement.*
If I think I can learn something from the criticism,
I might feel excited and appreciative.

In the dialectical view, although I can't always control outside events (1), I *can* learn to make conscious decisions about how I evaluate the events (2), which means I take an active role in determining which feelings I experience (3). Just knowing that other people cannot control my feelings makes me feel less vulnerable and passive in relation to other people's actions. "When you realize that it *takes* two, more power is in you."

So after identifying my feelings, I trace down the thought or value that caused the feeling. This thought might represent my "old" self, the baggage I picked up from an oppressive society, or it might represent revolutionary values. If I catch myself falling into the old kinds of thinking, I can consciously try to look at the situation differently. For example: Once my friend Ann was late for a meeting. As the minutes ticked by without her showing up or phoning, I got more and more furious. "She's just trying to let me know how important and busy she is—if she had any respect at all she would have called by now." I was busily steaming myself into a fit when I remembered to take a look at what was going on inside me. First I realized that I was angry mainly because of my *interpretation* about her motives—if I had known she had car trouble, for instance, the actual lateness would not have bothered me. Next I tried to analyze the content of the thought that was making me so angry—I had to admit that a lot of what I was thinking was bound up with preserving my own self-importance. After this self-criticism, I consciously tried to replace my original interpretation with a more constructive thought: "Okay, she's late, a lot of things could have happened. I can criticize her for it, and she¶ probably clean up her act. Now, what can I work on until she gets here, so I can use this time constructively?" By this time, I was completely calmed down. When Ann arrived fifteen

minutes later, I was able to explain how her lateness had inconvenienced me, and then proceed with the meeting.

Changing our ways of looking at things is a protracted process. We've been steeped in a racist, sexist, individualist and competitive society for years, and we live in a country that constantly reinforces these values in a thousand ways. Just because we're in the movement doesn't make this automatically go away. Really changing ourselves takes time and lots of help from other people.

The Politics of Emotions

It is nothing new to announce that we are socialized to avoid expressing our feelings: "Big boys don't cry," "You know we mustn't hate our teachers." Our alienation from our feelings, from each other, and from our unique human ability to plan before we create, all reflect the fact that working people are objectively alienated from the tools and resources required to produce the necessities of life. To guarantee that the capitalists would have a pool of workers who could be exploited for private profit, our ancestors were ripped away from their means of production and thrown into the labor market, where they were forced to work for the owners in order to live. Whole nations of the Third World were thrown off their land and subjected to colonialism. The peasants of Europe saw their land stolen by the enclosures, communal property was forcibly expropriated by the capitalist class, and small independent craftspeople were driven out of business. This is the concrete historical origin of our feelings of alienation.

Folk wisdom has it that when you go to work, you leave your feelings at home. "If work was supposed to be fur', you wouldn't get paid for it." "Nobody asked you to *like* it, just do it." In a productive system where everything is run from the top down for the benefit of the few at the top, people must be predictably willing to perform

dehumanizing and brutal tasks. Predictability is vital to keeping the machines running profitably; it is a capitalist's dream that the people who run the machines will be as reliable and passive as things.

In their own words, two workers describe what they have learned about feelings on the job. The first speaker is Ernest Bradshaw, a Black supervisor in a bank auditing department, quoted by Studs Terkel:

> I'm not too wrapped up in seeing a woman, fifty years old, get thrown off her job because she can't cut it like the younger ones. They moved her off the job, where she was happy.
>
> Some people can manage and some people can't manage. I figure I can manage. But it's this personal feeling-it just doesn't seem right for me to say to this woman, "Okay, I'll rate you below average." She has nobody to support her. If she got fired, where would a woman fifty years of age find a job? I'm a good supervisor. I write it up the way it's supposed to be written up. My feeling doesn't come into play. What I do is what I *have* to do. This doesn't mean I won't get grey hairs or feel kind of bad...
>
> They knew I didn't particularly care for doing it. They knew my feelings. I told them she was a good woman. They said, "You can't let personal feelings come in. We'll give her about five months to shape up or ship out." She was put on probation.
>
> That's the thing you get in any business. They never talk about personal feelings. They let you know that people are of no consequence. You take the job, you agree to work from eight-thirty to five and no ifs, ands, or buts. Feelings are left out ... I look at people as people, person to person. But when you're on a job, you're supposed to lose all this.[11]

Luigi, an acquaintance of mine, had been a soldier in Vietnam.

I'll tell you what really hurt me about growing up as a man here in this country. It's when they tell you, "A man's not supposed to cry." When I was over in Nam, in the jungle, it was crazy. You knew you didn't have any business being in these people's country anyway, but there you were, fighting. There was this helicopter, it was getting shot down, and I could see all my buddies dying [tears came into Luigi's eyes, and he had difficulty talking]... My buddies were dying man, it was so bad it would make a stone cry. But they said, "A man isn't supposed to cry. Get back in there and fight."

I say it's *good* to cry sometimes. But it's taking me a long time to learn how again.

The denial of feelings is essential to exploitative or dominant-submissive power relationships. The oppressed must be objectified as things that deserve or even prefer their fates, as in the myth of the "happy slaves" or the little woman at home. We are also taught a soulless "scientific neutrality" as part of our alienation training. A high school student's history paper, speaking up against U.S. slavery, earns a red-penciled marking from the teacher: "Your feelings are showing too much. This is dangerous to objectivity."

On the job, we are forced to cooperate in our own oppression by deadening our feelings enough that we can make it through a day of alienated work. We survive, all right, but at a heavy cost. "I'm a paraprofessional in a public school," says Emily, a friend of mine, "and all day long I see kids being destroyed. It tears me up inside. The only way I can get through the day is to turn myself off. I put so much effort into *not* feeling, I'm totally exhausted at the end of the day. By the time I get home, I'm so drained that all I can do is watch TV"

Suella, a secretary, has her own version of the same story. "The boss will come in and say something to me, nothing horrible, but just one of those little insults we get all the time. I can't blow up at him—it's not really a big thing, and

besides, I'd probably get fired. So instead I just get depressed. I may not even know I'm feeling bad, but it's just a grey cloud of depression that might descend for the rest of the day."

Roberta, a prostitute, sums it all up in this quote from a Terkel interview:

> You're the lowest of the low if you allow yourself to feel anything with a ..... . The way you maintain your integrity is by acting all the way through... You become your job. I became what I did ... I became cold, I became hard, I became turned off. I became numb.
>
> Even when I wasn't hustling I was a hustler. I don't think it's terribly different from somebody who works on the assembly line forty hours a week and comes home cut off, numb, dehumanized. People aren't built to switch on and off like water faucets.[12]

When we are alienated from our means of livelihood, from our feelings, and from each other, we are less likely to focus on the systematic causes of our pain, and more likely to turn to the external palliatives that are constantly pushed on us: drugs, alcohol, food' consumer items, and so on. Our alienation as producers makes us easier targets for alienated consumption. Carol, a middle-aged, middle-income woman, put it like this. "For me, buying things is a poor substitute for what I really want. I really want to be part of something larger, to be part of some sort of community. But if I don't have that, and I can't see how to get it, then I'll redecorate the dining room or something. I don't think I'm so different from most people."

Pat, a postal worker, describes how she uses consuming to stave off depression from work: "I was furious at that damn supervisor. He was wrong, he knew he was wrong, but there was nothing I could do about it. I kept thinking to myself, 'I'm gonna bake me *fifty* biscuits and I'm gonna cover 'em with butter and honey, and I'm gonna eat 'em all, every one.' "

Business interests play on this socially-induced vulnerabil-

ity in the most cynical way. Driving home from work during the rush hour, we hear the solicitous voice of the radio announcer crooning: "The work day is over. You can come alive again. Drink Heublein sherry." The next commercial is a woman's voice. "Life can get you down a little. But there's no reason to stay down in the dumps when you can get a real pick-me-up with a new furniture suite from Otto's. Come in today, we're open till nine!" First capitalism robs our lives of human satisfaction, then it sells us back plastic substitutes at marked-up prices.

The result is that many of us learn to fear our own feelings as alien, uncontrollable forces. "I'm so afraid of getting angry," said one working woman. "There's so much anger inside, I'm afraid it will spill out and dissolve me in chaos. When I start feeling angry I get afraid I might murder someone. So instead of getting angry, I make myself go dead inside."

This denial of our feelings, or their expression in random acts of violence, will continue as long as we are isolated and disorganized, until we have a political channel into which our energies can flow. Successful revolutionaries the world over have consciously recognized the need to arouse and collectivize the emotions of the people. In "speak bitterness" sessions in China and Viet Nam, for instance, the outrage of the peasants and women was channeled from little drops of individualized anger and shame into a river of revolutionary determination.

So it is important that our movement recognizes the extent of alienation and emotional isolation in our country, and that our organizing speaks to this need. We must not leave the problem to the profiteers who manipulate our alienation, or to the industrial psychologists with their pseudo-participation and their pseudo-belonging. Instead, we can build up a people's culture that counters the hollowness by nourishing our sense of struggle and connectedness.

Exercise on Guideline Two
Describing Feelings

Only some of the statements in the following list describe what I call feelings; others communicate thoughts, usually about what the other person is doing to the speaker. Try to spot the sentence that contains *thoughts* and then translate them into sentences that describe *feelings.*

Watch for two common abuses of Guideline Two. First, look out for any tendency to sneak in thoughts or judgments under the guise of feelings. It looks like this: "I feel that *you are* the most selfish person I've ever met," or "I feel *like you* are totally inaccessible." Or more subtly, "I feel put down -which translated means, "You're putting me down, you schmuck." All of these statements tell me what I *think* the other person is or what she is doing to me. While this may be a good device for avoiding the responsibility of saying where I'm at, it is *not* expressing my own feelings.

Next, watch out for the habit of saying "I feel" when you should be saying "I think." Women in particular are socialized to express our positions in this tippy-toe way: "According to my analysis of the economic crisis, I *feel* we should focus on fighting social service cutbacks." You don't *feel* an analysis, you *think* it! Saying "I feel" in this instance only makes it more difficult for other people to disagree. For this exercise, the List of Feeling Words in the back of the book may help you.

1. I feel you are ignoring me.
2. We were really angry about how you handled our proposal.
3. I feel misunderstood.
4. I'm really ticked off that you didn't do your preparation.
5. I feel like I'm a one-down position compared to leadership.
6. I feel as though you're being unfair.

Here are my comments on each statement above:

1. This statement says that I *think* the other person is ignoring me. To express my feelings about this thought, I might say "I feel hurt," or "I'm angry."
2. This statement expresses a feeling.
3. "Misunderstood" is one of those sneaky blame words. It would be better to say something like, "I feel frustrated because I think you're misunderstanding me."
4. This is a feeling.
5. This is a statement of what I *think* my situation is. A feeling might be, "I'm really pissed off about what's happening between membership and leadership in our work group, because I think..."
6. The statement is my thought. A feeling might be, "I'm really mistrustful."

Guideline Three
Stating Wants

After I've gotten clear on what I'm reacting to (the observation) and how I feel about it, I focus on clarifying what I want the other person(s) to do differently. Although this sounds embarrassingly obvious, I find that all my training in powerlessness and passivity makes it difficult for me to do this. I learned early in life that it was rude and selfish to say what I wanted, and that instead I should ask leading questions ("Don't you think it would be a good idea to let somebody else talk?") or hint ("It sure would be nice if someone would volunteer to do these phone calls") or sit passively, hoping that the other person would be "sensitive enough" to read my mind ("If you really cared about me, you'd have known"). Saying exactly what I want—"Barry, I wish you'd wind it up," or "Jane, I really want you to help me with these phone calls"—that would be much too easy!

The idea of expressing wants has three parts: (1) Say directly

who you want to do something, rather than leaving it vague. (2) Specify concretely what you want the other persons to *d6* and *say*, rather than what you want them to *be* or *feel*. (3) Stress what you *do* want, rather than just what you *don't* want. Let's look at these three points in more depth.

The first point involves saying directly *who* I want to do something, rather than leaving this implied. Directness of this sort can feel risky, because it means really putting a finger on the problem. It's clearly easier for me to address my want to everybody and nobody in particular—"I think we should all reevaluate our basis for unity"—than it is to say what I really mean: "Doris and Pat, from some of the political differences that have been coming down lately, I've come to really doubt whether you should be in the group. I'd like to take up that question next time we meet." Wants that are addressed to the universe in general. I've found, rarely make it to the people they were intended for.

The second point requires stating wants concretely, rather than using vague abstract terms. Recently my friend Hank brought up a problem he was having: "Some people in the political economy class I'm teaching told me they wanted me to stop being such a typical male intellectual. I really felt bad about what they said, because it was hard for me to learn from it. I still don't know exactly what I was doing that they didn't like, or what they wanted me to do differently." "So where are things now, Hank?" I asked. "It got even worse," he groaned. "The next week I went back, not aware of doing anything differently, but they said I was really improving! I'm more at a loss than ever!" To give another example: In the midst of a frustrating meeting, one of the chairpersons burst out, "People have just *got* to be more supportive of the leadership!" Everyone sat there feeling confused and guilty, but no one knew that the speaker really wanted the membership to approve a plan that the chair had put forward a little while before.

Third, action-wants involve saying what I want someone to *start* doing, rather than just what I want them to *stop* doing. Although it takes almost no effort for me to get clear on what I *don't* want, I find that a negative statement often doesn't

get me the results I'm after. I remember telling a co-worker that I *didn't want* him to call women "chicks": he tried to comply, in all innocence, by referring to women as "gals" and "girls". Also, positive wants are just plain easier to hear. When someone tells me they *don't* want to use my suggestion, I'm likelier to get defensive than if they say, "I want you to do such and such instead, for these reasons."

Recently I ran into a typical example of the needless aggravation that groups can get into when people express their wants in a fuzzy way. An hour into a planning meeting of a class that had been running for several weeks, one man burst out: "What's the point of doing all this planning anyway? We're not going to get anything accomplished in here!" After a shocked silence, everyone started to jump in with their arguments and explanations: "How could you say that, Ed?" "Everyone *else* thinks we're accomplishing a lot!" and so on. Ed kept repeating his statement: "I tell you, it won't come to anything," I could feel tempers shortening all around me, and my own impatience was reaching the boiling point—I was close to bursting out, "You've got a hell of a lot of nerve undermining the discussion with that negative stuff!" But just in time, Judy started to guess what Ed *wanted* from us. After a couple of minutes back and forth, with Judy trying to clarify Ed's wants in action terms, the issue became clear. "That's right, Judy," said Ed, "all I'm trying to say is that I'm discouraged that just when the class is really getting good, we're going to stop meeting, I'd like us to extend the class for several more weeks."

After the relief of finally understanding Ed, I couldn't help but think how much easier it would have been for everyone if he had been able to clearly state his want in the beginning. I could well imagine another end to the story: If Judy hadn't helped clarify things, the whole interchange might well have had a tense, negative ending, with everyone resenting Ed's "obstructionist" behavior, and Ed convinced that the group was unresponsive after all.

Exercise on Guideline Three
Stating Action-Wants

The following is a list of abstract or negative wants that you can translate into concrete action-wants. Since there is no context provided, just make up your own. In summary, action-wants say:

1. *Who* you want to do something. ("I want you to talk less in meetings, Paul and Luis," rather than "It would be good if everyone would be more sensitive in the future.")
2. What you want the person to *do* or *say* concretely. ("I want you to volunteer for childcare regularly," rather than "I wish you would *be* more supportive of mothers," or "I want you to *feel* more responsibility.")
3. What you *do want* rather than what you *don't want ("I* want you to give an example of what you mean," rather than "Don't talk so abstractly.")

So, here's my exercise list:

1. You should stop hiding your politics.
2. I want you to be more supportive.
3. I wish people would stop putting themselves down.
4. You should stop acting so subjective.
5. You should feel more self-confident.
6. Would you like to help out with the collating?
7. I should be more organized.
8. I want you to listen to me!
9. (And for the home front, try making *this* into a concrete statement:) I want you to love me.

Some comments on each excuse:

1. This is a negative and fuzzy want. A better statement would be something like this: "If you disagree, I want you to say so in the meeting, rather than talking about it to your close friend outside."

2. To make this want more concrete, you might say: "I want you to ask me questions to help me draw out my position some, instead of coming on with your disagreements so hard and fast."

3. Less fuzzy would be something like this: "I notice that several people say what they think in a half-apologetic way; for instance, Sue, you said something like, 'Well, this may be really crazy but . . . 'I think that it's a way of protecting yourself, and I think it stifles debate, so I wish people would just spit out what they think and save the apologies."

4. This is a negative and fuzzy want. Try something like, "Sharon, I have a hunch that you had such a negative reaction to Peggy's class analysis of doctors because you're in med school—I'd like you to tell me if my hunch is right."

5. An action-want should say what you want the person to *do,* not what you want them to feel. How about something like: "I want you to try it first, and then ask for help if you get stuck, instead of saying you can't do it before you try."

6. More direct would be: "I'd like some help with the collating, Barbara."

7. What would "being more organized" require in terms of concrete *action?* Better would be something like: "I'm going to buy a datebook and set up a filing system this week."

8. Notice the many possible meanings for the word "listen":

"I want you to be quiet while I talk," or "1 want you to run back what you heard me say, so I know you got it," or "I want you to enthusiastically agree to everything I say."

Guideline Four
Explaining the Purpose

Perhaps the most important part of a criticism is the political motivation, the explanation of *why* I think someone should change. There are two contrasting ways of getting people to change. The first reflects the donkey theory: People won't change unless hit by a stick or bribed with a carrot. We're

also familiar with *indirect* compulsion: "Do what I say or I'll lower your grade." A bit more subtle is psychological compulsion, where labels are used as bludgeons: 'If you don't enthusiastically go along with us, you are (a) culturally deprived, (b) emotionally disturbed, (c) socially dangerous or (d) the unfortunate product of a familial fracture."

Then too, we're all familiar with the good old-fashioned guilt trip: "Do it my way or I'll go eat a worm, and then you'll be sorry." Of course the flip side of compulsion is bribery: "Do X and you'll get Y " This kind of external motivation is endemic under this system, which can only keep people in line through the use of threats and bribes. But we also internalize these ways of thinking, like the father who pays his ten-year-old son two dollars for every A and a dollar for every B.

The alternative relies not on punishment or bribery, but on education, based on the dialectical conception that the process of change begins primarily with internal commitment. It relies on educating others about the *purpose* of the desired change. When I'm operating from this dialectical understanding, I want the other people to change not out of fear or obligation, but because they see how the change will benefit the whole—the whole group, the whole organization, the whole liberation struggle—themselves included.

I remember one experience that showed me the sharp contrast between the two kinds of motivation. Many years ago, when the women's liberation movement had just hit St. Louis, I lived in a large collective household of women and men. After some months of struggle, we had made significant changes in the old sexist division of labor, where the women did all the cleaning, because "dirt bothers you women more," and all the cooking, because "you know how to cook. Besides, we men don't ask you to change the oil in the car (once every four months), do we?" One man named Tim, however, was a diehard. He consistently skated through with the least amount of housework possible and would seldom even bother to answer the constantly ringing telephone in our busy movement household.

Our reaction was a textbook case of what shouldn't happen.

Part of the problem was our own liberalism-after two or three confrontations had failed, we reverted to the cold shoulder method of miseducation. The other problem was our inability to explain our purpose to Tim in a good way:

When we did confront him, our explanations were abstract and moralistic—"You're being really piggy, Tim. Don't you see how *selfish* you are?"

We were at our wits' end with Tim when a couple of old friends came into town. In desperation, we asked one of them, Abigail, to talk to him. She and Tim spent the better part of a Sunday afternoon talking. The change in Tim's behavior, while by no means miraculous, was definitely a breakthrough. He made a self-criticism at a house meeting and was noticeably more visible during Saturday morning cleanup. He asked for cooking lessons and developed an entire repertoire of variations on rice-veggy casserole. A new atmosphere arose where we were able to do further criticism in a much more open way. Before Abigail left, we asked her about their conversation.

"First," she said, "we had to make an agreement that we were willing to do some criticism. I told him that you had asked me to talk to him, and he really tensed up. But then he saw (because it was true) that I wasn't grinding an ax:

I *did* want him to make some changes, but I wasn't punishing him into it. I told him I'd seen enough struggles where people tried to guilt-trip each other into changing. I'm really glad we got our agreement straight to start with, because the content got pretty heavy.

"We talked about the way society runs by everybody's labor. Tim's been conscious of exploitation on the job for a long time, but he hadn't thought about how housework was necessary labor, too. I told him it was no accident that he'd never been taught that—unpaid labor is *hidden* labor under capitalism. He didn't want to be part of exploiting people, no way.

"On the other hand, he protested that he didn't have time to do that much housework. He was a leader of Viet Nam Veterans Against the War, and his work was more important than having the house 'compulsively neat.'

"I think he was shocked when I hotly explained that everyone else in the house also had important political work, and that if men or leadership opted out of it because they felt their time was 'too valuable,' then it would all fall on the women—so what, our time wasn't just as valuable? I talked about how women all around the world had the same problem, of being held back from developing their full potential because of bearing the whole weight of housework and childrearing. And I gave him something to read on the subject.

"Finally, we also talked about how *he'd* be helped by changing. I told him he was losing something very important by staying outside of the housework—there's a lot of team feeling that comes from working together, and he was just plain missing out and undermining his chance to be really close to people in the house. He brought up the fact that a sex-typed division of labor forces men into roles, too-he talked about how he hates having to be the heavy who always ends up hassling with the landlord.

"So, it was just one round in a long struggle, and I'm sure he won't be transformed into a new person overnight. But I think things have been going better, and he did come up to me yesterday to thank me for the discussion. He said that having some analysis makes scrubbing the toilet bowl seem a little bit less odious!"

There were two lessons I drew from this incident. First is the importance of making sure that both sides enter into the criticism with the understanding that change should be based on a grasp of the purpose, rather than on fear or guilt. The second lesson is the importance of giving the criticism in a way that politically educates, that shows the real consequences of the different kinds of behavior. Abigail didn't do this with an abstraction or a character judgment ("You're a male chauvinist, Tim"). She explained it in a concrete way that Tim could really grasp.

We said that change should be voluntary. This does not mean that criticism must be "nice", the pretty-please-with-a-cherry-on-top style. If someone's behavior is consistently having a negative impact, it's only right to use more forceful

action when talk has failed. The crucial difference is whether pressure is applied to *punish* or to *educate and protect*. Here's an example that shows the distinction. Say a solidarity committee has developed security guidelines to avoid exposing sensitive information on the presumably tapped office phone. One person breaks the guidelines repeatedly-nothing malicious, but dangerous nonetheless. If criticism does not solve the problem once and for all, at some point the committee might legitimately decide to drop this individual—not as a punishment, but to protect the work. Although this action would involve a certain kind of coercion, it would be consistent with the spirit and goals of criticism and self-criticism.

Here again, it's important to emphasize that I myself need to be politically educated in order to explain the political purpose behind my criticism. Abigail was able to explain her point to Tim because she had an analysis of women's household labor. While how we criticize is important, the primary thing is knowing *what* to criticize, what purpose to put forward. Again, to use these guidelines, we need to develop ourselves politically.

Summary of Four Guidelines for Giving Criticism

The first four guidelines help me criticize in a way that is most likely to educate; they help me avoid vague, subjective and punitive thinking. The formula below shows one way of putting these guidelines together to communicate observations, feelings, wants and purpose. Some people who are learning the guidelines joke about writing this formula on the inside of their arm before making a criticism. It should be clear, though, that this formula is only a mechanical scheme. Common sense and practice will tell you which components of a criticism are important at anyone time. Again the formula:

When you do A *(observation),* I feel B *(emotion),* and I want you to do C *(action-want)* because of D *(purpose).*

How to Receive Criticism

Guideline Five
Paraphrasing

In criticism and self-criticism, clarifying my statement of the problem is only part of the work. Unless the criticism is accurately received and understood, the communication is not complete. This fifth skill focuses on how to *receive* criticism in better ways.

Unless people can hear my criticism correctly, it can be very risky to give criticism at all. Once, for instance, I said in a meeting, "Excuse me, Diane, but I'm getting antsy with the length of time you're taking to make that point, and I'd like you to wrap it 'Ipso we can get through the agenda." She replied with shock and hurt, "Oh, I know I'm a bigmouth, everybody tells me that. I'm sorry I bore you." Although I *hadn't* called Diane a bigmouth, if that's the way she *heard* my message, our working relationship is in trouble. That is why I want people to know how to paraphrase, or check out what they heard by saying back the essence in their own words. If Diane had used the skill of paraphrasing, she would have *suspended her own reaction* until she confirmed the accuracy of what she had heard. She might have run back my criticism in this way: "So you're anxious to get through the agenda and you want me to shorten it up, yes?" This would assure both of us that my criticism was getting through the way I intended it. It would also give me a chance to correct any misinterpretation that might have occurred.

Paraphrasing is very different from mechanically parroting what the speaker said, and it should not be done indiscriminately. I paraphrase only under these conditions:

1. When the other person asks me for assurance that I have understood her message, as when someone ends her statement by saying, "Do you know what I mean?"

2. When I'm unclear about what the other person had in mind, and want to check my own understanding of it.
3. When things are starting to get rushed and confused, and I want to slow things down.

It is also important to see the difference between *paraphrasing* and *agreeing.* If I restate a message to see if I have heard it accurately, that does *not* mean that I'm going along with it. To refer to the example used earlier, Diane might first have paraphrased my impatience about how long she was talking and then come back with her own feelings and wants: "Look, Grace, I'm not clear on what I'm trying to say myself, but I want to try to say it out loud to help get it clear in my own head. It's really important to me to figure this out, so I want you to just sit tight for a few more minutes."

Exercise on Guideline Five
Paraphrasing

Here is a list of clear messages that express some combination of observations, feelings, wants, and purpose statements. You might ask a friend to read the sentences out loud, and then you paraphrase what you heard in your own words. This format may be helpful

When I (we) do A *(observation),* do you feel B *(emotion),* and do you want me (us) to do C *(action-want)* because of D *(purpose)?*

In real life it is not likely that you'd jam all this information into one paraphrase. Luckily, if you miss something important, the other person will oftentimes repeat what you left out until you show them that it registered. In the following example, Patty is receiving Gwen's criticism and has to paraphrase repeatedly before she picks up everything that Gwen wants to get across.

Gwen: "Look, Patty, I'm angry that you didn't get that

article in to Steve when you said you would. I'm afraid that the news will be outdated by the time the article gets to LA, and all our work will have been wasted. I sure as blazes wish you'd only sign up for jobs if you're really going to follow through."

Patty: "So you think the article may not be useful any more and you think I should clean up my act, right?" (Gwen paraphrased the purpose and want, but missed the feeling.)

Gwen: "Yeah, I was *really blown* away when Steve told me you got it to him just yesterday. Jane and I spent nearly two days on that article!" (Gwen reiterates her feeling and the observation.)

Patty: "I can really see what a bummer that is. I can dig how you'd be angry about my getting it to him so late. (Patty finally shows that she hears how angry Gwen feels.) Look, let me tell you what happened so we can iron this out."

Since criticisms in the list are pretty clear and concrete, this exercise will be easy for you. The only trick is to avoid parroting, to make sure you paraphrase the message in your own words.

1. I get irritated and rattled when you start talking before I've finished my sentence. I want you to wait till I'm done before you start talking.
2. We're confused and critical about the fact that our group didn't get an invitation to send observers to your organization's national conference. We'd like to know what your reasons were.
3. I'm really pissed off that you didn't show up with the leaflets this morning. Three of us got up at 5:30 am. to do leafleting before work, and we were all really burned.
4. I'm really mistrustful because I've noticed that you criticize the men in *our* caucus for sexism, but you don't have any criticism for the men in *your* group. I'm guessing that your criticism is directed more at our political disagreement than it is toward actual sexist behavior. If that's the case, I think it's really unprincipled, and you people should retract the criticism.

Guideline Six
Empathizing

This focuses exclusively on empathy when receiving criticism, but empathy is also important when giving it.

It would be great if everyone gave criticisms in the clear, concrete way we've been talking about. But since we've all been drilled in categorical and static thinking, this is often not the case. Empathizing is a way to receive vague or one-sided criticism as a statement of the criticizer's observations, feelings, wants and purpose without counterattacking defensively, and without getting wiped out. Using this guideline prevents me from taking criticisms as a personal character judgment, and allows me to learn from any criticism that comes my way.

For example, during an evaluation period at the end of a class session, one student, Ellen, made a strong criticism of me as a teacher. "We're studying alienation in this class," she said, her voice strained and her face red. "Well, I'm alienated, all right! You keep pushing us on, telling us we have to hurry through things—we never really have time to finish one thing out!" I felt a cold flash of fear at the thought of looking bad in front of the whole group; and I was even uneasier because there was a visitor in class that day, someone I respected and wanted to impress. In the few seconds of silence after Ellen's outburst, a flood of thoughts and feelings raced through my head. Part of me wanted to launch a heated defense—anything to preserve my self-image. Somehow I managed to remind myself that I could receive Ellen's message in a way that would help me learn. With an effort, I blocked my habitual defensive impulse and haltingly tried to hear her criticism in terms of observations, feelings, wants and purpose.

"So when I interrupt the small group discussions, Ellen, and say I want us to move on, it's really frustrating because it cuts off the discussion, and you'd like me to ... uh ... you'd like me to ask whether people need more time before I push on? Is that it?"

The balloon of fear inside me collapsed. Hearing Ellen's

criticism in this way made the whole issue seem less enormous. I had disciplined myself to see that the issue did not center around some abstract and static judgment of whether I was a "good teacher" or a "bad teacher", or about whether it was Ellen or I who would come out looking better. The issue was about some *concrete thing I was doing* that Ellen wanted me to understand and change.

In this spirit, the dialogue continued. I told Ellen where I agreed with her, and criticized myself for not making it clear that I was very open to letting people alter the agenda. I also offered some criticism, telling her that I had real trouble with the way she gave her criticism and that I disagreed with her perception that my suggestions had been orders. We also discussed the social root of the misunderstanding:

The negative experience all of us have had with oppressive teacher-student roles. The discussion soon included the whole class, and produced some new understandings and ideas that would involve more people in exercising leadership during our sessions. We had succeeded in doing our criticism in a cooperative rather than a competitive way.

Empathizing was a key factor in the way the incident turned out. By disciplining myself to empathize, I was able to stop my kneejerk defensive reaction. Empathizing also gave the students a chance to see that I really wanted to *hear* the criticism so I could learn from it. This counteracts a punitive dynamic; when someone believes they're being heard, they're more likely to listen in return, and less likely to escalate an attack.

If this had been a situation of more trust and familiarity between my critic and me, I might have been less forbearing about the inflammatory way Ellen delivered her criticism. If a longtime friend had popped off at me the way Ellen did, I might have asked her to back off a little before we went any further: "Whoa, hold on just a minute. Slow down a second and give me an example of what you mean so I can get hold of your criticism. I'm having a hard time with how you're coming on." Empathizing has nothing in common with allowing yourself to get dumped on.

Often when I present the idea of empathizing, people say,

"Yeah, I can see how that would be useful for making sure I hear the criticism, but won't people think I'm trying to patronize them or run a psychological game on them?" How people respond to empathizing depends a lot on the *intention* the empathizer brings to the situation. If I convey that I'm genuinely interested in understanding the criticism, I usually find that people are *grateful* to have someone really listening. Of course, since I'm *guessing* to try to fill out an unclear criticism, there's always the possibility that I'll guess wrong. If I come across as though *I* know better than the other person what she thinks, she would be fully justified in accusing me of manipulation. My tone of voice is important here, in making it clear that I am just *checking out* my understanding for their verification. (Notice the question marks at the end of my guesses!) And clearly, it's important to avoid deliberately mishearing someone as a way of mocking their criticism: I would have been doing this if I had said to Ellen in a sarcastic tone, "So in other words you think I should abdicate all leadership here and just let it flow, huh?"

When I was first learning to empathize, it often seemed agonizingly hard to hold my own response long enough to see if I had even heard the original criticism. My survival training was so engrained that I automatically mobilized in self-defense, even when my rational mind knew that I was with people who had no real interest in hurting me. Just listening somehow seemed like giving ground—if I listened, wouldn't they mistake that for weakness? Working to empathize is a discipline! Then too, if I *did* manage to wait, I would halt and stutter while I tried to get the other person's criticism formulated in my own words. But if anyone accused me of sounding unnatural in this effort, I was prepared to pose the alternative: "Look, it's your choice: Either you can bear with me while I try to listen to you, or we can try it in my natural style—I'll just call you a horse's ass and we'll be done with it." Usually, people choose the first alternative, finding new reserves of patience deep within.

What to Do When the Going Gets Rough

Guideline Seven
Preventing and Handling Defensiveness

Of course, before we face the problem of how to give a criticism most constructively, we have to make the commitment to give the criticism in the first place. All of us know that in the short run it is most comfortable to hold our criticisms or vent them indirectly as gossip. Sending the criticism right to the mark is often scary, no doubt about it. At the same time, all of us know the long-term problems that crop up when conflict goes underground. The original problems persist, tensions mount, and people retreat into themselves or the small group closest to them. The result is illness or death for the organization or relationship—death by apathy or death by blowup, the grand explosion. Mao Tse-tung wrote a very useful three-page essay on the subject called "Combat Liberalism." (See Suggested Readings and Resources.)

Here I'll take up only one aspect of combating liberalism (avoidance of conflict). What's the connection between overcoming liberalism and dealing with defensiveness? In my view, when a person responds defensively to criticism (whether through a hot comeback, sarcasm or avoidance), she teaches her comrades that giving criticism is *dangerous*, thus pushing them back into liberalism. So, disciplining ourselves against reacting defensively, as well as learning how to handle defensiveness in others, are two ways to combat liberalism.

This section will focus on things you can do on the spot to prevent and handle the defensiveness that sometimes comes up, no matter how constructive your original criticism. You can use these suggestions either with someone who has not been politically educated about the negative effects of defensiveness, or with someone who knows better but blew

it. Before we get into the practical ideas, though, let's take a look at the social origins of defensiveness.

From our earliest days we have been subjected to name-calling and labeling. This one is "gifted," that one is a "slow learner" (dummy); this one is "cute," that one is "plain." The sorting process relentlessly divides us into winners and losers, until we are trained to obediently assume our places in the hierarchy. This kind of "criticism" really *is* dangerous; it's used as a weapon against us. It's no wonder, then, that we come to *expect* each other to categorize and call names, and often hear personal attacks even when they aren't intended.

Often too, people will hear *wants* as demands, and bitterly resent what they hear as an order. In my class with Ellen, you'll recall, the students assumed that my wants were an order. This confusion comes from our long experience with dominantsubmissive relationships—if the boss asks, "Do you want to do this piece of work?" you know the only answer he wants to hear. So, in reacting against authoritarian social relations, we may begin to confuse any kind of assertiveness or leadership with domination by an oppressor. Unless this problem is confronted and understood, people may try to avoid the conflict by abdicating all leadership, as when the chairperson of a meeting falls all over herself trying to prove that she is not "too pushy". Yet when leadership spends all its energy walking on eggs to be "diplomatic'; political work often grinds to a halt. Chair: "I think I might like us to maybe do 4 if that's okay with everyone, but on the other hand, we could do Y and I don't know, maybe it's not a good idea, what do you think?"

A third common misinterpretation comes when people hear each other's wants as guilt-trips or obligations. For example:

She says: "I'd like a hug."

He thinks: "Damn, she's accusing me of neglecting her! I suppose I have to give her a hug, even if I'm not in the mood."

He says (variation one): "Oh, all right then." (sigh)

He says (variation two): "Why are you so clingy and dependent?"

If she doesn't know about this dynamic, she may be very confused about what's hit her.

This problem also arises from our experiences with powerlessness. People in subordinate positions are forbidden to exercise power directly. They are forced to resort to a repertoire which includes guilt-tripping, hint-dropping and emotional blackmail. Life with people who have so adapted to their powerlessness can be a hellish game of second-guessmg. People who have had this game played in their vicinity are often gun-shy—and any want, no matter how straightforwardly given, can look like a guilt-trip in disguise.

To summarize: A lot of defensiveness originates not in resistance to the *content* of the criticism, but rather in resistance to what the receiver hears as the *intent* behind the criticism. When someone believes that a criticism is really a personal attack, or a demand, threat or guilt-trip, defensiveness comes to the fore.

On the other hand, some defensiveness is rooted not in misinterpretation, but rather in self-interest. If I'm afraid I have something to lose by changing, I may fall into individualistic self-protection rather than wanting to really understand what is best for the whole. This kind of defensiveness can only be overcome through political education, coming to see the reasons for guarding the interests of the collective above my own individual comfort.

For right now, we'll focus on some practical ideas for preventing and handling the kind of defensiveness that comes from misinterpretation of the criticizer's intentions.

Preventing Defensiveness. If I have reason to believe that a defensive reaction is likely, I can *preface* my criticism with words that try to head the problem off. There are at least two ways to do this.

First, I can ask in advance for the other person to run back or paraphrase what she hears, which will give me a chance to make sure that she's heard my criticism as I intended it. For instance, I might say, "I have some criticism tbat I'm a little tense about giving you. Just to make sure that I'm getting it across the way I want to, I'd like you

to say back what you heard when I'm finished."

Second, I can disclaim the interpretation that I predict is most likely: "I've got some pretty heavy criticisms of the newspaper, Rosa, but I want you to know that they're friendly criticisms; I intend for my feedback to help strengthen the paper."

Identifying a Defensive Reaction. if I'm pretty sure that someone has received my criticism inaccurately, it's important to check this out. "My hunch is that my criticism came across to you as a put-down—is that right?" The answer will give me an idea where the defensiveness is coming from; the question also encourages me to examine my own motives in giving the criticism. *Was* I trying to put the other person down, *was* I giving an order or running a guilt-trip, or was I firm in my intention to protect and educate?

Handling Defensiveness. If someone *did* hear my message inaccurately, I often want to empathize with how they feel and what they want *before* going on to correct them. If someone has a strong reaction to what they think is a putdown, my rational protests often won't save the situation—"Oh, no, you don't understand! That's not what I meant!" So sometimes I begin by acknowledging the reaction they showed when they heard my criticism: "Sounds like you're angry and maybe hurt about what I said. Do you want me to understand the reasons for what you did?" Only when they answer are the signals clear for me to backtrack and clear up the original misperception. If a person has flipped into a defensive reaction, empathizing can be important simply to slow things down.

Once I know that someone has heard my criticism inaccurately, how can I get things back on the track? One way is to ask the person to paraphrase what they heard me say: "I'm still upset that I'm not getting through to you right, so I'd like you to run back what you heard me say." if there's some discrepancy between what I said and what they heard, I can point out the difference: "Bob, I'm hoping that you can see the difference between my saying I think you took the wrong position last night and my saying you were deliberately trying to be opportunistic. Can you see

the difference there?" Particularly if I'm in a long-term or high-stake relationship with someone, I may want to stick with this point until I'm completely satisfied that they got my message right.

I may also choose to ask the person to tell me how I might express my position in a way that's less likely to provoke a defensive reaction next time: "Ian, I'd like you to see the bind we're in if every time I give you a criticism it comes across as a personal put-down. I want you to give me some ideas about what either of us can change so we can break through this problem."

Occasionally I run into a situation where someone *consistently* misunderstands what I say. They've got me so stereotyped that it seems there's nothing I can say that won't fit into their preconception of me and my politics. Some of the cues that warn me I've been pigeonholed are such expressions as "You people always... You never... There you go again... You're just like all the rest of those (women/ men)." In these cases, I may ask the person or group for a way out of the box: "Listen, I'm getting really frustrated that you attribute all my political positions to the fact that I'm working with X organization, because I've already told you that I have my own opinions. What do we need to do to break out of this so that we can talk politics in some kind of good way?"

Of course, no matter how well I give criticism, and no matter how hard I work to deal with defensiveness or prevent it through political education, there are still situations where good criticism and self-criticism seem very unlikely to occur. One organization I know, for instance, holds the political line that it is the vanguard party and that all other leftists are fake leftists. Conducting good mutual criticism with such an organization is probably impossible. At some point, I may reach the decision that the basis of unity between me and another person or organization is not strong enough to make it worth the struggle. In such a situation, the best advice I know is this: "If you can't stop the train, get out of the way.

Exercises on Guideline Seven
Preventing and Handling Defensiveness

1. On preventing defensiveness: Think of a negative or positive criticism you've been postponing giving to someone because you're afraid of how they might take it. Try jotting down how you might preface your message to prevent a possible distortion.

2. On handling defensiveness when it's occurred: Using the examples below, or your own experience, think through what you might say to handle a defensive reaction.

(1) You are Person A. Person B hears a demand.

A: "When people get to the meeting late, we lose a lot of time. I'd like to propose that we all get here fifteen minutes early next time."

B: (sarcastically): "Yes, teacher."

(2) You are A. B hears you laying on an obligation.

A: "I'm really overextended in the rest of my life. Would you be willing to get the mailing done yourself, B, without my working on it?"

B: "Wow, I don't know, I'm really busy too (sigh). Oh well, if it has to be done, I suppose I don't have any choice."

Postscript

The process of criticism and self-criticism is rewarding because it pushes us to change and grow. Yet it's also very difficult. We need all the help we can get—I hope this book serves that purpose.

Appendix A

List of Feeling Words

(This list is from Marshall Rosenberg's book *From Now On,* Community Psychological Consultants, 1970 Gulf Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130,1976.)

Positive

absorbed
adventurous
affection
alert
alive
amazed
amused
animated
appreciated
astonished
blissful
breathless
buoyant
calm
carefree
cheerful
comfortable
composed
concerned
confident
contented
curious
dazzled
delighted
eager
ecstatic
elated
electrified
encouraged
engrossed
enjoyed
enlivened
enthusiastic
exalted
excited
exhilarated
expansive
expectant
exuberant
fascinated
free
friendly
fulfilled
good-humored
grateful
happy
helpful
hopeful
inquisitive
inspired
intense
interested
intrigued
invigorated
involved
joyful
jubilant
keyed-up
loving
merry
mirthful
moved
optimistic
overwhelmed
overjoyed
peaceful

pleasant
proud
quiet
radiant
refreshed
relieved
satisfied
secure
sensitive
spellbound
splendid
stimulated
surprised
tender
thankful
thrilled
touched
tranquil
trust
warm
wide-awake

Negative

afraid
aggravated
agitated
alarm
aloof
angry
anguished
animosity
annoyed
anxious
apathetic
apprehensive
averse
bad
beat
bitter
blah
blue
bored
burned up
breathless
brokenhearted
chagrined
cold
concerned
confused
cross
credulous
critical
dejected
depressed
despair
despondent
detached
disappointed
discouraged
disgruntled
disheartened
disinterested
dislike
dismayed
displeased
disquieted
dissatisfied
distant
distressed
disturbed
down
embittered
exasperated
exhausted
fatigued
fearful
fidgety
flaky
forlorn
frightened
frustrated
furious
gloomy
grief
grumpy
guilty
hate
helpless
hesitant
horrified
horrible
hostile
hot
humdrum
hurt
impatient
indifferent
inert

infuriated
insecure
insensitive
intense
irate
irked
irritated
jealous
jittery
keyed-up
lassitude
lazy
let-down
lethargic
listless
lonely
mad
mean
melancholy
miserable
mopy
pessimistic
pissed off
provoked
puzzled
rattled
reluctant
repelled
resentful
restless
sad
scared
sensitive
shaky
shocked
skeptical
sleepy
sorrowful
sour
spiritless
startled
surprised
suspicious
tepid
terrified
thwarted
tired
troubled
uncomfortable
unconcerned
uneasy
unglued
unhappy
unnerved
unsteady
upset
uptight
weary
withdrawn
woeful
worried
wretched

Appendix B

Criticism/Self-Criticism in the Chinese Revolution

Criticism has been used by revolutionaries as long as there has been a Marxist movement. The tool was developed most deeply, though, in the Chinese Revolution. Originally used only inside the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army, criticism was later popularized for the use of the whole population.

The Chinese placed such great emphasis on criticism because Marxist-Leninist theory told them that to defeat imperialism completely, it would not be enough to revolutionize the economic system and overthrow the oppressive political system; it would be necessary, at the same time, and over many years, to establish the dominance of working-class ideology in all social relations. They saw that class struggle went on not only between the working people and the ruling classes, but also between working people as individuals. China's small-scale peasant economy, as well as centuries of living in a class society, had caused working people to internalize many ideas that would preserve old feudal and colonialist power relationships.

Male supremacy, contempt for manual labor, blind obedience to authority and superstition were heavy burdens on the backs of the Chinese people as they began their national democratic and socialist revolutions. Until the deep divisions inherited from the old society—divisions between town and country, mental and manual work, wage labor in the market and unpaid labor in the home, planners and workers—were thoroughly erased over the decades, there would still exist a material basis for a privileged minority to reestablish domination over the rest. Criticism gave people a way of distinguishing between old ideas which perpetuated class relationships and new ideas that served the revolution.

Criticism was used from the earliest days of the Chinese Communist Party, sometimes taking the form of Rectification Campaigns, periods of intense study and debate within the Party which sometimes lasted more than three years. One such campaign was launched after 1927, when a series of errors had resulted in Chiang Kai-shek's massacre of tens of thousands of Communists, workers, and peasants. The bloodied remnants of the Communist Party gathered to do a thorough self-criticism of their political line. In the process, the erroneous idea of basing the revolution chiefly on China's extremely small industrial proletariat was defeated, and Mao's line of seeing the peasantry as the Chinese revolution's main force was consolidated. during the course of the debate, the policy of confiscating the holdings of middle peasants and merchants (which had only served to drive these intermediate forces into the arms of the enemy) was exposed as an error. Finally, the Party summed up the bitter lesson they had learned about making the wrong political alliances.

Another Rectification Campaign focused on principles of unity. By eagerly allying itself with Chiang's Kuomintang Party (KMT) in order to resist the Japanese invaders, the Communist Party gave up much of its power and was helpless when the KMT turned its guns against its former allies. Ten years later Mao wrote "Combat Liberalism," to remind people of the extreme danger of sacrificing political principles out of the desire for unity.

Later Rectification Campaigns focused on methods of work. Just before the Communist Party gained control of much of the country in the late 1940s, Mao led a movement to "clean up and shake up" a top-heavy Party bureaucracy that was starting to stifle the elected mass organizations in the liberated zones of China. Later Mao advocated the policy of "opening wide," that is, asking non-party members to freely criticize Party cadres. "To open wide means to let all people express their opinions freely, so that they dare to speak, dare to criticize, and dare to debate; it means not being afraid of wrong views and anything erroneous; it means to encourage argument and criticism among people having different views, allowing freedom both for criticism and

countercriticism: it means not suppressing wrong views but convincing people by reasoning with them."[13] Mao invited a constant fight against bureaucracy and ossification when he proclaimed, "Anyone, no matter who, may criticize us, because we serve the people."

A second form of criticism was ideological education campaigns in the army. The soldiers alternated between periods of fighting and periods of criticism/self-criticism. When the guerillas encamped, everything was thrown open for debate. "Not only were battles and campaigns discussed," writes Han Suyin in her biography of Mao, "but the individual conduct of any commander or fighter could be criticized. The inarticulate peasant thus learned to think, to express himself; he became responsible, valuing his own worth as a member of a great revolutionary company."[14]

Because the Party was composed of the most dedicated and politically developed people in the country, and because of its principles of organization, it could use criticism in the very deepest ways. Democratic centralism meant that once a policy was decided, it would be carried out in a thorough and disciplined way, thus insuring a real basis for evaluation. It also meant that experiences from all over China could be gathered and synthesized by the central leadership and sent back to the lower levels for full democratic discussion and correction. By the time the Party had determined a policy or summed up its practice for a certain period, the ideas and experiences of thousands of people had been synchronized into the richest criticism possible.

Whenever the Party worked, the masses of workers and peasants would receive training in criticism. Often villagers would be asked to criticize the Party members working in their locale. In an unprecedented challenge to feudal notions of authority, mass meetings were set up where the villagers would conduct thorough investigations into the revolutionary practice of each Party cadre. In "passing the gate," each Party member was helped to identify and overcome her shortcomings, and received invaluable feedback from the people she served and led.

Over the years, criticism was spread more and more widely

as a method for resolving every kind of contradiction among the people. While the Party understood that conflicts between the people and their class enemies could not usually be resolved without force, it classified 95 percent of the Chinese population as having a fundamental common interest in revolution. Among the people, Mao emphasized that struggle should be carried out through the democratic method of patient persuasion, and out of a "wholehearted desire to protect and educate." After the consolidation of power in 1949 the Chinese revolutionaries used criticism to resolve their differences with the remaining capitalist elements in China and to reform common criminals and counter-revolutionaries.

Enormous ideological education movements, involving daily political study sessions for millions of people, popularized the principles of Marxism-Leninism among the masses, so that they could use criticism themselves, learning to identify the roots of errors.

William Hinton gives us this account of a criticism session among a mutual-aid team in the countryside. Li, an intellectual, began with a self-criticism:

"I quarreled with Lao Chang the other day... I thought, 'He is always getting in the way. He is so slow.' So I spoke to him sharply. That was wrong. I should have patiently explained [how to use the tractor] instead. My trouble is individualism."

"Yes," said a peasant. "Sometimes you act like a landlord. One would think you thought you were better than other people. You must realize that your education was made possible by others' hard work. For every one who studies, hundreds must sweat in the fields. There is no particular merit to being a student. If things had been the other way around anyone might have done the same as you. So you should really think about it

It has to do with your [class] outlook."[15]

A second example of the use of criticism and self-criticism among the people was described by Barbara Ehrenreich, who

visited the dockworkers of Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution:

> [Our party] met with both sides-the chairman of the dock's revolutionary committee (who had been a target of criticism) and a group of rank-and-file representatives including Fang Tien Rin, the young worker who had written the first big-character poster of the rebellion. If there had been any hard feelings before, they were no longer in evidence. Everyone, from the chairman on down, was impatient to tell his or her part of the story. Fang ran down the grievances which had emerged from the workers' early meetings to criticize Lin Piao and Confucius: "For a period before the Movement to Criticize Lin Piao and Confucius began, the leadership ~f the docks] concentrated all its efforts on managing production to the neglect of doing political and ideological work among the workers ... The leadership was only interested in loading and unloading freighters and in tonnage, while forgetting to grasp the most important thing...
>
> "I will give you an example. Some of the leaders resorted to material incentives to speed up production. They did this in a disguised form. [All overt material incentives had been eliminated during the Cultural Revolution.] They encouraged workers to work faster so that if you finished your work you could just go home-no matter what time it was. They did not bring into full play the workers' enthusiasm for building socialism.
>
> "Another example: Some leaders praised or rewarded in one way or another workers who fulfilled their quotas on schedule, no matter how they filled it, so that some workers just neglected the [safety] rules. So that, in actual fact, these leaders did not care for the safety of the masses. Also, some leaders shut themselves up indoors, making plans instead of consulting the masses.
>
> "We think that we longshoremen are the masters of the dock. It's our duty to keep the leaders on the correct

line and make sure we advancealong the revolutionary path... So we put up posters saying 'Be Masters of the Dock, not Slaves of the Tonnage.' "[16]

Footnotes

1. Amilcar Cabral *Revolution in Guinea* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), pp.91-92.
2. Quote from Engels, in Robert Freedman, *Marxist Social Thought* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p.31.
3. "The Damned," *Lessons from the Damned: Class Struggle in the Black Community* (New York: Times Change Press, 1972), p.19.
4. Allyn and Adele Rickett, *Prisoners of Liberation* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1973), p.291.
5. Rickett, *Prisoners of Liberation,* p.292.
6. David Hunter, "Organizing for Revolution in Viet Narn," *Raidical America,* September 1974, p.100.
7. Hunter, "Organizing for Revolution in Viet Nam," p.100.
8. Richard Sennet and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden lnjuries of Class* (New York: Random House ~mtage, 1973), p.157.
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10. *Psychosources* (out of print), p.108.
11. Studs Terkel, *Working* (New York: Avon, 1975), pp.398-99.
12. Terkel, *Working,* pp.59, 65.
13. Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1971), p.93.
14. Han Suyin, *The Morning Deluge* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), p.199.
15. William Hinton, *Iron Oxen* (New York: Random House, 1971), p.21.
16. Barbara Ehrenreich, "Democracy in China," *Monthly Review,* September 1974, pp.26-27.

Suggested Readings and Resources

Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tse-tung* especially "On Practice," "On Contradiction," "Combat Liberalism," "On the Correct Handiing of Contradictions Among the People," (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1971). On dialectical materialism and its application to criticism/self-criticism.

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Marshall Rosenberg, *A Model for Nonviolent Communication* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1983). Avallable from The Center for Nonviolent Communication, 3229 Bordeaux, Sherman, TX 75090.

Ann Tompkins, with whom I led workshops just prior to the first publication of this book. has continued to develop theory and applications for criticism/self-criticism. Anyone who would like to contact her for additional information regarding her materials and workshops may do so by writing her at 1725 Sextonview Lane, Sebastopol, CA 95472.

Mario Roberto Santucho, *Notes on Revolutionary Morals*, published by the Movirniento de Liberacion Nacional Puertoriquena, Rebeldia Publications, Box 233, 2520 N. Lincoln Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60614.

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