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Being Critical

From the Greek *kritikos* ‘a judge,’ being critical is the act of expressing adverse or disapproving comments or judgments. In addition to *being critical*, you can get yourself into a *critical situation*, win *critical acclaim*, and be in *critical condition*. And nuclear reactors can go *critical*—that is, if they’re working correctly.

Criticism is either constructive or destructive. Constructive criticism is meant to help someone improve by giving them honest feedback. The challenge is to give the feedback in a way that people will accept it. Even well intentioned criticism is often taken as mean-spirited, particularly if it focuses on the person instead of their actions or if the language is insulting or degrading. Although it can be done, constructive criticism is hard to give and even harder to receive in even the best circumstances.

Destructive criticism is much more common. People dish it out to boost their egos and hurt others by rating them against arbitrary standards. People who do the criticizing are usually frustrated, jealous, angry, feeling taken advantage of, or lacking self-confidence. They project their unhappiness onto others through their criticism.

Somewhere, sometime, someone has likely said to you, “You don’t know what you’re doing.” That’s not constructive. A better way to say it would be, “You look like you might be having some trouble. Can I give you a hand?” Feel the difference? The words and the message are supportive, not judgmental. Try that approach the next time you want to give someone feedback.

Being Critical Dos and Don'ts

- Handle both giving and getting constructive criticism with kid gloves. It takes finesse to give and understanding to receive feedback, a.k.a. constructive criticism.
- Be on the lookout for destructive criticism. It chips away at your self-esteem.
- If you dish out destructive criticism, stop. You're not doing anyone a favor.

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