



# How Self-Aware Leaders Deal with Criticism and Negative Comments

By John C. Maxwell

**Leadership means going first, standing out, taking risks, trying to take ground.**

J O H N C . M A X W E L L

One of the prices of leadership is receiving criticism. Leadership means going first, standing out, taking risks, trying to take ground. Others notice you, and not everyone will agree with how you lead.

As a young leader I liked leading. I liked being out front and being noticed. I enjoyed the praise of the people. However, I didn't want to put up with anybody's "constructive criticism." Very quickly I learned that I had unrealistic expectations. No leader, no matter how good, gets only praise (and I certainly wasn't good when I got started).

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If you want to be a leader, you need to get used to criticism, because whether you fail or succeed, you will be criticized. Some of the criticism will be deserved. If you receive it with grace and learn from it, you will benefit. Other criticism will be unfair. Some people will always find something to be unhappy about, and the way they criticize others, you'd think they got paid for it! But you need to respond well to that kind of criticism too.

## HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH CRITICISM TODAY?

Not everyone handles criticism the same way. Some try to ignore it. Some try to defend themselves against it. Others, like the salesman, use a witty remark to put a critic in his place. But no matter what, if you are a leader, you will have to deal with criticism. And if you can do it with grace, people will respect you.

## 4 WAYS SELF-AWARE LEADERS DEAL WITH CRITICISM

Since all leaders have to deal with negativity and criticism, regardless of position or profession, it's important for them to learn to handle it constructively.

Greek philosopher Aristotle said, "Criticism is something you can avoid easily—by saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing."

However, that isn't an option for anyone who wants to be successful as a leader. So what do you do? The following four-step process has helped me deal with criticism, so I pass it on to you.

### 1. **Know yourself - This is a reality issue**

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Since you know you will be criticized as a leader, what should you do? First, have a realistic view of yourself. That will lay a solid foundation for you to handle criticism successfully.

Self-awareness is your friend. Here's why. When a leader is being criticized, it's often really the leadership position that prompts the negative remarks, not the individual leader. You need to be able to separate the two, and you can do that only when you know yourself. If a criticism is directed at the position, it's not personal. You should let it roll off of you.

## 2. **Change yourself - This is a responsibility issue**

To be more self-aware as a leader, I need to examine criticism objectively, no matter how it's delivered.

Here are the questions I ask to get to determine what kind of criticism it is:

- **Who criticized me?** Adverse criticism from a wise person is more to be desired than the enthusiastic approval of a fool. The source often matters.
- **How was it given?** I try to discern whether the person was being hostile or judgmental, or whether he gave me the benefit of the doubt and spoke with kindness.
- **Why was it given?** Was it given out of a personal hurt or for my benefit? Hurting people hurt people; they lash out or criticize to try to make themselves feel better, not to help the other person. But criticism can also come because people are genuinely trying to help.

Constructive criticism is always easier to accept. But even destructive criticism needs to be mined for truth. And when I determine that someone's criticism about me is accurate, then I have a responsibility to do something to address it.

## 3. **Accept yourself - This is a maturity issue**

Accepting yourself is a sign of maturity.

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If you worry too much about what other people think of you, it's because you have more confidence in their opinion than you have in your own. Or you're trying to hide who you really are. But if you know and admit your weaknesses, and you know your strengths and work within them, you can be yourself with confidence.

And as executive coach and consultant Judith Bardwick says, "Real confidence comes from knowing and accepting yourself—your strengths and limitations—in contrast to depending on affirmation from others."

#### 4. **Forget yourself - This is a security issue**

The final step in the process of effectively handling criticism is to stop focusing on yourself. When we were growing up, a lot of us spent a good deal of time worrying about how the world saw us. Now that I'm over seventy, I realize the world really was never paying much attention. Secure people forget about themselves so they can focus on others. By doing this, they can face nearly any kind of criticism—and even serve the critics.

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