

# CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM ISN'T A THING

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Dear Reader,

We're going to play a game. I have this insatiable need to tell you something that really bothers me about you. And in telling you this, it's going to help you get better. Ya know...it's **constructive criticism!**

*You never pay attention and you make too many mistakes.*

What's your first reaction to hearing this? If you're human, which most of us are, your first reaction is probably defensive. You will think of all the ways this statement just isn't true. Have you ever had somebody say something completely mean to you, and then try to soften it? Maybe **that** could be constructive. Let's try that.

*NO OFFENSE, but you never pay attention and you make too many mistakes.*

How does that feel? Offensive? But I said NO offense! Lighten up, will ya? How about I soften it with some humor?

*NO OFFENSE, but you never pay attention and you make too many mistakes. LOL!*

No? Didn't help?

How about I soften it using Dale Carnegie's "poo sandwich" strategy, where you put the criticism in the middle of two positive things?

*Our customers like you, but you never pay attention and you make too many mistakes. Keep up the good work!*

At best, this is incredibly confusing. Do you suck? Or are you amazing?

**Criticism** is defined as "the expression of disapproval of someone or something based on perceived faults or mistakes." **Constructive** is defined as "serving a useful purpose; tending to build up." These two terms are, by nature, oxymoronic. You can't just call criticism constructive, and make it so. Like jumbo shrimp or honest politician. It is impossible to express disapproval while tending to build up.

Marriage Expert John Gottman calls criticism and defensiveness “horsemen of the apocalypse” that lead to divorce and misery in marriage. Whether you like it or not, your workplace is kind of an arranged marriage of people who wouldn’t necessarily associate with each other. So you might as well make the best of it.

One question you want to ask yourself before any interaction with someone is:

**What’s The Function?**

What do **you** want to get out of this?

What do you want **them** to get out of this?

If the function of your constructive criticism is for you to let off some steam, I have some criticism for you. That’s **your** thing, not theirs. Deal with **your** thing.

If the function is to build them up, **get on the same team**. This person is not your adversary. You are teammates. Be direct in defining the specific issue or issues. Ask questions to figure out what’s missing.

*Hey, the last few times you filled out this form, the blankity blank was omitted. I used to have trouble with that too. Here’s what I did to overcome that. Do you think that would work for you, or do you have any other ideas?*

How does that feel? It’s kind of hard to react defensively to that, isn’t it?

People are their own worst critics. People need to be made aware of their omissions, but the only compelling reason to pile onto that is to make yourself feel better. Focus on the constructive. Everything negative that happens creates an opportunity for constructive improvement if we can avoid the criticism/defensiveness loop. And that starts by accepting that constructive criticism isn’t a thing.