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GETTING THE CRITICAL EDGE

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The ability to take criticism has been identified as a key attribute of effective CEOs, executives and managers, to say nothing of how it affects our personal lives. Yet, most people find being criticized one of the most stressful parts of their job, and research indicates that most individual respond to criticism in nonproductive ways.

This presentation will focus on the art of taking criticism and will offer specific strategies that enable one to use criticism to his/her own advantage. Specifics will include:

- How to appraise the validity of criticism
- Dealing with the destructive critic
- Strategies for handling critical customers and clients
- How to keep yourself from becoming defensive
- Fail-safe techniques for changing your own behavior
- Getting the critical edge

MS. DAPHNE BARTLETT: A few days ago, somebody asked me who my best boss was. The name will remain a secret. But the person was the first one who told me I wasn't perfect. The interview was painful, but the feedback was invaluable. Since then I've been criticized a lot. It still hurts, and it still helps. Our guest speaker is going to talk to us about receiving criticism. Dr. Hendrie Davis Weisinger is a licensed psychologist, the originator of Criticism Training, and a leading authority in the area of anger management. It's going to be interesting, right? He teaches at UCLA in the Executive Education and MBA programs, and at other leading business schools. And he's conducted workshops and seminars for many Fortune 500 companies and government agencies, including the CIA. His latest book is *The Critical Edge: How To Criticize Up and Down Your Organization and Make It Pay Off*. His articles have appeared in many national magazines and newspapers, and he's been a guest expert on many TV shows including "Oprah Winfrey." I can see all those imaginations just running wild. To tell us about getting the critical edge, Dr. Hank Weisinger.

DR. HENDRIE DAVIS WEISINGER: It's a pleasure to be here. I see that it's 1:30 p.m. If you're here with your spouse, I might already be too late, because criticism has probably already disturbed you since you woke up. To go with that point, let me ask a quick question, just to cut to the chase, and please be honest, a show of hands will do it. How many people come home from work each day, say to your spouse or call up a friend and make the comment, "Gee, I had a great day today, I got criticized." Anybody? Anybody want to tell me how great your marriage is because of the way your spouse is always criticizing you? Or how great your childhood was, because of the way your parents gave you criticism? And just from the giver's point of view, if you are like most parents, believe me, every time you criticize your kids, you're probably chipping away at their self-esteem. I have

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been involved in this subject of criticism actually for all my life, but formally, for about 10 years. And what I have found is that most people find criticism, especially taking criticism, one of the most distressful parts of their job.

A few of us really know how to respond productively to it, which is what we're going to talk about, and few of us ever actually seek it out, which is going to be one of the main points that I am going to drive home. You really have to develop an aggressive attitude of looking to be criticized.

When we think of criticism, it's almost as if somebody is throwing a knife at us. Suppose somebody takes a knife and throws it at you. Most likely, your first reaction is not going to be just to stand there, but to literally duck and dodge. Of course, if they have another knife, they are going to keep throwing it at you, and you're going to keep ducking and dodging. Some people will actually retaliate. You know, if you visualize yourself in an alley, and it's a life-or-death situation, and somebody throws a knife at you, and you know they're going to come and get you, you're going to pick up that knife and you're going to retaliate. This is what I want you to remember as a metaphor; that most of us respond to criticism as though somebody is throwing a knife at us. First reaction: duck and dodge.

Of course, your life is now miserable, because you're going to work and visiting with your customers and clients, ducking and dodging, and it's going to keep coming, and eventually, on some type of performance appraisal, some type of recommendation, somebody is going to write, "This person cannot take supervision, especially criticism." Some people do retaliate, "You were going to say something negative about me? I must say something negative about you." You see that in domestic relationships all the time. The wife can say to her husband, "Will you tuck in your shirt, you look like a slob." The guy gets a little bit defensive. Within three minutes you'll hear, "Are you going to wear that dress tonight? Gee, it looks like you gained 10 pounds." And before they're out of the room, the situation escalates.

There are sex differences between men and women, in terms of how they respond to criticism, and I'll get to that soon, but some people just do stand there. And they take the criticism to heart, and they become totally demoralized, and so long self-esteem. There is another way, though, to respond to the knife, and that is to catch it. To look at that edge and to start to think, I can either use this knife to slash myself up and literally kill myself, or I can use that edge to carve something better out of myself. And that's what I like to call the critical edge; learning how to convert negative criticism to respond positively. Believe me, for the rest of your life, you are going to be criticized. I'm not talking about the word *feedback*, because to me that begs the issue. I want you to remember to call criticism criticism. Anytime you couch the phrase under coaching or counseling, which are totally different processes, or feedback, it begs the issue. Because you have to start to think of criticism differently. I'm going to tell you exactly how you can start to do that, but first, let me back up by telling you the most important concept. It's called taking action.

You must take action on things that we are going to talk about. Otherwise, nothing is going to change. I used to do a lot of therapy work and I used to find that patients would come in to see me or any of my friends, colleagues, and they would be lousing up their lives and they didn't know why. Now I would call these people

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unconsciously incompetent. They're lousing up their lives; they don't know why. Then, after a few weeks of therapy, these people would develop insight. Now they are consciously incompetent. Now they're lousing up their lives, they know why, but nothing has changed. And nothing has changed because they haven't taken action. You have to implement. We all know that you cannot take Jane Fonda's home video, stick it in your VCR, lie in bed and expect to get in shape. You have to do it. So as we go through and I start to say, "Now here's how you can take action," that is what you need to do.

Most of you have probably 30 years under your belt of responding to criticism, in very destructive ways. And most of you, also, have about 30 years of giving criticism in very destructive ways. If you take action, you can do something about it. And the reason I say that is so important, is that there is now a whole line of academic research that indicates that the ability to give and take criticism productively is a key attribute of effective CEOs, managers, executives, supervisors, and line employees, to say nothing about how it affects our personal lives. In fact, Donald Michenbaum, a very famous clinical psychologist at the University of Waterloo, has recently told me that he has found that the number one factor that puts people back in the hospital, when they are depressed, is their inability to respond to destructive critical comments from their support staff. So this is a subject that not only affects how you perform on the job, but also in personal relationships. It is a parenting skill; it is a job skill; it is really a peak performance skill. Actually, it isn't a peak performance skill, it's a competency skill because I take the position, you cannot even be competent on the job if you cannot be responsive to criticism.

Now I know that if I were to poll the audience and ask why you don't say you had a great day today because you got criticized, I would hear things like, it hurts your self-esteem, it makes you feel bad, sometimes it makes you angry, you feel like you're not as good as you thought you were, and you don't come up to somebody else's expectations. And a large reason you react that way is because of your definition of criticism.

The first thing that must happen in order to make criticism work for you, is you literally have to change how you mentally think about it. Because people have trouble responding to criticism for two major reasons. One, they think negatively about it and two, it hurts. Don't think negatively about it. You know, from the giver's point of view, when I criticize somebody, I expect the person to thank me. Because my attitude, when I criticize somebody, is that I am teaching them appropriate skills and knowledge. That is my task. That's how I want you to be thinking anytime you give criticism. You are teaching appropriate skills and knowledge. If I have to go criticize somebody, why would I feel anxious if I think I'm teaching appropriate skills and knowledge? This will allow me to criticize somebody in a way that's going to help develop them, motivate them, educate them. On the other hand, if I think that their criticism is negative, of course, I might find it embarrassing, I might find it anxiety-arousing to have to be criticized, because mentally I'm telling myself that I'm telling a person that they did something wrong. So always think from the giver's point of view, think of criticism as a task. Again, it is teaching appropriate skills and knowledge.

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Now from the taker's point of view, please make this assumption. For the rest of your life, you will be given criticism and it will probably be done in a very critical and destructive way. It doesn't matter. I'm telling you this. You are going to be criticized destructively. Now that you know you are going to be criticized destructively, I want you to ask yourself, what's the best way for you to respond? Defensively? Making excuses? Retaliating? That is never in your best interest. Or productively? Responding productively to destructive criticism does not mean, "You're right, I agree." It means, "Tell me how to do it better. Give me examples. Tell me solutions." What we will see is how you can train somebody to give you criticism productively. See, I'm not saying have a positive, Pollyannaish attitude. That would be a little different. That would be that you're driving home tonight and you come to a red light and with a positive attitude you drive through it. I'm not saying that. I'm saying, given the fact that you are going to be criticized, it is only in your best interest to learn how to deal with it in a way that can enhance your behavior. And this is the first thing. When somebody criticizes you, again, no matter how destructively it is given, you have to mentally train yourself to hear it as information that can help you grow.

You know, most of us think of criticism as a four-letter word. Basically, we react as though somebody is throwing four-letter words at us. They are: GROW. You learn new skills about yourself. You learn how to develop and believe me, it makes your relationships that much better, that much more effective interpersonally. Now, the process of taking criticism productively doesn't happen overnight. You know, I'm pleased to be here, but for the most part, again, I'm giving you some insight into the criticism process. What you're going to have to do to really make criticism productive, is go through a four-step process.

And the first step is learning how to think of criticism differently. You have to change your thoughts. You need to take 3x5 cards, for example, and write down criticism information that can help you grow and you need to put them in highly visible places. Put them on your desk. Put that card on your night table or in your car. You have to give yourself a signal that there are different ways of thinking about criticism.

If you were taking a guitar lesson, and the guitar teacher said you were using the wrong chords or something, would you take that guitar and smash him over the head with it? You wouldn't. You might feel like that, but I know you wouldn't. And if you were taking a tennis lesson, and the tennis instructor told you to bend your knees a little more, so you could get better lift on the ball on your backhand, to get it over the net, you would not take your racket and smash it over his head. Now think of this. When you take a lesson, you are actually paying hard earned money for somebody to criticize you. You're paying somebody to criticize you. What I always want you to remember, is that at work, people are going to do it for free. You see? It's the same thing. Criticism is like a commodity, but we don't know what to do with it. We don't know how to use it to invest in ourselves. So this first point here is, you literally have to change your definition of criticism, and that is not going to happen overnight.

One concrete thing you can do is to write down a new definition of criticism. Incidentally, the dictionary defines criticism as "an evaluation of positives and negatives." We think of criticism too much as being critical. Now the dictionary will

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define critical as flaw finding, telling a person that they did something wrong. Most of the time, when we're actually trying to give somebody criticism, I have found that we are actually being critical. So again, to change your definition, you can do a couple of things. One, write down on a 3x5 card, criticism is information that can help me grow. Two, seek it out. You must develop an aggressive attitude of looking to be criticized.

I do training for the Hyatt Corporation in Maui and Honolulu. All right, it's a rough job, but somebody has to go there. I was checking out of the hotel, and I see one of those little cards that are in restaurants and hotels, where it says, "Give us your comments." Well, the clerk says to me, "Sir, as long as you have a few minutes, could you fill out this card, so we know how we are doing?" That to me is a wonderful example of having an aggressive attitude; seeking it out, looking for it. Very few of you go to work looking to be criticized. Very few of you go up to your boss and say, "Boss, criticize me. Tell me how to do it better." I'm not saying, "Boss, criticize me and tell me what I'm doing wrong." That would be masochistic. But rather, "Tell me how to do it better." When was the last time that any of you sat down with your spouse and said, "Spouse, tell me how I can be a better husband. How can I be a better wife?" When was the last time you sat down with your kids and said, "How can I be a better mother? How can I be a better father?" You must develop an aggressive attitude, and I'm not saying that it feels good. Criticism might never feel good. We'll get to that point. But nevertheless, it is a necessity. So in order to start the process of changing your definition of criticism, I'm telling you concretely, your action is to write down information that can help you grow.

Mental rehearsal becomes another strategy. Visualize yourself. Many of you have to undergo performance appraisals, for example. Visualize that. Visualize your boss criticizing you very destructively. See yourself responding productively. Visualize your spouse giving you destructive criticism which, for most of you, will be very easy to do. And I'm telling you, see yourself responding appropriately. So you can mentally rehearse the situation, which is a very powerful technique. You can, again, write things down, and you can aggressively seek it out.

Now the truth is, no matter how many mind games we play with the concept of criticism, it still hurts. Criticism still hurts. It hurts our feelings. And I have found clinically, that the reason for that is that it makes us vulnerable. You see, most of us like to think that we are perfect and that we are doing everything great in our lives. And of course, when somebody criticizes us, it points out that, hey, we're not perfect. Instead of seeing it though as you're not perfect, what I want you to see is that you are in the process of developing. See yourself as sort of a rough circle and all that criticism is going to do is smooth you out. But we get so defensive, because we hear it as a personal attack on our own ego. And we start to talk to ourselves irrationally. Gee, if my boss tells me that my work is sloppy, the first thought that comes to my mind is, I'm in trouble. There goes my promotion. What are my coworkers going to think? If your spouse criticizes you, it's very easy to start saying to yourself, "Well gee, he or she doesn't love me." So as a result, we tend to get defensive. How many times have you criticized somebody and you point out, "Hey, you're getting defensive." Now I want you to think of that word *defensive*. It is healthy to get defensive. There are different ways. You know, I could say defensiveness is a coping strategy and oh, now coping sounds a little more positive. When

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somebody criticizes you, you get defensive, because you are defending your self-esteem, and you start to perceive criticism as an attack. Of course, you're going to get defensive. But as we're going to see, there are good ways to get defensive, and there are bad ways to get defensive.

You have to make yourself vulnerable. In the 1980s, in my opinion, vulnerability had no place in the working environment. You know, everything was the killer attitude. Be harsh. The bottom line is everything. As we go into the 1990s, I think we can all conclude that that philosophy certainly did not work. We know the state of the economy is not a robust situation, because there are foreign economies that are doing far better. And I think a lot of that harshness and lack of vulnerability needs to come back into the work environment in the 1990s. You have to give yourself practice in becoming vulnerable.

And there are a couple of concrete activities you can do. One simple thing that you can do is go out and try things that you know you're not going to be perfect in. I remember one time I had a client, she was a young lady, and she never wanted to do anything. Somebody would call her up and invite her to play tennis, and her basic attitude was: "I'll look like a fool. I'll be terrible." Now the consequence of that is she ended up being by herself, stagnating, and never developing herself. Anytime you start a new activity, you know that you're not going to be perfect in it. But what happens is, I believe, we live in a society that is so performance oriented, that we have lost our pleasure. You ask somebody if they play tennis or golf and their first comment is, "Well, yeah, but I'm not that good at it." As if the performance is the only thing. Whether it's writing a song, writing a poem, cooking something, trying a new type of sport, give yourself permission not to be perfect, because it allows you to be a little more vulnerable. There's nothing wrong with being vulnerable.

The fear of being vulnerable inhibits you many times from even speaking up and saying your own mind. You know, a very famous psychologist, Carl Rogers, wrote an article and it was called "Barriers to Interpersonal Communication." And in that article, he identified that the biggest barrier to interpersonal communication is the fear that what you say will be negatively evaluated by other people. Which means that you hold on to your thoughts, because gee, if I say this, everybody else is going to jump on me and they'll say that I'm stupid. I see social situations all the time. You go out to a movie with four friends, and you think it was the worst movie you ever saw. And the other three people say it was the greatest movie. I guarantee, you're not going to say it was the worst movie. You might say, "Well, it wasn't that good!" But you're not going to say it was terrible because that makes you again, vulnerable. Anytime you speak for your own reference point, you set yourself up to be evaluated by other people. Now I want you to realize that withholding your own thoughts and feelings, because of the fear that other people will think less of you, is one of the great neurotic traits.

Now I don't do therapy anymore. But when I did, I thought I was pretty good. Good to the point where I could sort of identify neurotics from a hundred yards away. Okay? I'm serious. And it's really nice, as I look out here, I see that nobody fits into that category. So I know, even in this large group, if somebody has a question, they are going to actually raise their hand. And you should feel free, incidentally, to raise

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your hand at any particular time, because I really want to meet your needs. You have to make yourself vulnerable by giving yourself practice in things that you know are not perfect. Also I found clinically another way to make yourself vulnerable is to say positive things to other people. Most of us do not say positive things to other people. We don't give specific positives. Even when we criticize, we negate the positives. We might start out by saying, "You're doing a great job," and you know the word *but* is quickly going to follow. And then we tell the person the negatives. So I have found that giving a person positive feelings generates positives. Positives breed positives. When you look at the study of what successful people in marriage do, you will see that there is a high incidence of positive comments to each other. On the other hand, negatives breed negatives. I think the beauty of giving positives to another person is that it comes back to you and you can start to appreciate yourself a little more.

So again, I'm saying that to start off this process of making criticism productive, you have to change your definition and you have to make yourself more vulnerable. Now I am up here telling you that criticism can lead to new skills. You can develop yourself by responding productively to criticism, but that doesn't mean that anytime somebody criticizes you, you have to accept it! The question is, Is it valid? And I am going to define valid criticism simply as, is it in your best interest to do something about it? If the criticism is in your best interest to do something about it, I think the truth is, you'd have to be crazy not to do something about it, because it is in your best interest.

Now one of the things that I learned in graduate school, studying to be a psychologist, is that people are like rabbits. Now visualize this. It's a beautiful sunny day, and Mr. Rabbit is walking down the street. And he comes up to a big green, grassy bush. And he stops for a second. And on the other side of that bush he hears a rattle. What do you think the rabbit does? Do you think the rabbit says, "Gee, I wonder if that rattle is from a rattlesnake? And if it is a rattlesnake, I wonder if it's in a hostile mood. And if it is in a hostile mood, I wonder if it's going to strike out at me and will it be long enough to get its fangs into the right section of my leg?" Or, do you think the rabbit just hears the rattle, jumps to the conclusion that it's a rattlesnake and as the animal behaviorist would say, "bolts out of there." You know that that's what the choice is. The rabbit just bolts out of there. Now, maybe it wasn't really a rattlesnake. Maybe it was the leaves rustling in the wind. Maybe it was a friendly rattlesnake. Maybe it was a baby playing with a rattle. The rabbit will never know because it bailed out too early.

People are like rabbits when it comes to criticism. Somebody starts to criticize you and just like the rabbit, you zip out. And therefore, you lose the opportunity to potentially develop yourself. You will always bail out of a criticism encounter if you hold onto the belief that criticism means that you're a bad person, that you did something wrong. You need, again, to change that. And if you can change it, then you can start to appraise the criticism. Now when I say appraise the criticism, I mean assess it. How do you know criticism is really in your best interest? What are the criteria that you use mentally to decide whether the criticism is really valid? You know, you might be speaking to somebody and they might say, "You know, you're really talking over my head. This is much too technical. You're giving me a bunch of jargon." It's very easy to say, "This person is really stupid. I am talking in a simple

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way. And I'm just that much smarter than them." Rather, listen to what the person is really saying.

There's criteria that I would really like you to start to think about, anytime somebody gives you criticism. And the first, of course, is how important is the information? You have to measure it. Think of a scale from one to seven. If somebody criticizes you, how important is it? Now the criticism might be valid. I have an office in my house. Somebody can certainly come over to my house, and they can look at my office and say to me, "You know, you're a real slob!" You know what? I agree. I am a real slob. But I don't care. It is not important to me to go around cleaning up my office and putting papers in neat piles and so on. I know where everything is. Now I'm not getting defensive. Defensiveness would be, "No, I disagree; it's because I work here and my kids are always here messing things up. That's why." Then I'm making excuses. What I'm really saying is, "You are right, I am a slob but I don't care. It doesn't bother me." You've got to think of how important the information is, because every criticism you get is not necessarily going to be important. And you know, if something is not important to you, then you're not going to be motivated to do something about it.

Two, I want you to think of the source of the criticism. Now I have found the basic mistake people make when they evaluate the source of the criticism, is they ask, do I respect the person? Respect actually has nothing to do with it. I've gotten some of the best criticism in my life from people who I do not respect, but they were qualified. And that's the key. Anytime somebody criticizes you for something, I want you to ask yourself, is the person qualified to give me this criticism? The more qualified that person is, the more credible that criticism is, and you can start to think, the more it is in your best interest to do something about it.

Your wife or your husband does not have the right to criticize you about your job, unless of course, he or she is in the same business. I used to see it clinically all the time, with both males and females. They'd come in and they'd be devastated because their spouse would be telling them that they were not good in their particular job. But their spouse knew nothing about their job. Now you can start to see what happens. Let's say that the importance of the criticism is not great unless the source of the criticism is your boss. All of a sudden it becomes a little more important. So any criteria that you have mentally, is not to be thought of individually. It's a whole bunch of things and incidentally, you can have your own list of criteria. I'm just telling you you have to have something. See the whole point of appraising a criticism is so that you are responding intellectually to it, rather than emotionally to it. And as long as you think of criticism again, as a negative, you will always respond in an emotional way because, again, you perceive the criticism as a threat.

I want you to ask yourself, how consistent is this criticism? How many people tell you the same thing? You know, somebody might come up to me and say, "You know, Hank, every time we're in a conversation, you interrupt. You never let me finish." And I say that's not true, and the person says it is true. Well one of my favorite strategies is to use a technique called consensual validation. I will ask other people, "Am I guilty of this behavior?" Now the truth is, if I ask 10 people and they say, "Gee, Hank, you don't do that with me," that gives me some information. Now I realize that the criticism is probably unique to that relationship and that's where I can

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start to look. Maybe I'm feeling threatened by this particular person, and that's why I'm always interrupting, because I feel I'm never given a chance to express my thoughts. On the other hand, if everybody tells me that I do something, then that tells me that I have to start working on myself. I have to start to change my behavior and I think that's the importance in terms of looking for the consistency of the behavior.

Next I want you to ask, what is the emotional context? We know that when people become emotional, and as they become angry, they say things, not that they necessarily don't mean, but that are greatly exaggerated. If my eight-year-old daughter says to me, "Daddy, I hate you! And you're a terrible father!" I don't take that seriously. She's saying it because it's bedtime. "Put your books away, pick out your clothes, go to the bathroom, brush your teeth and that's it." I don't take it personally. Because I see it in the context of the emotional situation. On the other hand, if she comes home from school one day and says, "You know, dad, we have to talk, because I really hate you," this is a different issue, you know? In fact, I will tell you, if you ever give criticism, especially on the job, from an emotional point of view, even if your criticism is valid, the person will reject it because they think you're only saying it when you're angry.

Again, think of your intimate relationships. If you get into a big argument with your spouse, you blow it off. "Ahh, when you calm down, it won't be a big deal." When the truth is, it still might be valid. So I want you to ask, what is the emotional context? You can bet that the calmer the person is, the more in control they are of their own emotions. Again, that becomes criteria that I use. I say this person is not flying off the handle. This is something that the person really believes, and I want to listen to it. Finally, as another criterion, you have to ask yourself, what's in it for me? Anytime somebody criticizes you, ask yourself, what's in it for me and how much energy do I have to put out? I wrote a book on managing anger, for example, and after I had finished it, and I put a lot of work in it, a lot of my friends who are psychologists, psychiatrists and writers looked at the manuscript and many of them told me 20 ways to make the book better. And my attitude was, "You know something? You're right. I agree. I'm just not doing it though, it's too much of an effort." That's what I mean, you have to sort of do a cost analysis. It is okay not to respond to criticism, simply because it is too much effort. That's not being defensive. Being defensive is disagreeing with the person, making up excuses. I've had a lot of practice being criticized, especially by editors. I'm not even talking about personal relationships. I get a lot of professional criticism, and I always have to think through this criteria and it really makes a difference. It prevents me from getting angry. It prevents me from getting defensive.

One of the strategies that I'd like to recommend to all of you, is that when somebody criticizes you, that doesn't mean that you have to respond right there on the spot. First of all, I doubt you can. It's like somebody giving you a performance appraisal and then saying, "Well what do you think?" Are you really going to be able to assess a performance appraisal about yourself right there on the spot.

So I think a very effective strategy is simply to respond, "Let me think about it." You're moving yourself away from the situation and you become a lot calmer. It's much easier to think of criticism when you're calm, rather than when you're in the

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heat of the action. Do you ever notice that when you get criticized on a Monday and you get very angry, you get defensive? But by Wednesday, it's no big deal. Now what's changed? Not the criticism. The criticism was still given. What has changed is how you have been thinking about it.

When I got a letter from my editor on the anger book, it was seven pages, single spaced. I thought she was going to call me up and tell me this was the greatest manuscript that she had ever seen! So I get this seven-page letter back and it was devastating to me, because of what I was expecting to hear. I didn't call my editor right up on the spot, because I knew that I would come across as being defensive and very angry. I took that letter, and I put it on my desk. I covered it with some paper. A few hours later, I went back to see if it was still there; it was. I read it again. And I read that letter, about 10 times a day. I started to take it with me on my errands, and at a red light, I would read another paragraph. I started sharing it with my friends. By the time Friday came, I felt that this was the greatest letter that I ever got. I started to think to myself, my editor is really telling me how to write a better book. And I was able to respond productively. The truth is, I needed a week to befriend the criticism. So you have to practice what the Japanese call egoless listening. You must listen less with your ego, because your ego is going to get in the way.

You know, we always talk about people with big egos. A big ego is not a good thing to have. A healthy ego is much better. A big ego really, at least clinically, you know, is a buzz word for a person who is insecure. And one of the reasons or one of the ways again, that you can make yourself more secure is getting an accurate assessment of how other people see you. And that's really what self-esteem is all about. You know, you're not born with good self-esteem or bad self-esteem. There are a lot of theories of self-esteem, but basically, it comes down to how you think other people perceive you, and what you do with that type of information.

I had to take a group therapy course when I was a graduate student. It wasn't really called group therapy. It was called human relations training but it was group therapy for the graduate students. They didn't want to say that though. And the teacher, who was really the therapist, said after the third session, "Hank, I'm going to say something to you, but I don't want you to respond now. Any time somebody says something to you here, you feel like you always have to make excuses and rationalize and defend your behavior. I don't want to hear about it now. Think about it for a week." Basically he was telling me I got defensive! And instantly, I did get defensive. See, it's the same thing. From the giver's point of view, he forced me to take a week, and the truth is, I thought about it and thought about it, and I learned something about myself. Again, I needed that time. So when I say to appraise criticism, see if it is in your best interest. Again, you can use this criteria of how important it is, who the source is, how credible are they, how much effort do you have to put out, is it actually worth it? That depersonalizes the criticism, and the astute person is really hearing what I'm saying.

You have to slow down your response to criticism. Always slow down your response, because when you respond quickly, I'm telling you, you're like Pavlov's dogs. You hear the word *criticism*, you start to open your mouth and whammo! You're back with your "Yes, but . . ." Did you ever notice how many times

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somebody criticizes you and you don't even let them finish? The truth is, most of us aren't even listening when somebody is criticizing us, because we're thinking of our yes, buts. We're thinking of our excuses. It's like we're always blaming it on the other person. And I don't know about you, but I have never heard anybody say, "I can't work with these people at work anymore, because I'm a real jerk!" It's always that the other person is the problem. The attribution is the other person.

Now, after you appraise the criticism, one of two things is going to happen. Either you have decided it is in your best interest to do something about this, or you just blow it off and you say the person is off the wall. About 99% of the people just blow off the criticism, which is okay if it's not valid, but the third thing you have to do is you have to respond to it; whether it's valid or whether it is not valid.

Now I used to see this clinically all the time. The wife would say something to her husband and the husband would say, "All right, all right, I'll think about it!" Well you know what happens, the person thinks about it or they quickly forget and they never bring it up again. The truth is, somebody criticizes me and they tell me that maybe I'm too complacent on my job and I'm not doing anything innovative. I'm not trying to change the working environment or just the general business. And I can assess that and I can say now that's not true. And I can say to my boss, "Boss, let me think about it." Now my boss doesn't hear anything from me for another two or three weeks. In fact, he never hears anything from me. What is he or she supposed to conclude from that? It's either that I don't care, I just got defensive, or I don't value his opinion, which of course, invalidates his self-esteem. The reality is, I do care about my job. I did think about it.

The mistake is if you don't tell the other person that you disagree with them. If the criticism isn't valid, you have to go back to the other person, and you have to say something along the lines of, "You know, I thought about the criticism that you gave me and I decided that I don't want to do anything about it, and this is why. Here's how I have appraised the criticism." See, the reason that is so important is your boss might say, or a customer might say, "But have you considered this?" And they give you another piece of information. And now that you have this other piece of information, all of a sudden, the criticism starts to make sense. Criticism is basically an interactive process. There's a giving and there's a taking of criticism. And you need as the receiver to interact. That's the whole point of this. You have to go back to the person and you have to have a dialogue with them, and exchange information. I have found incidentally, that nobody ever gets angry if you disagree with them. But I have found that most people will get angry if you don't tell them that you disagree with them. I think that is a crucial difference. And if the criticism is valid, push comes to shove, which means you have to change your own behavior.

Now when we talk about changing our own behavior, I'm going to use a phrase, *productive criticism*. The first book that I ever wrote, it's out of print now, so you know I'm not promoting it, was called *Nobody's Perfect*. In that book I use the phrase *constructive criticism*. Now I throw that out the window because think of it. What does constructive criticism really mean? Usually it means you're going to say something to the person that doesn't offend them, i.e., you will be tactful. You know what happens. You're so tactful, the person will eventually say, "What are you really saying to me?" Or you get so angry at yourself 20 minutes later because you

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were so tactful, you didn't really say what you wanted to say. Constructive criticism really means that you just don't offend the person. And it's the same thing, "Gee I heard that constructively. You can criticize me and I can respond nondefensively, so now I am responding constructively." I like the phrase *productive criticism* because it means change. If somebody criticizes you, if you don't get defensive, that's one thing. But if you have not changed your behavior, you have not responded productively and that's what I want you to start doing; to literally learn how to change your behavior. And again, this is where most people get stuck.

Let me give you two easy ways of how you can start to change your own behavior without the support or help of anybody else. The first technique is to literally take the global behavior that you are being criticized for and break it down into small manageable steps. Now to me, weight reduction is a great example of this. I would always laugh to myself when I would hear people say, "I have to lose 50 pounds." First of all, anybody who says they have to lose 50 pounds is doomed before they start. Because it is overwhelming. One of the reasons it's so hard to change and where the resistance starts to come in is that, for most of us, change is threatening, because again, it's something new. We're all much more comfortable in doing the same things over and over and over. Now that's what habits are all about. You get into a comfort zone. One of the ways that you can minimize your own resistance is to take the global behavior and break it down into small steps. Give yourself tasks and assignments. So the person who is really smart about losing weight is not going to say they have to lose 50 pounds. But rather, "I've got to lose one pound." Now after you've lost that one pound, if that was your goal, what's the message you give to yourself? I can do it! Well if I lose one, I can lose two.

Break a goal down into small manageable tasks. The key is that first task must be a little challenging, but a guaranteed success because it's a way that you're going to give yourself confidence. And this is a very smart strategy for developing other people as a way of criticizing. If you're the boss, break down a subordinate's assignment into small steps. And every time they conclude one step, give them a lot of positives, a lot of praise. You're developing them and they have confidence and they can do the other step. Certainly if you have a three-year-old, you don't say to your three-year-old, "Now you're going to go swimming" and throw them in the pool. What do you do? You get them in a bathing suit; you give a little applause as they put one foot in the water; you give some more applause. Little by little, it becomes a series of baby steps, and it's a lot easier. The bottom line of course, though is you need to take action and you need to do it.

I think the second way that makes it very easy to respond to criticism and changing your own behavior, and this is my favorite, is called monitoring. Now monitoring, again psychological jargonese, is called the reactive measure. Re-activity in psychology means doing it changes the behavior. That is, I think, a very powerful sentence. Doing the technique literally, changes the behavior. What you're going to do when you monitor your own behavior is graph it. There is a considerable amount of research that shows graphing of behavior in itself changes the behavior. Now nobody knows why, but the way that psychologists like to interpret that is, the visual feedback is so strong that nobody wants to see that graph getting out of hand.

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Now I remember a couple of years ago, I looked in the mirror and I said to myself, "I have to lose some weight." I was giving myself criticism. Now eating less was out of the question. So what it really came down to was, "Oh god, I'll have to do something like sit-ups." I have a stomach here and I wanted to try and flatten it out. Now I hate doing sit-ups, so I thought to myself, what is the best way to get myself to do sit-ups every single day? And I used this strategy. I started to graph the behavior. For behaviors that you want to improve, set up the slope of the line so it's going up. For behaviors that you want to decrease, set the slope of the line so it's going down.

For the sit-ups of course, I wanted that slope to go up. Well the first day, I'm embarrassed to say I could only do 25 sit-ups. My stomach was killing me, but I did it. And I graphed it. Second day, I did 25 in the morning and 25 at night. And then I was up to 50. Third day, 75 and 75; this is not an exaggeration. At the end of four days I was doing 175 sit-ups and graphing it and feeling great. I put that graph in a highly visible place, because it gave me a message. It gave me a message that I was succeeding, that I could do it! Now what's interesting is my wife had been out of town. She came home, saw this graph and said it was ridiculous and threw it away, and I never did another sit-up again! See, I am telling you that I needed that visual feedback to help me change my behavior. And it becomes a simple way but again, you have to take action. See, a lot of us feel really silly about graphing our behavior. And I'll tell you the truth. If I have a boss who is constantly giving me a hard time and criticizing me, or if I have a client who is giving me the same criticism over and over, this becomes a great strategy to use. Because you're going to have visible evidence that you are, in fact, changing. You know, eventually you're going to be able to say, "Boss, look at the graph. I am getting my work in on time. I am having better relationships with the people that I have to go out and serve." So the criticism then becomes invalidated.

Again, you have to change your definition of criticism, step one. That information that can help you grow. Even though this sounds so simplistic, I am telling you it is the most profound thing that I can say to you. Changing your perception of criticism changes everything. Everything else starts to fall into place.

Two, you have to remove yourself from the emotional impact of it and you have to think about it. Is this in my best interest? How do I know this is in my best interest versus how do I know it is not in my best interest? Well who said it? What's the payoff? How much energy do I have to put in to get this type of return?

Three, regardless of how you have appraised your criticism, what you still need to do is to respond to the critic. If you don't respond to the critic, you damage the relationship because the person thinks that you just blew it off.

And four, if in fact the criticism is in your best interest, then it would be foolish not to change. And I told you that two simple things that you can do is just break it down, make it a little easier for you, and graph the behavior. Now that is really from the taker's point of view. And again, taking criticism, I find, is a much harder process to master than giving criticism. Because giving criticism really comes down to strategizing about how you want to word things, how you want to phrase things. And if it didn't work, whammo, you can try something else.

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See the key for giving criticism is to be thinking to yourself, how can I communicate this information so the person will be receptive to it? How can I communicate this information? It's as if you have to be very strategic in your thinking. You know, I travel a lot and one of the things I've noticed about myself, is I'm always criticizing people. It's one of the ways I keep myself in shape. And what I find, whether I'm on an airplane, in a hotel, restaurant, or cab, the first thought that comes to my mind, always, is how can I communicate this information so that the person is going to be receptive? Everything else starts to fall into place. And I will tell you one of the ways that you can practice both giving criticism and taking criticism. Think of the criticisms that you have to give. You know, if I were to ask all of you to make a list of criticism situations, you'd be able to identify a whole bunch of them. At the same time, think of the criticisms that people give you. Now that you know you have to give and take these criticisms, what is the best way for you to respond? Don't be naive. If you can't figure out how you're going to handle criticism when the person isn't even there, then you were being terribly naive to think that you're going to be able to handle it at the moment of truth. Because at the moment of truth, I'm telling you, that's where it starts to become very emotional. Criticism today has really become a very emotional process. It is an ego indictment. Even though we say things like, "Well, I'm talking about your work, I'm not talking about you." Somebody might come up to me and say, "Hank, you're a nice guy, but your book stinks. Don't take it personally." I'm going to take it personally. You are your work. And by the same token, if somebody builds up your work, they build up your self-esteem. And if you build up somebody else's work, by association, you are building up his or her self-esteem. So I found that to be a very effective strategy. How can I communicate this information so that the person is going to be receptive?

And another important point you want to remember for giving criticism is always protect the person's self-esteem. Self-esteem, I find, is the most important thing that anybody has. And it's to the point where people do strange things to protect their self-esteem. I find that most people lie on a daily basis to protect their self-esteem, usually two or three times a day. Somebody comes up to you with their new baby and they say, "Isn't my baby beautiful?" I doubt you're going to say, "Let me get a banana, it looks like a monkey." Instead you say "This baby is beautiful. And what beautiful girls you have." You do that, not only to protect their self-esteem, but also your own. You lie many times to people to protect your own self-esteem because if the truth comes out, many times you get into a power struggle. And a power struggle creates a conflict. And it's because self-esteem is on the line. I believe the Japanese have learned this so well, at least dealing with other Japanese. They have really learned the value of protecting the self-esteem of another person. They allow a person to save face. And many times we find it's difficult to be responsive to criticism, because we feel we are losing face. Make it easy for the person to take the criticisms that you give them, by again, protecting their self-esteem.

Let me give you one example. It is one thing to respond productively to criticism. But it's another thing to have the critical edge. And that means going beyond just responding productively to criticism, but literally, turning it into a positive opportunity of growth. I used to work at the Brentwood VA Hospital, I did my psychology internship there. The VA is very interesting. Patients would be getting \$800 a month to stay sick. Plus, they would be living in Brentwood, California. And I was working on a ward that was exclusively designed for Vietnam veterans. Now, when

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you think of it, it's crazy to come out with symptoms to stay in the hospital. But many of these people were very skilled at coming up with these great symptoms. We used to have a staff meeting every Wednesday morning. It was a community meeting and one time one patient, who was a towering man, got up. He was about 6'7" and he wore the same clothes every day – a white safari costume with boots up to his hips. He called himself "Eli" after the prophet Elijah in the Bible. He said, "Excuse me, Doctor. I've got to know. Am I manic depressive or am I schizophrenic? Because the neurons from outer space are slowly coming down and poisoning my mind." And when I heard this, I was hysterical. I thought this was the funniest thing that I had ever heard.

Well one day, I remember the psychiatrist, who I had a tremendous amount of respect for, and yes, he was competent to evaluate my behavior, said to me, "You know, Hank, I'm not quite sure if your laughing at the patients is in their best interest." This was devastating to me. Devastating. It was so devastating because my fear was, "Oh my god, my teachers back in Kansas are going to find out about this, and it's sort of going to confirm what they had thought about me already." So I want you to know that for the next 24 hours, literally, I went to every nurse on that ward, every nurse's aid, and I asked if they thought it was funny when they heard these people talk like this. And they all told me they had to bite their lip.

Now, I had a supervisory meeting the following day, and I knew the psychiatrist was going to bring up this issue. Anytime you know somebody is going to bring something up, bring it up yourself. Since you know they're going to bring it up anyway, if you bring it up yourself, what happens is that you can start to manage and control the situation that much more effectively. And so I brought it up myself and I explained to the psychiatrist, that I know sometimes I do probably laugh inappropriately, but other times, I find that the laughing at the patient is a way of giving them criticism. What I'm really saying to the person is, if you come across like this in the real world, you're going to have a lot of trouble. And I know I can't take it seriously, so my laughter becomes a way to let these guys know they're off the wall.

I worked giving vocational counseling for eight weeks. I did the testing, the reports, everything and do you know what happened? He finally came in and said he decided that he didn't want to be a movie star. He'd have to give too many autographs, and we would have to think of something else for him to do. Now here's a patient telling me he doesn't want to be a movie star; that's what he got out of vocational counseling. I'm sorry, I had to laugh at that guy and tell him he was off the wall. Well eventually, we brought it up at a staff meeting and I found out that everybody had difficulty controlling their responses when patients started acting like this. And I ended up doing a workshop for the staff on therapeutic interventions of humor as a form of criticism. Everybody liked it and it got back to my department and they thought, "Gee, Weisinger must have changed."

So what I am saying is that was an opportunity. Just responding productively would mean, okay, I'm not going to laugh anymore. But sometimes you get a chance to have the edge. It would be like somebody who is a terrible time manager getting sent to a seminar, and all of a sudden, giving lectures for your own company on time management. It's like taking the deficit and not just responding, but literally making it an asset. And I think we all want to increase our assets.

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Let me make my final point which I really think sums everything up. I already mentioned that I had written a book that was called, *Nobody's Perfect*. Now it's out of print. I didn't come up with that title. A very distinguished magazine writer called me one day and said he had a good title for my book. I said I didn't know what it meant, but I could certainly exploit it. Well, now I know what the concept of "nobody's perfect" really means, 10 years later. Again, we're all in the process of becoming. We are in the process of developing.

First of all, who'd want to be perfect, because if you were perfect, you'd have zippo to look forward to. You are very different people now than you were 15 years ago. You will continue to change and indeed, one of the reasons you are here, is you want to develop yourself. See I have found that the real way to defend your self-esteem is to open up. Who cares if it feels bad? I never once said criticism feels good. I don't want anybody here to lose the opportunity to grow, just because of your ego. If you let your ego get in the way, then you are a loser. I know no other way to put it. So the real way to defend your self-esteem is to aggressively seek it out. Seek out criticism. It's people with low self-esteem who say, "No way." Because they think criticism is fault finding. And their thinking is, "I can't let my boss know that I'm not perfect, because if I'm not perfect, I don't get the promotions, I don't get the recognition, I won't be successful, i.e., I might get fired." And in our intimate relationships, "I can't let my spouse know that I'm not perfect because if I'm not perfect, they might not like me anymore. He might not love me. Perhaps he will abandon me." So these people build a wall around themselves. They get defensive in the worst way. They build a wall which makes them impervious to any type of feedback, especially criticism. Look at the irony. The way they try to protect themselves keeps them the same. Again, the real way to defend your self-esteem is to let it in. People will only think more of you when you can be responsive to their criticism and change your behavior.

I grew up in an environment where I learned that nobody was perfect at a very early age. Because for 30 years, my father was a story editor of Superman. And everybody knows, not even Superman was perfect! He had one thing that could destroy him, which was what?

FROM THE FLOOR: Kryptonite.

DR. WEISINGER: I said the same thing to a third-grade class one time and a little boy yelled out, "Lois Lane." Much more than the technicalities of appraising a criticism or specific strategies for giving it, is its spirit. And this is what I want you to remember because this is my final message. Once you can start to see criticism as a form of emotional support, rather than an emotional attack, then you make yourself, your organization, your family, feel like a Superman despite the kryptonite.