

Dealing *with* CRITICISM



When confronted with criticism or suspicious questions, leaders often feel frustrated, perplexed, and sometimes even hurt and bitter. However, criticism is a leader's constant on-the-job companion, but no one prepares the leader for this reality. Criticism may come from opponents or adversaries, from leaders of other churches or entities, or even from the very people leaders are trying to serve and lead!

Criticism from the outside is easier to deal with because leaders can find ways to excuse what "they" are saying: "Poor people, they must be prejudiced, ignorant, spiritually blind, or opposed to the truth. This is just part of the spiritual battle!" Criticism from other Christian leaders is harder to deal with because, although these leaders may represent a different denomination, line of doctrine, or worship style, they are our brothers and sisters. We fight on the same side! But we can still excuse such critics, saying that "they have a narrow vision, they are insecure, they envy us."

The worst type of criticism is that which comes from within a leader's own environment. We tend to classify such criticism as disloyalty or rebellion: "You see, the same people who implored us to accept this office now criticize us!"

What causes criticism?

We need to accept that criticism is part of the environment surrounding the role and functions of leadership. There's a saying: "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." Those who choose to remain in leadership positions subject themselves to criticism.

It is important to understand that criticism is inevitable, comprehensible, and completely legitimate, even when leaders are not at fault. Why is that?

- When functioning properly, leaders are usually agents of change, and for most people, change of any kind seems uncomfortable and threatening, even if the changes are for the better. In any group, some people will always resist change.
- Leaders look to the future and then work to reach the goals and objectives that lie ahead. Therefore, their work is always undone, and they will always have projects in progress.
- Many times, criticism and questions arise from the simple fact that people cannot see the future as clearly and completely

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as their leaders. Actually, if followers *could* see the future as clearly as their leaders, they would soon become leaders themselves! Those in leadership must constantly work to mobilize their followers to reach for the future. An absence of questions or criticism would probably indicate that the leader is not leading properly.

- Criticism may also occur when people do not possess or comprehend all the data that their leaders have, and thus, they draw the wrong conclusions. Leaders must be careful to keep their followers well-informed.
- During difficult times, followers often lose sight of their leader’s original objective. Obstacles loom larger than the goal—remember Israel’s experience in the desert? But such

difficult times—when things appear to be going badly or when people want to quit—are exactly when leaders can perform their most valuable ministry.

- There also will be times when people criticize because they can see real dangers or mistakes that have escaped the leader’s attention. Sometimes, leaders are so busy with the long-range goals that lie far ahead that they fail to notice the traps in front of them. In this case, followers can help leaders by alerting them to these dangers.
- Sometimes criticism occurs because of personality differences. Some people can grasp the scope of the entire task before taking the first step. These individuals will always ask many questions. Other people may identify potential problems. And people at-

tempt to delay progress by demanding additional, unimportant answers.

- Some people may have been hurt in the past by irresponsible, authoritarian, or insensitive leaders. When dealing with criticism from these individuals, leaders will need discernment, patience, and wisdom.
- Because leadership is closely connected to power, leaders will often encounter people who desire leadership but who have been rejected as leaders. These individuals may allow envy to control their behavior. This is not new: “And they were jealous of Moses in the camp and Aaron the saint of the Lord” (Psalm 106:16).
- Finally, it is always easier to criticize the initiatives of others than to create

something new. As Gene Edwards says: "The ability to see mistakes is a cheap and common talent." Criticism creates the impression that the one criticizing could have performed much better than the leader and, as it creates this impression, the critic feels secure because he or she does not have to do anything to demonstrate this supposedly superior ability!

Dealing with criticism

Since criticism is inevitable and therefore must be accepted as a fact of human life, how should a leader deal with criticism?

1. *Do not automatically reject criticism.* A leader might think: "Let them talk among themselves; I won't pay any attention." This attitude could be dangerous! Just as leaders avoid poison, they should also avoid arrogance. No matter how unfounded the criticism, it can always serve as a remedy against pride or arrogance.
2. *Do not become discouraged.* Criticism tends to weaken the leader's courage, especially when it derives from those whose opinion the leader values. We might find some consolation from a fellow leader or a small group who could encourage us. But ultimately, our strength comes from Christ and from the assurance that He is with us. When David's men wanted to stone him, "David encouraged himself in the Lord his God" (1 Samuel 30:6).
3. *Do not allow criticism to demoralize you.* This can be worse than discouragement. Sometimes, when feeling cornered, leaders resort to unethical methods that are contrary to biblical principles. Thus, a leader might become so overloaded by the external weight of criticism and opposition that he or she loses the will to resist.
4. *Do not be controlled by criticism.* Leaders might be tempted to yield to every question and immediately change their plans or procedures to satisfy critics. Will this create unity? No! Those who were satisfied before may now become dissatisfied and start to ask if the leader possesses firm convictions or lives only to please the public. Do not be inflexible, but remember that rapid, short-term adjustments made only to decrease criticism may result in deviation from your legitimate, long-term goals.
5. *Do not personalize criticism.* This might be the most important recommendation but also the most difficult to practice. Leaders may falter in two ways. When criticism is directed at their programs and action plans, they may perceive the challenges as attacks upon their integrity, character, or capability. They may also react personally against the critics, rejecting the person altogether—even if that person had a legitimate opinion and viewpoint.
6. *Do not automatically reject bad news.* Always consider criticism in the light of your ultimate objective. It is important for a leader to maintain the following attitude: "If you can help us make a better decision, I will remain open and grateful for your help." Even a critic's wrong motivation does not constitute sufficient reason for leaders to automatically reject criticism. Leaders must recognize that sometimes the wrong person, at the wrong time and with the wrong motivation, can say exactly what leaders need to hear.
7. *Seek to discover the reason for the criticism.* Many times what a person says and the way the criticism is expressed do not represent the problem itself. It may be only a symptom of an underlying problem. If leaders can discover what really motivated the criticism, they will know better how to respond. For instance, similar criticism from different individuals may have similar root causes:
 - *Fear of change or fear of the future.* This person needs to be reassured.
 - *Mistake, error, or lack of comprehension.* This person needs information or additional explanation.
 - *Discouragement when facing difficulties and challenges.* Encourage and renew this critic as a vital part of the team.
 - *Perception of a real mistake or danger.* Pay attention to the danger and act to correct the mistake or avoid the danger.
 - *Rebellion or a futile dispute that will go nowhere.* Such criticism needs to be refuted; otherwise, it can dissipate the group's energy and obstruct progress.
 - *An expression of pain or hurt as a vestige of bad experiences with other leaders from the past or present.* If current leaders have hurt the person, they should recognize their responsibility to ask forgiveness and seek to heal the injury. There are, however, painful situations that do not represent any fault of current

leadership. For example, if someone desired a certain office that was given to someone else, there is no fault; even so, effective leaders should seek to help the person and heal their emotional injury.

- *Wrong attitude, wrong spirit: envy, jealousy quarrelsomeness or sectarian spirit.* It is imperative for leaders to oppose such attitudes. At the same time, leaders must take care not to characterize a criticism as being ill-motivated if, in reality, the problem is within the leader—defensiveness, pride, or insecurity. In general, if leaders do not completely perceive their own motivations, how can they position themselves as infallible judges of other people's motivation? "Remember that you cannot read hearts. You do not know the motives which prompted the actions that to you look wrong" (Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, Vol. 2, pg. 755).

When you are personally attacked

Sometimes criticism will attack the leader's personality or character. In such cases, it is important to remember the following recommendations:

- *Do not respond in the same manner.* If the critic's attitude is wrong, the best way to overcome is to respond with the opposite attitude. For example, if the critic exhibits a spirit of quarrelsomeness, respond in a calm, non-threatening manner. If the critic attempts to hurt, respond with love. If confronting a spirit of stinginess, respond with generosity. If a spirit of pride, respond with humility. If a spirit of arrogance, respond with a teachable, eager-to-learn approach. If a spirit of deceit, respond with truth. If you encounter a spirit of distrust, respond with confident faith and affirmation.

- *Do not allow your emotions to dictate your responses.* It becomes easy to spill out your own pain or rage when responding to criticism. Be careful not to nurture bitterness, to hold on to resentment, or to adopt a "poor me" self-pitying attitude. One cost of leadership is to be misunderstood by those who are being led. Also, remember that others may be hurt even more than you—your spouse or children, for example.

- *Do not become the personal focus of a division.* Only in rare instances is a problem solved in a fruitful way when factions remain opposed to each other on opposite sides of an issue. If continuing with divided opinions appears to be the only viable option, seek a peaceful resolution based on principles to which all may agree. Find some common ground and use that to build toward a new solution. Avoid "win/lose" situations where the personality differences of one group or the other become the focus.

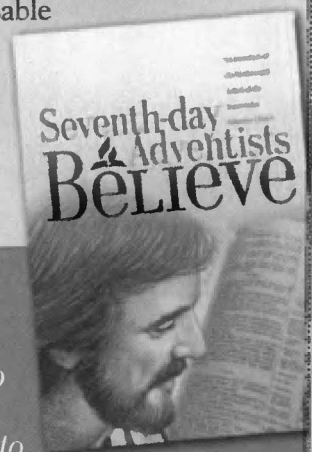
- *Do not allow others to be attacked through you, and do not distance yourself from those to whom you owe loyalty when they are attacked.* True loyalty affirms: "I'm on your side, even if others oppose you. I will defend you at any cost or risk to me." True loyalty also affirms: "We remain stronger when standing together than we could ever be if we were to become separated." ^{ED}

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