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Liz@LizCurtisHiggs.com
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Taking Criticism in Stride

by Liz Curtis Higgs

I've never been voted off the island, named the weakest link, or told what not to wear, but I've weathered my share of criticism—constructive, destructive, and otherwise. A sharply-worded email from a reader makes me question my calling. Or a scathing evaluation from an audience member sends me back to my hotel room with a heavy heart.

You've been there. A customer's disparaging comment still rankles days later. A coworker points out a character flaw "for your own good," leaving you grinding your teeth. An employer's negative evaluation echoes through your mind long after you've moved to another job.

When your work has been found wanting, what's the smart thing to do? (a) Let those critical words fester? (b) Pretend you never heard them? Or (c) Strike back while your ire is hot?

You know the answer: (d) None of the above. Instead, take a positive approach when negative news comes your way.

Consider the Source

Take a good look at the person's credentials. Is she or he qualified to judge your efforts? If so, listen and learn. If not, press on. Everyone is entitled to an opinion, but not every opinion is of equal value.

Deflect the Drama

Snarky comments often stem from jealousy, frustration, or anger. If a friend is clearly lashing out from a place of pain, overlook his or her caustic barbs and simply ask, “Are you okay? You seem really down today.”

Embrace the Truth

Most criticism, however painful, bears a small kernel of truth. Find that kernel, chew on it, and swallow your pride along with it. However difficult the process, if it leads to growth and improvement, the momentary discomfort is worth it.

Filter the Feedback

Our human nature tends to focus on the lone naysayer and discount the many affirming voices. We tell ourselves, “They’re just being nice.” Exactly. *Nice* is a good thing. Take a consensus vote—not one person’s opinion—as your guide.

Eliminate the Fringe

Any time you’re assessed by others, throw away the worst evaluation and (this is harder) toss out that gushing, over-the-top one too. Somewhere between “Ugh!” and “Wow!” lies an honest appraisal of your work.

In the end it’s your own opinion that matters most. If you’ve done your absolute best, take a bow. If you can do better, now you know where to start.

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Liz Curtis Higgs is an award-winning speaker and best-selling author. Her latest novel is *Here Burns My Candle* (WaterBrook Press). Visit her Web site: www.LizCurtisHiggs.com.