

Ask an Ombudsman! Dealing with criticism - constructively?!

Recently, the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services (UNOMS) launched a mini-series to give practical advice on how to deal with everyday conflicts in the work place.

This second part of the series focuses on “*constructive criticism*”.

You feel you have been criticized? Take a breath!

Most of us have experienced this: A supervisor or colleague comes to your office and tells you in a disrespectful tone that your previous project was not handled well. Instinctively, you defend yourself – or even react aggressively. One argument leads to another and the situation gets out of control.

Let’s ponder for a moment: What is your first reaction in this vulnerable situation? Do you feel under attack? Does your response start with “Yes, but...”? Do you blame it on a colleague or retaliate? Do you take the criticism personally and are offended? Do you ignore, dismiss or block it?

While we might have a natural inclination to react to criticism in this way, we also have a chance to deal with these situations more consciously. There are no easy recipes on how to deal with complex conflict situations but the following might be helpful in transforming them into an opportunity for personal growth:

1. Breathe

Pause and reflect: What were you going to say or do? Think about your instinctive response — and resist! Don’t bother with the tone of your counterpart; you are only responsible for your own dignified reaction and behavior, not for the other person’s misbehavior.

2. Acknowledge

Instead of your initial reaction, acknowledge that the other party took the time and made an effort to give you feedback. Particularly, if the critic does not mean well, simply thanking the person can already disarm him/her. Defensive phrases or counter-attacking will not help and will only add to the stress of the situation. Instead, show that you are willing to listen. Keep in mind that acknowledging the feedback does not necessarily mean agreeing with it.

3. Ask

In the next step, try to ask specific questions about the issue starting with “when, where, how, etc.” This will transform the personal criticism into a specific one and prove that you have heard the other person. Inquire about criticism focused on a specific behavior or the concrete project rather than on your person.

4. Add

Ask if you may add your perspective on the issue. Communicate clearly what you think, point out where you agree and apologize, if appropriate. Also clarify, where you disagree. Explain your standpoint calmly and stay focussed on the issue.

5. Find solutions

Ask the other person what you can do next time to handle the issue better and demonstrate your willingness to find a solution. In any case, move on, stay future-oriented and focus on specific actions in the future.

The next article will focus on: “*Giving constructive feedback*”.

We would like to hear from you! Experiences? Suggestions? Contact us at: manaigo-vekil@un.org.

Find out more: www.un.org/ombudsman