



Feedback or Criticism? A Toolbox for Dealing with Criticism in the Workplace

By Judy Ringer

It started out innocuously. I asked a colleague if she'd be willing to listen to an upcoming presentation for a local non-profit. She said she would, and I plunged in.

My colleague had a lot to say and delivered it with stinging energy. "You use too much jargon; I hate jargon," she said. "And you need something besides theory. They'll fall asleep."

My hackles went up. *Wow! Was there anything you liked?* My [left hand column](#) was in overdrive. I was ready to leap on her but stopped, centered myself, and decided to practice what I do, in fact, teach.

A Toolbox for Dealing With Criticism in the Workplace

I don't like criticism any more than the next person. **And, in my work, it's a necessary component of excellence.** So I find ways to manage it, using one or more of the following five tools:

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#1: Criticism or Feedback?

Even "constructive criticism" feels negative, so I call it "feedback", as in: Information. Positive, negative, or in between, **begin to frame criticism as information that could be useful.** It will help if you position your body so that you're slightly to the side of the speaker. **Let the information fall into the space between you rather than on you.** Adopt a curious attitude, and decide if and how the feedback can be used. Take it or leave it. Either way, say "Thank you very much."

#2: They're right

I asked for my colleague's opinion. That's what I got. **Her perception is true for her.** What can I gain from knowing this?

#3: Reframe

In the Aikido model I teach and practice, I see incoming communication as energy. **The question (and practice) is: how can I use this energy?** In my case, I reframed the critical "attack" as feedback and directed it toward my goal: a great presentation.

#4: Ask for what you want

Things would have gone more smoothly with my colleague if I'd been specific about the kind of feedback I wanted. For example, "This is a fairly educated audience. They understand my work. I'd like to know: 1) Are the transitions clear? 2) Is the opening compelling? 3) What do you like? 4) What would you change?"

#5: Be direct

What about unsolicited criticism? **Stop the speaker and help them offer their feedback in a way you can receive it.** For example, "I appreciate you have feedback, and I'd like to hear it. In fact, I'm curious about ... (state what that is)." Now you're ready and more likely to experience the feedback as useful.

What did I do?

I listened. I got curious. **I understood I was reacting to how she delivered the feedback:** big gestures; loud voice; authoritarian affect. Easy to reject. So **I stepped aside, let her big energy flow on by, and looked for what was useful.**

- I don't like jargon either, so I'll see if I can use words that are more inclusive.
- Why did she perceive the content as theoretical? I asked and got more "feedback!"

Is it criticism, or is it feedback? Whether it's constructive criticism in the workplace or elsewhere, if I'm open to learning, everything is feedback and almost always interesting. And if I don't like it, I say "[Thank you very much](#)" and move on.

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About the Author: Judy Ringer is the author of *Turn Enemies Into Allies: The Art of Peace in the Workplace*. She provides conflict and communication skills training based on mind/body principles from the martial art aikido, in which she holds a third-degree black belt. Employing best practice communication models, Judy brings to life key concepts such as self-management under pressure and appreciation of other viewpoints.

Judy is also the author of *Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict*, and three CDs: *Managing Conflict in the Workplace*, *Simple Gifts: Making the Most of Life's Ki Moments*, and *This Little Light: The Gift of Christmas*, all of which can be found on her website [www. JudyRinger.com](http://www.JudyRinger.com), or Amazon.com.

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