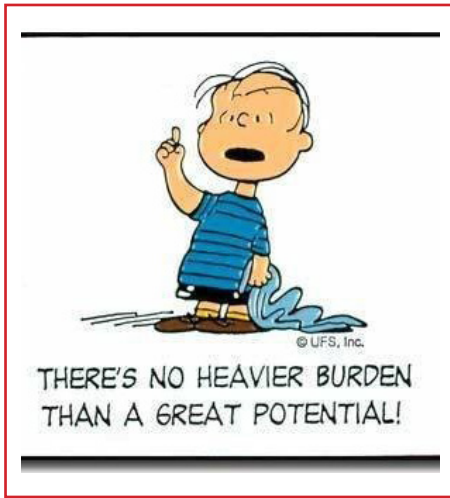


Critique or Criticism

The Burden of a Great Potential

Fusion White Paper #4



“Read not books alone, but men, and amongst them chiefly thyself. If thou find anything questionable there, use the commentary of a severe friend rather than the gloss of a sweet lipped flatterer; there is more profit in a distasteful truth than in deceitful sweetness.”

—Francis Quarles (1592–1644)

There may be some stalwart players out there, untouched by the fear of failure or of underperformance. But most of us (under the cultivated exterior) are a little more like Linus Van Pelt, laboring under the burden of a great potential, and our own concerns about failing to measure up.

Linus, the self-critic, may be quiet for long periods, but instantly appears when one is called to attend a Presentation Skills Training Program or Actually Do a Presentation in front of one's clients, colleagues and senior executives.

You may have had a perfectly wonderful growing up time, free from injurious bullying, whisked by difficult doormen at nightclubs, and graduated high in your college class rankings. But look out. There's nothing like being recorded and played back on a big screen in front of a room of your peers to unsettle your perfectly Balanced Personality Components.

Herewith our suggestions for how to request a critique and how to deliver one — and remain both relatively sane and in good standing with peers in the aftermath...

First the Challenge:

Most people “doing a critique,” make the mistake of becoming “Critics.” They fall into the “Like and Dislike, Plus and Minus, Strength and Weakness” trap. Or, they dispense with the namby-pamby, confidence building recognition of any minor satisfactions and proceed to directly to the “Enumeration of Deltas.” (That's engineering talk for “You sucked! Let us count the ways...”)

Of course, this approach, while easy for the critic, really doesn't assist the speaker in moving forward and improving the next offering. Imagine going forward with a long list of “Must Never Do!” items floating in memory... Many a learner has failed to move into the area of “What and How to Improve because they were “lost in the Deltas...”



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Critique: Noun / Critique: Verb
(Instructive)

Analysis of a dish, a play, a performance: with special attention toward suggestions for improvement going forward.

Critic: Noun / Criticize: Verb
(Destructive)

An individual who dishes out “Criticism” — a string of withering negative evaluations, findings or conclusions, frequently mixed with personal grudges, vendetta and enmity.

Requesting a Serious Critique:



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How do we avoid these traps, and become valued for the wisdom of our reasoned yet compassionate critiques of ourselves, our families and our colleagues?

Keep in mind, that anything being critiqued (or criticized) exists only in the past. So while you might dissect it with impunity, you leave the speaker (they're your friend, right?) in a bruised and bloody heap, wondering what hit them. It may have been well intentioned, but it didn't turn out to be helpful. And it leaves your target eternally “Wrong in the Past...”

Start by recognizing that there might be a blurring of the distinction between Critique and Critic. (Close but not the same.) Of course, we realize that we may be nudging the distinctions and definitions a bit, but that's the service for which you are paying us, right?

Sometimes, when asked for Critique by an earnest colleague, family member or student, we fall into the trap of doing criticism instead. The average person cannot deal with more than a few negative inputs without their “Linus” kicking in.

OK, you're right. We're supposed to be adults here in our big boy clothes. And yet, realize that if someone criticizes your tie, shoes or latest business submission, Linus will not be far off. You may put up a strong front — maybe even counter attack. But if one is looking to really improve things, the input goes down better when softened.

Are you helping? Think Critique! **Instructive.**

Do you intend to destroy this unholy presentation and the individual who birthed it? Then Criticism is your game! **Destructive.**

“Don't sugar coat it Butch. Give it to her straight!”

—Robert Redford: Sundance
Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid

1. You're not asking for feedback from a powder puff here, this is serious. So look for someone who will give it to you straight. Find a reliable colleague who won't pull any punches, but not the tedious critic either. You need someone who will lay it out without attempting to please you, but who can stick to the agreed upon criteria and then Stop! Tough choice, but finding — or naming — your office Master of Critique — (perhaps your toughest Mentor?) can be a career Ace in the Hole.

Requesting a Serious Critique (continued):

2. Lay out the Rules of Engagement. What constitutes a “Win” with this assignment? What’s the desired end result? Does this presentation appear likely to move the audience to that end? Does it contain a structure to make it most easily understood? Is there an emotional chord to it as well as a logical premise? Are you delivering it with enough intention to put it over? Does it strike your advisor that it will play? Is there anything missing?
3. Now, with the official stuff handled, ask for his/her opinion. “Don’t sugar coat it! Give it to me straight!” (Isn’t it interesting that a lot of times, people are really looking for a pass under the heading of critique...)
4. Offer to buy the drinks after the presentation and recognize that a no-frills critique is hard to come by, but incredibly valuable. Give thanks. It’s tough to take an honest critique, but it’s even harder to give one.

Giving an Honest Critique:

“How would you like to improve this work?”

—Dorothy Sarnoff

1. Start by getting clear about what’s being requested. Really!
2. Work out the Rules of Engagement. Are you being asked for your opinion? Or for your opinion about how the project satisfies some outside standard of expectation? Have you both forgotten to agree on Objective Standards of Achievement?
3. Begin by asking the speaker how they feel about the work so far — gives you a sense of their perceptions, and their accuracy. The similarity or disparity of your respective perceptions is an indication to help you calibrate your remarks.
4. Ask ‘em what they hope to achieve with the work. Ask them the next step — the desired outcome.
5. Ask about the audience. The obvious connection between outcome and audience is often missed, even by senior people. “The Presentation is the Bridge” between them. And you can be the steward of that bridge.
6. Here’s what I think worked... And what might benefit from improvement. What about working on it this way on the next go round? (What worked. What to improve. How)
7. Finally, share with them what you think they can “reasonably

receive” of your perceptions. Know that they may not be able to take everything you think — or know. So give them what they can have. And save some for next time. Life is long.

All of us want to reach the stars, and sometimes the burden of our desires can be excruciating. When you ask for it — a tough but straight critique can be just the kick you require. But when asked, be sure and be careful about just how far your colleague can be pushed — the stars are a long way off.

Applications:

1. Personally

Requesting a Critique. Ask for what you think you can take — and take it gracefully, quietly and go to work on it. The second time, you’ll be both more astute and resilient. Giving Critiques: Honest is one thing, compassion is another. Start gentle and work up to the black belt stuff. Allow the process to grow into a fundamental part of your management skills portfolio.

2. At Home

How Much Candor, and How Much Compassion? The family is a test case for establishing the perfect combination. The kids will need your candid take on things so the world doesn’t crash in on them too hard. But your challenge is to give them what they need to hear in a tone that they’re able to hear. Critiquing starts with you both as a practitioner and as a model teacher, so don’t soft ball it, but don’t shirk.

3. At Work

A clear eyed critique is worth its weight in — well — something valuable. The office tends to shift between soft ball and hard ball as you go up the elevator. What you’re expecting may not be what’s expected. So keep your Linus in check and remember, what you hand out today may come around back at you at the next pitch rehearsal.

Linus had it right. There’s a heavy burden of potential, expectations and fear. An even handed but direct critique can help someone overcome the burden and achieve their great potential!

**Earn your friendship and professional standing
by being straight with your critiques!**