

How To Take, And Learn From, Tough Criticism

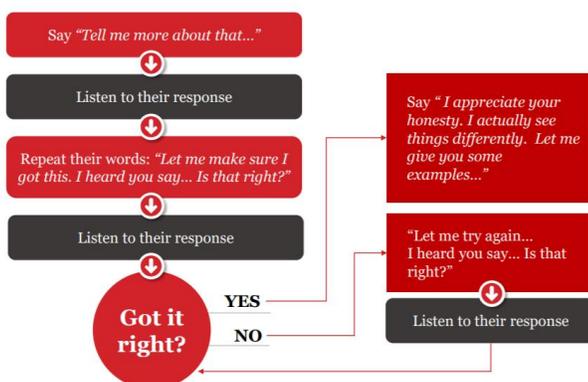
Why we care: Every criticism can be useful, sending valuable signals and offering important insights. Learn how to get certified to teach [Truth at Work: The Science of Delivering Tough Messages](#).

Learn how fast you bounce back from tough criticism using the **10 question Psychological Hardiness Assessment** (see slides). Determine if you are **psychologically hardy, moderately hardy or psychologically fragile** and strengthen and develop where needed. People with a strong **internal locus of control** (“I have control over what happens to me”) handle criticism better than those with an **external locus of control**. If you believe everyone can **grow, develop and change**, criticism becomes just a step in that evolution. See the research work of [Paul Bartone](#) and [Salvatore Maddi](#) for deeper study on psychological hardiness.

The F.I.R.E. Model: As criticism is being delivered, separate the **Facts** (unemotional, candid, observable, objective, specific and timely, you could record them) from the **Interpretations** (emotional reactions to the facts) and the resulting **Reactions** and desired **Ends** (F/IRE). [Read more about using The F.I.R.E. Model.](#)

Example: Boss: “Sally, I asked you to work on the tone of this yesterday, did I not? And look at this, I caught two typos. Look, I count on you to get these things right. I don’t have time to worry about them myself. And it’s like everything I said yesterday was just ignored, which makes me wonder what else you’re missing. Not to mention I’m getting pretty irritated by all this. For the next two months, even for small things, I want to proofread everything before you send it out.”

Apply F.I.R.E. Model to this example and the **only fact** is there were **two typos**, everything else is Interpretations (you ignored me), Reactions (I’m irritated) and desired Ends (for the next 2 months...). If Sally can focus on just the Facts, she will be emotionally poised to manage the situation and do something constructive with the criticism (e.g. what can I do to avoid those typos in the future?).



Flow chart for Structured Listening. Tough criticism escalates when people feel you didn’t hear what they said. **Slowly and silently count to 3** before you open your mouth. (You can’t make your brain go faster in a tough feedback situation, but you can slow down the conversation.) **Elicit, listen and confirm to validate that you heard their words.** Use the FIRE model to dissect the Facts, Interpretations, Reactions and Ends. Move on to unemotional problem solving with **adult-to-adult fact-based conversation**. Follow flow chart script if you **disagree with the criticism**.

Breathe, Use HALT Approach (hungry, angry, lonely tired) and ask for a few moments to center, say “**Whew**” (sends the message “you are coming at me awfully hard.” If location is inappropriate for conversation, **ask to relocate**. Read [If You Want To Be An Empathic Listener, Stop Using This Word](#).

If you're **catastrophizing** ("I'm horrible...", "the boss hates me now..."), **reframing your anxiety** with this **5-step process** allows you to **factually debunk your assumptions** and beliefs and **replace them with positive and factual counter assumptions** and beliefs.

Step 1: What supposedly negative even is happening? *My career progress is going to stop because I have a new boss.*

Step 2: What are your underlying assumptions about this? *I can't adapt to a new boss.*

Step 3: Given your underlying assumptions, what is going to happen to you and how will that make you feel? *I'll be unhappy, frustrated, stifled in my professional growth, and hate my career.*

Step 4: Answer these questions and assess whether your underlying assumptions are rational: *Is my thinking based on obvious facts? What are the counterarguments to these beliefs? Will my thinking here help me achieve my short-term and long-term goals?*

Step 5: Write new rational replacements for the assumptions you made in Step 2. *If my belief that only my boss is responsible for my career growth is wrong, then my new belief must be that I need to take personal responsibility for my career growth.*

Developing anticipation and awareness is the foundation of emotional intelligence and **leads to control**. Once you understand your emotions and why you react and act the way you do in certain situations, you can initiate or avoid certain situations and rehearse and prepare for situations based on your likely reactions. Get ahead of the curve by **proactively asking for feedback** while issues are still small. Ask the boss: "*If you were me, what would you choose to work on?*" [Take the Emotional Intelligence quiz.](#)

Exercise: Pick an emotion and remember a time at work when you felt this emotion (use Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions found on the slides to help). **Ask yourself:** What was the setting? What caused me to feel this way? How did I handle this feeling? Say/write the following: I felt _____ and because I felt that way, I did _____. Then ask yourself: What happened when I handled things this way? How did other people react? Could I have handled my feelings better? How? Make the most of the exercise by working through at least six to eight different emotions. **Repeat** the exercise every few weeks and **look for progress** on a) how you're becoming aware of your emotions "in the moment" and b) how you're handling emotions. Read more about this exercise [here](#).

Thinking **strategically** enables us to be more factual, smarter and savvier when receiving criticism. Sometimes we need criticism to learn where we're falling short. [Find out if Dunning-Krueger is keeping you from hearing tough criticism.](#)

Temporal distancing will keep you strategically minded, in the moment, and you won't react emotionally. Picture yourself and the other person (your truth partner) interacting 6 months from now. Determine: *In 6 months: What do I want our relationship to be like? What changes do I want to have occurred? What do I want to be doing? What do I want my truth partner to be doing?*

Summary: Find the value in the criticisms you receive. Determine your psychological hardiness and use as a baseline. The F.I.R.E. Model keeps you focused the Facts (and not Interpretations, Reactions and desired Ends) when responding to criticism. If you find yourself catastrophizing or ruminating, reframe your anxiety using the 5-step process to factually debunk your assumptions and replace them with factual counter assumptions. Developing anticipation and awareness leads to greater control. Think strategically.

Read [Three Simple Ways to Make Your Workplace More Truthful.](#)

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