

- If possible, lead into the discussion with warranted praise.
- Show concern and offer help in the form of specific solutions and directions.
- Speak in terms of a problematic behavior, not of the person.
- Emphasize description rather than evaluation. Describe what upset you rather than assailing the person whose behavior caused the upset or problem.
- Restrict comments to the present situation without connecting it to old baggage.

Common reactions to criticism, even when well intended and carefully given, include demoralization, anger, aggression, competitiveness, avoidance, and withdrawal. Personalities condition working relationships and comfort with different styles of communication. For example, a “bottom line” person often finds it frustrating to work with someone who spends a lot of time explaining details and alternatives before giving instructions. Conversely, someone who likes details can find it hard to work with a person who sums up everything in a single sentence. Such differences often magnify the difficulty of hearing and accepting criticism. People who want to minimize their emotional responses and learn as much as possible from criticism may find it helpful to keep in mind, and sometimes ask, the following:

What is the problem the critic is trying to bring to my attention?

What are the critic’s concerns? Can specific events that led to this criticism be identified?

Specifically what went wrong in each event, and how could I have avoided it?

What can I take away from this conversation and apply right away?

Moving from Resistance to Problem Solving

Communication techniques can be used to redirect conflicted conversations to effective problem solving. Imagine you’re in a hurry trying to drive a combine or loaded grain truck across a field. At random intervals, it won’t budge. Your first reaction is likely to be to tromp on the accelerator. Not a good idea, as any experienced farmer will confirm. If a big, expensive piece of farm equipment is sputtering, it is time to stop and find out why. A quick check can mean the difference between getting the harvest in on time or getting stuck in mid-operation with a costly break down.

The same is often true with people. It seems the harder they are pushed with brute force, the less reliably they move. When meeting resistance from people who oppose and are critical of them, many people exhibit a reflex of either arguing back or defending their ideas. Rather than improving the situation, these responses often set off verbal ping pong matches, in which nasty comments escalate a conflict. Cousins Roy and Dave played some ping pong one day. See what happened in the following story:



Roy: I'm going to be 55 in a couple of years and want to retire then to relax a little and do some traveling. Let's start working on a plan for the farm to provide me an annual retirement income for as long as I live. You can keep all your equity in the business until you're ready to slow down.

Dave: What a hair-brained idea! The farm can't afford that! I'll have to keep working here for a long time, and you will too if you want it to pay your bills.

Roy: I've worked on this farm with you for 15 years! You are just trying to rip me off as usual!

Dave: No way am I going to saddle myself and my kids with a deal like you want! What are you smoking? Ever since you got married three years ago, you've been making ridiculous demands.

Roy: What you mean, is that ever since I got married, I haven't always been available to cover for you when you decide to take time off.

Dave: I'll fight you tooth and nail on this!

Roy: See you in court, Big Guy.

A way to halt the escalation and steer the conversation toward constructive problem solving is to ask questions to find out what the individual is upset about. Pursue understanding rather than victory. Questioning, actively listening, and reframing can turn ping-pong into a more positive game of catch.

If either of the cousins had tried playing verbal catch, the conversation would probably not have gotten so bitter. Dave might have turned it with something like:



"Roy I understand that you are thinking about your retirement and security for your wife if something should happen to you. I am starting to think more seriously about these things myself. But I am also concerned about the long-term viability of the farm and what that means to my children. I am wondering what other options there may be that would meet your needs and also be good for the farm. What do you say we get some more information together and make a date to talk with our accountant or a financial planner?"

Personal Advice

Giving advice on personal matters rather than techniques of the job is a touchy task. Some people are reluctant to provide it when asked, and others gratuitously offer it on the slightest provocation. More often than not, unsolicited advice is unwelcome. Even a person who appears to be seeking advice may simply want to reach a sympathetic ear. Often most helpful are questions that support a person's examining his or her own situation, such as "What have you done so far?" or "What do you think you should do?"