



## Responding Wisely to Criticism (Part 2 of 2)

*"ASK" is a disciplined and helpful method to turn it into a benefit*

Tim Stevenson

**BEING CRITICIZED IS** inevitable for anyone in a leadership position. The most important issue is how the leader **responds**. The currency of leadership is **credibility**, and your credibility is always on the line when you face this test. Your response to criticism may raise or lower your ability to lead, regardless of the validity of the criticism itself.

### When instincts are counterproductive

There are three instinctive reactions to a threat: **fight**, **flight**, or **freeze**. They can be observed in the animal kingdom and in human behavior. You instantly get ready to defend

yourself, run away from danger, or try to become invisible. Reason and logic are shut down and left in the dust by powerful emotions doing their thing.

Any of the three might be appropriate when we're confronted by genuine objective danger, but these instincts are counter-productive when they take over our behavior in response to criticism. No one enjoys being criticized. Apart from awareness and deliberate decision-making, our instinctive reactions tend to be the classic trio: fight, flight, or freeze. However, it is possible to learn how to respond to criticism and turn it into a positive opportunity. **ASK** is a process for this very purpose.

**A = Attitude**

**S = Spotlight**

**K = Knowledge**

In my previous article we looked at the first point, A = Attitude, and considered several reasons why a leader should think differently about criticism. Rather than giving in to instinct, you can become **aware** and choose to adopt an **open and non-defensive**



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attitude that enables you to derive benefit from the process. Today we will look at the second and third points.

## S = Spotlight

With an open and non-defensive attitude, you can avoid the common and credibility-draining behaviors of denying, defending, or excusing. Now instead of those natural reactions, you do the exact opposite. You put the **Spotlight** on the criticism. This means **you put the focus on the criticism itself**, asking for **details** and **clarification**. You can use questions like these:

“That’s something I haven’t heard before. Can you give me some details?”

“I certainly don’t want anyone to have that impression of me, so I’d like to know more. What do you mean by saying, ‘\_\_\_\_\_’?”

“I’m sorry you feel that way. Would you please help me understand better what I’m doing wrong? For example, what do you mean by ‘\_\_\_\_\_’?”

The Spotlight principle means that you, with an open and non-defensive attitude, will ask for details about the charge. The benefits are many:

- You will gain **awareness** and **clear understanding** of **valid criticisms** you need to hear — the first step in making changes.
- You give the other person the chance to be specific if he’s begun with an indirect charge (which people often do); example, “You’re just too busy.” What is the person really saying? You don’t know until you ASK.
- By asking for specifics, invalid criticisms will be exposed for what they are. They may be an indirect warning about something you need to be aware of, such as

# ASK

Process for responding to criticism and turning it into a benefit

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## A = Attitude

- Your **attitude is most important**. Be *open* and *non-defensive*.
- You **want** to learn and improve, and you **want** to keep channels of communication free and clear.
- Open criticism is an opportunity: you can learn and make positive change, or you can put invalid criticism to rest.

## S = Spotlight

- Turn the spotlight on the criticism itself. Bring it into the light.
- Ask the person to elaborate.
- Take time to gather details.

## K = Knowledge

- Positive change begins with *awareness*. Seek understanding.
- Sift the criticism. Identify what’s valid and discard the rest.
- Thank them for bringing it to your attention. Share your conclusions when appropriate.

brewing staff unhappiness. But they may also be a bum rap, something a person is saying to get the focus off himself (misdirection).

- You will get to the core of “global criticisms,” which will help you sort out what is valid and invalid, and you can decide what to do about it, if anything.

Global criticisms are a particular hot button of mine, because **they are neither fair nor helpful**. Some examples: “You’re a lousy manager” or “You’re a crummy employee.” Some assertions identify themselves as global

criticisms by beginning with “You always” or “You never.” You can’t learn from or respond to charges like these. **Spotlight** will give you some defense against them, and the ability to find out if there’s anything valuable to learn.

**The most important thing is to remain open to valid criticism.** Remember, it is *good* to have something called to your attention which can hinder your success. You can take action to fix, avoid, or protect yourself from a weakness, fault, or blind spot. And remember: A valid criticism can be hidden within a haystack of other things. Your job is to sift through it and find what’s true and valuable.

## K = Knowledge

**Knowledge** is what you’re after. You can’t do anything about a problem of which you are unaware. When you gain awareness you can make choices. You are empowered for action.

There’s also a side benefit for practicing the principles of **Spotlight** and **Knowledge**. By focusing the analytical problem-solving part of your brain, you automatically turn away from the instinctive fight/flight/freeze emotion-driven reactions. By pursuing **understanding**, you become calmer, more rational, and more able to consider the criticism itself.

That calm will also enable you to relate to the person who brought the criticism as a *person*, rather than as an enemy or opponent. You will find you can feel some empathy for the frustration, fear, or anger that motivated them to come to you with the criticism, and gain some appreciation for their perspective.

## Pursuing the conversation to a conclusion

**Don’t rush the conversation.** People can find it very difficult to initiate a confrontation. They have to get psyched up, and the early

stages are sometimes clumsy. But normally, if you are patient, once the dam bursts it will continue for a while. Let someone talk, then ask, “**What else?**” Let them talk some more, then ask again, “**What else?**” They’ll let you know when they’re finished. Then you can ask more questions to gain more understanding. Remember: Merely by listening non-defensively with full attention you can build more leadership credibility.

When you believe it’s time to bring the conversation to a close:

1. Thank them sincerely for bringing the matter to your attention — whatever you believe about the criticism.
2. If it’s a clear matter where you know what you must do, commit to taking action. If you’re not sure, or if even if you disagree, promise to give it careful consideration and get back to them.
3. Take some time to reflect on the validity of their points. Talk to a trusted peer or other advisor if you want an objective opinion.
4. Be sure to get back to the person in a timely matter. Take time to explain where you’ve arrived in your own thinking and what you plan to do.
5. Do it. Follow-through is essential.

Besides the three points — Attitude, Spotlight, and Knowledge — the acronym itself, **ASK**, is a reminder of how to respond. **Don’t respond to criticism by talking. Ask questions.** Be constantly aware that your credibility, the currency of leadership, is always on the line. Listen, consider, and seek understanding. When you understand a problem clearly, “what to do” usually jumps out at you. **L**