



Love

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LOVELY

Lovely

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IN SUMMARY

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- *Catch: Bond in Meaningful Ways (abridged)*
- *Catch: Because Telling Ain't Selling (complete primer)*
- *Command Parallels*
- *First World Maladies Volume I*
- *Lovely*
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- *The Legend of Tabula Raisa*
- *150 Sharks (abridged from Sharking)*

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to anyone who's sought (or needed) honest feedback but was instead given empty, insincere words. To anyone who's used critique in his/her relationships or professional process, please stay on it. There isn't a person out there who can't benefit from this type of exercise.

FOREWORD

Ever notice how certain occasions are rife with uber-sweet nothings?

Weddings.

Interviews.

Making up.

Finishing in second place — or further back in the pack.

Opportunities for thoughtfulness are plentiful. Pivotal moments demand the most sensitive, well-meaning critics on the job. Often, they're nowhere to be found.

Honest feedback, especially when coupled with free means to greater ends, shouldn't be painful. It's a gift. You're delivering something of tremendous value. While it's precious, it's also something that few wish to pursue or receive.

*“If you look for truthfulness,
you might just as well be blind.*

It always seems to be so hard to give.

Honesty is such a lonely word, everyone is so untrue.

Honesty is hardly ever heard, and mostly what I need from you.”

— Billy Joel, “Honesty”

The most common uses of ‘critical’ put people on edge — enduring someone who's overly critical, or visiting the bedside of someone in critical condition. Both are unhappy times.

However, critical also embodies powerfully positive traits — judicious, decisive, vital and indispensable. This spirit is the inspiration for *Lovely*.

Before going too far, let me assure you that I prefer lightly-sweetened critiques. A little bit of sugar makes any bitterness more palatable. I'm asking that you avoid using multiple packets.

Critiques that amplify strengths achieve more than those designed to address weaknesses. That doesn't mean that you abandon one for the other. A balance should be struck.

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Bearers of perspective and suggestions deliver the highest order of assistance to those in need. The process shouldn't be delayed, nor should it be completely watered-down. Keeping quiet, gushing, passing the buck or otherwise withholding substance are letdowns to anyone who's at least somewhat dear to you.

Consider an important behavioral phenomenon. Studies show that those who witness a crime generally don't take appropriate action. They fear consequences. They assume others will report the incident. The result? No one does anything. The crime escapes correction.

If you're witness to something that's far from ideal (or even just a little askew), and you have ideas for how to impact matters positively, then please don't hesitate! Don't stand by idly while your friend, colleague or family member falls short of success. Help meaningfully!

Please don't allow your words to wither away to sweet nothings.

Do we resort to inadequate words because we're inherently fragile? Do we lack the strength to relay something as basic as what we see in front of us — or better — what likely lies ahead?

Remember: *If you're on the inside, then you're likely part of the problem. If you're on the outside looking in, then you can be part of the solution.*

Do we surround ourselves with too high a concentration of meek individuals — those who can't chew or swallow a well-thought pill aimed at feeling better?

Are we stretched too thin? Do we cram too many items into a day, with each receiving less than optimal attention and care?

Maybe we're just not challenging our brains to perform at peak levels. We're happy to accept mediocrity. There's no urgency. We go about our own business, even as we know our senses require training, paces and exercise. It's yet another sign of societal sloth and complacency.

What role do you tend to play in events that transpire in less than spectacular fashion? Perhaps it's time to muster up the mettle to be a catalyst. Be the most sincere person in the room. Show someone that you want the best that's possible for him or her. Be generous.

There's a way to do this so you don't seem like a bad person.

This book's mission is sixfold:

- To assume the ubiquity of foibles.
- To illustrate failures in the lowest forms of positivity.
- To prescribe what most incorrectly label as “negative” feedback.
- To do so in a manner that most will welcome (or at least stomach).
- To advance understanding of various constructive mechanisms and obstacles.
- To demonstrate ways to build upon strengths (will also tending to weaknesses).

If a detailed study of psychology and communications isn't for you, then please feel free to skip the final chapter, “inner workings.” There, I discuss things like personal development, critical thinking, interpersonal communication, learned helplessness and conflict resolution.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

“Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.”

— Winston Churchill

“What responsibilities do we have to the people we live with, whether they are family or strangers?”

— Scott Nolte

“Positiveness is a most absurd foible. If you are in the right, it lessens your triumph. If in the wrong, it adds shame to your defeat.”

— Laurence Sterne

“I knuckle down with my demons, and with my weaknesses.”

— Carlos Santana

“You can’t let praise or criticism get to you. It’s a weakness to get caught up in either one.”

— John Wooden

“We would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism.”

— Todd Ruthman

“We must concentrate not merely on the negative expulsion of war but the positive affirmation of peace.”

— Martin Luther King Jr.

“He only profits from praise who values criticism.”

— Heinrich Heine

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I. FOIBLES ABOUND

A LITTLE BIT OUR OWN

WHAT MAKES YOU PERFECT?

STAR-SPANGLED AWESOME

GO ON THE DEFENSIVE

WOODY

VULNERABLE IS THE NEW VENERABLE

GUILT, BY ASSOCIATION

A LITTLE BIT OUR OWN

If perfection is rare (or even unattainable), then it follows that imperfections are everywhere. If we're surrounded by them, then how much longer before we acclimate?

It's an interesting puzzle to consider. Humans are said to be the most adaptable life form on the planet. If that's true, then why can't we successfully navigate what should be basic discourse? I'm talking about peaceful and productive exchanges of feedback.

Sweet nothings are an acknowledgment that humans are fragile. It's coddling. The world isn't perfect, therefore all of us present flaws and foibles. We should be able to bear the sound of temporarily difficult words — because they're designed to create a more pleasing state.

I like the word 'foible' because it's cute. It softens what's otherwise tough to swallow. It produces a giggle. Change, on the other hand, is stressful. It's not easy to face weaknesses. It's hardly instinctive to endure what it takes to achieve an outstanding outcome.

*“The foibles that we ridicule must at least be a little bit our own.
Only then will the work be a part of our own flesh.
The garden must be weeded.”*

— Paul Klee

The transition from indifference to engagement begins with ourselves. We accept that the odds of reaching true perfection range from extremely rare to impossible. We can't avoid this truth if we're being honest about the world in which we live.

We're a very small cog in a much greater series of gears. We understand shortcomings inherently because they reside in all of us. The slightest twitch can move the entire mechanism. We all should want progress from stagnation.

Thinking in terms of foibles is helpful because the nicks are slight and easily overlooked. The success of people and their endeavors can be celebrated despite foibles.

WHAT MAKES YOU PERFECT?

Nothing. It's a myth.

I rarely smile, especially not in photos. My teeth have been a constant source of health issues. They say that comes from British blood. Whatever it is, I'm completely aware it's a flaw.

I joke too often. I don't mean to be "that guy" at the wrong time. While I've gotten better about it over the years, it still plagues me on occasion.

I'm not the most sympathetic person you'll ever meet. I regularly make an effort to see things as others might — generally because my work in the services field relies on it. Unfortunately, it doesn't always make its way into personal relationships. It's not also felt.

I tend to overlook what's going well and focus on what needs improvement. I figure people know what's right and working well. I feel like we're all a touch lazier than we should be, and that hurts us, so I try to advocate progress. It irritates some that I don't acknowledge the little successes often enough. I'm starting to value why this is also important.

What's my point with these admissions? I'm far from perfect. We're all in that boat. I'm acutely aware of my shortcomings, but I work hard to improve myself. That's all I can do.

We can't wait for a blue moon to push ourselves. We need to lose regularly — because of ourselves. We need to feel dumb, yet again, but pick ourselves up to mature further.

As you try to help those around you with meaningful assistance, there are three responses you'll hear repeatedly:

- Don't judge me!
- What makes you perfect?
- You're not God.

Keep your retort very simple. "Of course, I'm not. I never said I was." Try listing a few foibles or recent failures, then return to helpful efforts. Don't give up. We're all in this together!

STAR-SPANGLED AWESOME

How insidious can sweetness be? Look no further than a sugar-coated brand campaign we call American patriotism. Nationalism is mostly a good thing — except when it's delusional.

One of the great moments in television came during the pilot for the HBO series *Newsroom*. The scene is a Q&A with three panelists. A college student (Jenny) asks the main character (Will McAvoy), “Why is America the greatest country in the world?”

Google “Newsroom opening scene” for a video clip, or read from the show’s transcript below:

Jenny: *Hi, my name is Jenny, I’m a sophomore, and this is for all three of you. Can you say in one sentence or less — (Laughter in the room) you know what I mean — can you say why America is the greatest country in the world?*

Sharon (a panelist): *Diversity and opportunity.*

Debate Moderator: *Lewis?*

Lewis: *Freedom and freedom. So let’s keep it that way.*

(applause)

DM: *Will.*

Will: *The New York Jets (Laughter).*

DM: *No. I’m gonna hold you to an answer on that. What makes America the greatest country in the world.*

Will: *Well, Louis and Sharon said it. Diversity and opportunity and freedom and freedom.*

(Will sees a woman in the back of the audience hold up a notebook. On it she’s written IT’S NOT. Then she writes something else: BUT IT CAN BE.)

DM: *I’m not letting you go back to the airport without answering the question.*

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(Will looks back at the woman holding the notebook, but she's gone, replaced by another woman wearing the same outfit. He is silent for several beats.)

Will: *Well, our Constitution is a masterpiece. James Madison was a genius. The Declaration of Independence is for me the single greatest piece of American writing.*

(The DM just looks at him.)

Will: *You don't look satisfied.*

DM: *One's a set of laws and the other is a declaration of war. I want a human moment from you.*

(Will looks back into the audience and again sees the first woman, who is again holding up her notebook. IT'S NOT.)

DM: *What about the people? Why is it —*

Will: *It's NOT the greatest country in the world, Professor. That's my answer.*

DM: *You're saying —*

Will: *Yes.*

DM: *Let's talk about —*

Will (addressing Sharon, the Democratic panelist): *Fine. Sharon, the NEA is a loser. Yeah, it accounts for a penny out of our paycheck, but he (the Republican panelist) gets to hit you with it anytime he wants. It doesn't cost money. It costs votes. It costs airtime. And column inches. You know why people don't like liberals? Because they lose. If liberals are so f***ing smart then how come they lose so goddamn always?*

Sharon: *Hey —*

Will (turning to the Republican panelist): *With a straight face, you're gonna sit there and tell students that America is so star-spangled awesome that we're the only ones in the world who have freedom? Canada has freedom. Japan has freedom. The UK. France. Italy. Germany. Spain.*

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Australia. BELGIUM has freedom. Two hundred and seven sovereign states in the world, like, a hundred and eighty of them have freedom.

DM: *All right—*

(Will points to the college student).

Will: *And you, Sorority Girl, just in case you accidentally wander into a voting booth one day, there's some things you should know. One of them is there's absolutely no evidence to support the statement that we're the greatest country in the world. We're seventh in literacy. Twenty-seventh in math. Twenty-second in science. Forty-ninth in life expectancy. A hundred and seventy-eighth in infant mortality. Third in median household income. Number four in labor force and number four in exports. We lead the world in only three categories: Number of incarcerated citizens per capita, number of adults who believe angels are real, and defense spending, where we spend more than the next twenty-six countries combined, twenty-five of whom are allies.*

*Now none of this is the fault of a twenty-year-old college student, but you nonetheless are without a doubt a member of the worst, period, generation, period, ever, period. So when you ask what makes us the greatest country in the world, I dunno what the f*** you're talkin' about. Yosemite?*

(Silence for several beats. Will looks back at the woman with the notebook, but she's been replaced by the real woman again.)

Will: *Sure used to be. We stood up for what was right. We fought for moral reasons. We passed laws, struck down laws, for moral reasons. We waged wars on poverty, not poor people. We sacrificed. We cared about our neighbors. We put our money where our mouths were. We never beat our chest.*

We built great big things, made ungodly technological advances, explored the universe, cured diseases, and we cultivated the world's greatest artists and the world's greatest economy. We reached for the stars. Acted like men.

We aspired to intelligence. We didn't belittle it—it didn't make us feel inferior.

We didn't identify ourselves by who we voted for in the last election, and we didn't, oh, we didn't scare so easy.

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(He chuckles.)

We were able to be all these things and do all these things because we were informed. By great men. Men who were revered.

The first step in solving any problem is recognizing there is one. America is not the greatest country in the world anymore.

(Will turns to DM.)

Enough?

(Cut to black.)

GO ON THE DEFENSIVE

No, I'm not suggesting that you act stubbornly in the face of critique. Just the same, your arsenal would likely benefit from a form of defensive behavior. Its acceptance rate is low because its effectiveness is counter-intuitive. Once you try it, the results will surprise you.

Successful people are acutely aware of their weaknesses. Like Average Joes, their careers begin with masking foibles. Eventually, the best come to embrace and even leverage them.

Winning personalities stop trying to underline what makes them special. They understand the dangers of egomania. Instead, they call attention to their shortcomings. They trust the abundance of their talents and reputations. They leave the offense to their publicity team.

“The foibles of my body are pretty much out there in the work I do.”

— Philip Seymour Hoffman

Assuming a defensive posture through temporarily tearing yourself down does not equate to deliberating on weaknesses or forgetting strengths. Awareness remains sharp and steady.

Joshing lightens the load for Average Joe. It's easier for him to accept someone else's good fortune. It's a leveling agent. Without it, Joe finds discomfort in conceding ground.

Joe will be quick to offer:

Sally deserves everything that's coming to her.

Bob has worked hard for what he has.

They haven't forgotten where they came from!

Beyond the emotional capital that's gained, another advantage is squarely in play. It's easier to provide honest feedback to the successful person who's reasonable or critical with herself. You don't stress the reaction you'll receive because she's already knocking herself.

**The rich keep getting richer. It takes money to make money.
Guess what happens when the successful are inviting and
receiving greater levels of feedback?**

WOODY

One of the great masters of feats and foibles is Woody Allen.

Woody's peculiar. He's far from perfect. Most laugh before he opens his mouth to exhibit the fragmented, frenetic energy that's made him famous. When you consider his success and the depth of his intelligence, the joke stops there.

I imagine you can say just about anything to Woody. That's the power in embracing imperfections. Those around him are drawn that much closer. He's one step closer to receiving a valuable gift — honest feedback!

"If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans."

*"If you're not failing every now and again,
it's a sign you're not doing anything very innovative."*

"I failed to make the chess team because of my height."

"I have bad reflexes. I was once run over by a car being pushed by two guys."

— Woody Allen

An interviewer for *The Paris Review* once explored the level of importance an artist should place on the staying power of his work. Woody's response was refreshing:

I hate when art becomes a religion. I feel the opposite. When you start putting a higher value on works of art than people, you're forfeiting your humanity. That you can create is a kind of nice accident. It happens to have high value in society, but it's not as noble an attribute as courage."

VULNERABLE IS THE NEW VENERABLE

Sometimes the most courageous thing you can do is be real. Let others witness your process. Let strangers know you fail. Successful people know that losses outnumber wins. The losing makes winning that much more poignant and pleasing.

Courage may be strongest through vulnerability. Too many (including myself) forget the feat *of foibles*. Determination is accomplishment. Being unafraid to flop is powerful. It underlines your humanity at a time when expectations are detrimentally high regarding your abilities.

In the midst of building a winner, show how it starts as a loser.

“To be a good loser is to learn how to win.”

— Carl Sandburg

“All the world loves a good loser.”

— Kin Hubbard

I recently saw a school play of *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. The themes hit me in a totally different way than when I was a child.

I once looked down on Charlie. He couldn't get the kite to fly. I could.

He couldn't kick a football without landing on his butt. I kicked 40-yarders.

He harbored immense self-doubt, which chipped away at his confidence. I moved assuredly.

Now I see that Charlie is the loser who wins — and in a big way. Lucy works hard to appear successful, but it's difficult to like her. It's Charlie who *is* successful by the end of the story. Respect flows from peers because of his desire, ethic, flops, and eventual results.

There are two kinds of winners in life — those you line up to support, and those you hate to love. If the latter weren't insanely talented, then you wouldn't cheer for him.

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Losers can quickly become winners. It happens every day. Consider one of the more surprising, recent examples of this phenomenon.

George W. Bush wasn't brilliant. His SAT scores were 566 verbal and 640 math (each out of 800). He was a C student in political science and government classes at Yale University.

While the record has been expunged, he was allegedly arrested for cocaine possession in 1972. He was arrested for driving under the influence, which left him unable to drive for two years. Bush has admitted to abusing alcohol until age 40.

Bush didn't excel in the oil business, nor did he lead the Texas Rangers to a championship as their owner. On his watch, several players abused performance enhancing drugs (PEDs).

Despite his shortcomings and unimpressive track record, Bush was elected President of the United States. It was a stunning yet poignant turn of events. Winners rise from losing.

“To those of you who received honors, awards and distinctions, I say well done. And to the C students, I say you, too, can be President of the United States.”

*“I have a different vision of leadership.
A leader is someone who brings people together.”*

“America is the land of the second chance.”

*“I have written a book.
This will come as quite a shock to some.
They didn't think I could read, much less write.”*

— President George W. Bush

GUILT, BY ASSOCIATION

Success is a guilty pleasure. Most of us feel that there's something at least a little wrong about having more than is needed. If you're an unforgiving narcissist, then all bets are off.

The next level of self-deprecation is to diminish yourself as you raise someone else higher. It's a form of guilt by association — and it generates still more feedback.

The writer of a chart-topping song offers:

"All I did was write a song about courage. I wasn't actually courageous. If you want to commend someone, then turn to those fighting fires in New York, or the soldiers defending our freedom."

His fan responds:

"You're selling yourself short. It's a great song. It lifted my spirits at a time when I needed it most."

The songwriter concludes:

"I'm happy for any comfort I could bring to you through my music."

I'm not suggesting here that you should manipulate people into believing that you care.

I'm saying you should work on your humility. Be authentic. If you're talented, hard-working and connected enough to have reached critical success, then find a fair and reasonable place for your work and its impact.

When you do for others, or when you have others at heart first, the gifts return tenfold.

*"Ask not what your country can do for you,
ask what you can do for your country."*

— President John F. Kennedy

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

— Jesus of Nazareth

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II. FALSE POSITIVES

POSITIVELY NEGATIVE

CHOOSE STRENGTH

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A PINCH OF SUGAR

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POSITIVELY NEGATIVE

It's one of the worst societal tags that can be placed upon you: YOU'RE SO NEGATIVE!

What can be quickly forgotten with proclamations like this is your good intentions. Your feedback was designed to improve the status quo. Wanting the best for others, longing for progress and influencing perspectives — these aren't inherently negative.

What you're dealing with is a projection — a false positive. People who are less than honest, or who don't deal well with critique, tend to push back. They want you to stop making them feel bad for — well, being less than good.

*“Man cannot discover new oceans
unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore.”*

— Andre Gide

“By changing nothing, nothing changes.”

— Tony Robbins

*“The best thing you can do is the right thing;
the next best thing you can do is the wrong thing;
the worst thing you can do is nothing.”*

— President Theodore Roosevelt

Resisting change equates to denying goodness. Few things should be left as they are. Much in life can be improved.

Greatness doesn't happen accidentally. Most of us know that it's reached through hard work. It's an uphill battle. Those who complicate the already difficult climb have bad intentions.

They claim YOU'RE negative because THEY'RE guilty of it. Interesting how projections work. The good news is that detractors are easy to overcome.

CHOOSE STRENGTH

Each of us has the ability to overcome weaknesses and find strength. It's a choice and ongoing commitment to fight through what's normal to something more substantial.

“Lay a firm foundation with the bricks that others throw at you.”

— David Brinkley

Perhaps you limit yourself by thinking you're weaker than you are.

Maybe you've fallen short of goals because YOU lack something — or you allow something to stand in the way of your success.

Perhaps other times you've allowed the shortcomings of others to highlight a vulnerability in you — or you falsely perceived that others were more fit.

It's time for these patterns to stop. Rise to the occasion regardless of the obstacles!

The deepest, most valuable forms of positivity will seem negative to those least able to capitalize on gifts.

“Each person's task in life is to become an increasingly better person.”

— Leo Tolstoy

“Your life does not get better by chance, it gets better by change.”

— Jim Rohn

What's the easiest way to overcome those who say you're being negative?

- Ask why he has chosen to react in an accusatory way.
- Break down what you said and underline your positive intentions. Ask, “was that so bad?”
- List one or more weaknesses you have and offer that we're all trying to get better. See if you can soothe preemptively, before he asks, “WHO are YOU to tell ME what to do?”
- Alternate between ending and beginning with a bit of self-deprecation.

DECONSTRUCTING SWEETENERS

False positives and sugar-coatings are an American mainstay. That doesn't mean the tradition should be steeped any further. Some institutions become an obstacle to progress. We all can name a few that were toppled for the overall advancement of society.

Let's examine why sweet nothings are so flimsy and unworthy of permanence.

Sweet nothings are contrivances.

This isn't imagination or ingenuity where something is being created from nothing for the greater good. Contrivances have a much more base target — keeping things as they currently are, however undesirable that may be.

Low forms of contrivance contain a high level of impurity. They lack sincerity. They only work on a less perceptive audience. Miss Sweetness smiles through her teeth with an air that she knows something. Unfortunately, she's decided that you're unworthy of her help.

“The most destructive criticism is indifference.”

— E. W. Howe

If her hope was to make you feel better about yourself, and she did so with the thinnest, most common commentary available to her, then she likely failed. You were left with the painful sense that something wasn't being said.

To contrive something and pass it off as true is to tell people they're stupid. For their sake, let's hope that's correct. Still, why go through life wishing and hanging that on people?

Sweet nothings are guarded.

I don't mean protected as in having an armed patrol that guards the perimeter of your home while you sleep. I'm talking about the kind that makes you feel *less secure* and certain. The opposite of protection is achieved.

Words that are formed too carefully don't float effortlessly from lips like butterflies. They trip and fall and admit that they've been clumsy since birth.

*"In criticism I will be bold,
and as sternly, absolutely just with friend and foe.
From this purpose, nothing shall turn me."*

— Edgar Allen Poe

When her sentiments are offered in such a way that she appears to be shielding you from harm's way, two things happen. You become anxious and concerned, or you wonder why she's not instead delivering you to safety.

Most of us come with a built-in mechanism for sensing danger. Don't underestimate that.

Sweet nothings are imprecise.

Those best at platitudes tend to keep things simple. They won't resemble a Buddhist monk's commentary on natural laws through haiku. That would be eloquent. No, they will be kitsch, cliché and limited in meaning.

Lovely!

Looks great!

Very nice!

Proud of you!

If you're sincere, and you've consistently shown yourself to be positive in substantive ways, then brevity is perfectly adequate. Those who offer one to three words of hollow feedback, flash a quick smile, then leave so-so things as they are — they're shortchanging you.

It only takes a few extra moments to offer colorful input. The generosity can go a long way. Maybe she searches for the perfect words to characterize a joy she wants you to share. Maybe she seeks clarity, so that you avoid confusion in navigating the challenge ahead of you.

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You and she are going through life's journeys together, as fellow travelers.

“Sympathy is the first condition of criticism.”

— Henri Frederic Amiel

Compare a sympathetic person with a bearer of sweet nothings. It's a distant relationship. Miss Sweetness dresses and presents herself precisely. Crisp communication may be a staple of her success. She has little time to pass wisdom along to you. She just couldn't be bothered.

Sweet nothings arrive too late.

In the exact instant when feedback is due, the shine is applied one step too late — and that's if you're lucky. Sometimes, there's an awkward pause before sweet nothings. The words that follow can fast become a waste of your attention.

Timing is everything. Positivity that's fashionably late is of little use.

“Silence is sometimes the severest criticism.”

— Charles Buxton

Standing by silently, making excuses for why she can't be there, hoping someone else will do the perceived “dirty work” and lacking the conviction to be honest with the words she offers — these are tremendous withholdings.

When someone needs you, he'll take just about anything that rings true. Sometimes, he just wants someone to be present. That doesn't need to be pretty or complete — just punctual.

A moment that's starkly different than the one which preceded it demonstrates just how precious and limitless the smallest segment of time can be.

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When someone doesn't know there's a need, and you arrive to prevent an unfortunate scenario, you form a bond for life. You're only doing what's decent and natural, but it comes at a time when others choose to be insensitive and artificial.

Sweet nothings are inconsistent.

There isn't a single person among us who hasn't been served a cocktail of smiles with scowls. At the very least, you've heard that such things exist.

While you're receiving her feedback, it's all sweetness — short and exactly what's easiest to say and be heard. But after she's gone, she's may sing a different tune. She reveals what she really thinks to anyone who'll stand as audience.

*“A few of your buddies,
they sure look shady.
Blades are long clenched,
tight in their fist.
Aimin' straight at your back,
and I don't think they'll miss.
They smile in your face.
All the time, they wanna take your place —
backstabbers.”*

— The O'Jays

A simple follow-up question is all that's needed to test the validity, sincerity and depth of feedback in real time. Dolores, tell me, why do you feel that way? *Um. Er. Oh wait, there's Jenny. I simply MUST say hello!*

Looks like you've been buffed again.

The only question that remains is whether it's better to know or remain blissfully ignorant.

UP SOMETHING

No, not “up” as a loud car honk followed by “UP yours!”

Turn up the volume. Push a song up the pop charts. Move up the corporate ladder. Up, up and away in my beautiful balloon!

It’s time to take action — to see things clearly from a greater vantage point. Ironically, we often get to the next level fastest by first falling short, tasting failure, picking ourselves up, learning from mistakes and drastically improving the next time.

*“We are all formed of frailty and error;
let us pardon reciprocally each other’s folly —
that is the first law of nature.”*

— Voltaire

In this, we must be careful. We can excuse ourselves for our mistakes because they’re inevitable, but that doesn’t excuse us from the trials of progress. Unless you earn a living through comedy, all of us should be focused on feats before follies.

Some achievements are small and quiet. Most of us aren’t built to change the entire world.

Ripple effects make it more than impressive to change one tiny thing for the better. We’re all connected. The world is shrinking. Will you abandon, repeat or amplify ripples to waves — and waves to tsunamis?

Critique challenges the way things stand. What’s possible relies on two generally-opposed states: perception and reception. Some must perceive and weigh the gap between ideal and unfulfilled. Others must be willing to consider and change. It’s delicate business.

“The dread of criticism is the death of genius.”

— William Gilmore Simms

LIKE NATARAJA

The Hindu god Shiva has a favorite dance. Nataraja. The cosmic jig and juggle keeps two seemingly disparate forces in balance: destruction and creation. The model is an inspiring metaphor for critique.

He's surrounded by a ring of fire. Each of his many appendages is engaged. The objective is to destroy a weary universe and prepare for process of creation anew. The dance is not easy. Yet, Shiva's face remains stoic.

Under his right foot is a pinned demon who symbolizes the conquering of ignorance. The other foot is lifted in liberation and balance. Snakes are coiled around his right forearm and waist, which represent the potential for rebirth that exists in everything.

His upper right hand holds a damaru (a small drum that's shaped like an hourglass). Its beat is the passage of time. Shiva's upper left hand contains agni (fire), signifying destruction. This fuels the ring around him.

His second right hand introduces the abhaya mudra (fearlessness in Sanskrit) and bestows protection from evil. Shiva's second left hand points to his left foot with the sign of the elephant. This leads the way through the jungle of ignorance.

The long, matted tresses of Shiva's hair (usually piled up in a knot) loosen during the dance. They crash into the heavenly bodies and knock them off course or destroy them instantly.

Like Nataraja, critique can quickly resemble tumult. There are many moving parts. It's a delicate dance. Many become heated in the face of criticism, no matter how constructive it may be offered. Assurances must be offered. A positive example must be set.

For the dance to achieve its promise, remember who the real enemy is — ignorance. Can't overlook undesirable results. Can't shun the paths to improvement. Sometimes, it's necessary to wipe the slate clean and start over. Opportunity can be promoted through deconstruction.

Surround your critique with warmth and light. Overcome the urge to abandon matters to the dark.

A PINCH OF SUGAR

If humankind is mostly frail, and if shortcomings are ubiquitous, then it follows that catalysts must nurture at least a softer side (if not be wholly sensitive).

Self improvement is one gritty transaction after another. I'm certainly not implying here that you should become less serious, flip-flop here and there or retire your backbone.

When forming feedback, leave a small percentage of sugar. She probably prefers lightly-sweetened to sugar-free.

The important thing to remember? Keep the sugar light. Note one or two things that are already spot on, then move to underline the bulk of what could be improved. This way, the pill is slightly less bitter to swallow.

“Criticism, like rain, should be gentle enough to nourish a man’s growth without destroying his roots.”

— Frank A. Clark

Sometimes, with the most honest people, you'll want to apologize for even the slightest amount of sweetener. They don't require it, you've included it just to be safe, but you can't afford for them to read you as less sincere or less credible.

John, I hope you know that I have a great deal of respect for you. I've been careful to mention the good with the bad. If that's not necessary, then please just tell me that. I meant no disrespect.

A shrinking world means that lanes are fewer. They're more narrow than in the past, which means they're naturally more congested. Navigating them can quickly feel rushed.

In this environment, the courtesies you offer in counterpoint demonstrate your knowledge and ease in this new world. While others push and shove, you proceed gracefully.

JUST SAYING

You've mustered up the strength to critique something, and you've said what you mean. Allow for a retort or discussion. Don't abandon support of your opinion and signal that your words were nothing more than a common zinger.

If sugar is a productive feedback additive, then "just saying" is a detriment. Why demote your words so quickly?

NPR's Scott Simon said it best in his piece: "[It's Rude! It's Crude! It's Stupid! I'm Just Saying](#)"

Just saying puts a fire escape onto the end of a sentence. It lets you express a stern (or a rude) opinion, but not really. You're just saying. It invites the listener to discount what we've just heard, even as we're reeling from it.

"Just saying" is a disservice — both to the person offering it and the feedback's recipient. It wastes a timely exchange.

You couldn't remain silent any longer. You raised your voice, but chose a careless, half-serious approach. You didn't display confidence or composure, and you didn't show compassion for your counterpart. Your words were harmful instead of helpful. That's regrettable behavior.

"Just saying" is cowardly communication. Feedback is delivered in a loose, incendiary manner. Veiled as a joke, it's careless and confrontational.

When your actions lack conviction, you shouldn't expect to inspire a rally. Those who take aim and deliver potshots — especially those who diminish their offense two seconds after taking action — are only fooling themselves. They'll quickly find themselves out of favor.

All lip and no heart is a label to avoid. Fair and balanced feedback. Tough love. These are desirable outcomes. Achieve either by holding your ground. Don't dance around the ring like a shadow boxer who sticks and moves yet lands nothing of significance. It's a weak showing.

THE EVERWISE MODEL

Recently, I was asked to join Everwise to provide mentorship to emerging leaders.

For those interested in doing the same, I highly recommend that you review their introduction or apply to become a mentor at geteverwise.com.

One of the cornerstones of Everwise is effective feedback. Mentor and protégé alike rely on an honest, healthy exchange of professional opinions. Developing your ability to give and receive feedback is critical to getting the most out of the partnership.

Everwise defines effective feedback as:

- Descriptive rather than evaluative.
- Specific rather than general.
- Accountable to the needs of both the receiver and provider.
- Directed toward behavior the receiver can control.
- Solicited rather than imposed.
- Well-timed.
- Checked to ensure clear communication.

Here's how to give effective feedback:

- State your positive intent and constructive purpose in offering feedback.
- Ask for permission to give the feedback.
- Describe the observed behavior.
- Describe feelings/reactions/impact.
- Check for understanding and invite your partner to respond.
- Talk about its application for the future.
- Summarize and express support.

Here's how to receive effective feedback:

- Assume positive intent.
- Keep an open mind.
- Listen carefully. Do not interrupt or become defensive.
- Ask for more information.
- Check for understanding.
- Ask for help in applying the feedback to future situations.
- Thank your partner for offering feedback.
- Commit to take action.

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III. STRENGTH TRAINING

**SELF CORRECTING
INDIFFERENCE BREAKING
AMPLIFICATION
A REGIMEN**

SELF-CORRECTING

No, this isn't self-healing — where a damaged surface magically returns to like-new condition. Self-correcting is an important rite of passage in a professional's career (*see also* [“The Art of Self-Correction is an Essential Business Skill”](#)). It signals maturity.

What's the best thing we can do to aid progress? Own mistakes and weaknesses. Take the extraordinary measure that saves others from the difficulty of addressing a weakness.

When you're strong enough to self-correct, you shed the defensive posturing that normally would greet those compelled to help you. You come to the table as the kind of player that anyone would welcome on a team.

Here are a few benefits to self-correcting:

- Teamwork is simplified — no one needs to tiptoe around those who own their mistakes.
- Leadership is exhibited — we all know it takes strength to admit when you're wrong.
- Feedback is amplified — because you've shown to care about improving yourself.
- Following suit is encouraged — because you've taken the sting out of failure.
- Winning is unlocked — because those who finish first have generally also finished last.

Self-correcting is like the dragon, the Chinese symbol of protection. It defends groups against blind-siding threats from unspoken voices, factions, defensive behavior, hurt feelings, etc.

It's a great productivity tool. You and the team are able to get out in front of the type of problems that derail success down the road.

“Once we know our weaknesses they cease to do us any harm.”

— Georg C. Lichtenberg

The next time someone inquires about your weaknesses, take two steps:

- List weaknesses — underline that no one is perfect, and you're striving to improve.
- Point out how this is *probably* one of your greatest strengths — that too few professionals know how to handle or make good on criticism. Offer “probably” to guard yourself in the event that eyebrows are raised in the presence of somewhat uncommon thinking.

INDIFFERENCE BREAKING

Regardless of the changes you've made in life, there's one thing that can stop the spread of your goodwill dead in its tracks: indifference.

Each day, the phenomenon gains traction. It takes care to consider and adopt change.

“There is nothing harder than the softness of indifference.”

— Clare Boothe Luce

Gallup reported in recent years that seven out of 10 workers have “checked out” or are actively disengaged from their jobs (*State of the American Workplace Report*, 2013).

Engagement data remains largely stagnant since they first investigated in 2000.

Disappointing engagement is damaging for two reasons:

- Active disengagement costs the U.S. as much as \$550 billion in economic activity yearly.
- Indifference poses a significant threat to any attempt at progress.

Also according to Gallup, workers fall into one of three categories on the job:

- **Not engaged workers** (50 million) can be difficult to spot. They are not hostile or disruptive. They show up and kill time with little or no concern about customers, productivity, profitability, waste, safety, mission and purpose of the teams, or developing customers. They are thinking about lunch or their next break. They are essentially “checked out.” Surprisingly, these people are not only a part of your support staff or sales team, but they are also sitting on your executive committee.
- **Actively disengaged workers** (20 million) are more or less out to damage their company. They monopolize managers' time; have more on-the-job accidents; account for more quality defects; contribute to shrinkage (theft); are sicker; miss more days; and quit at a higher rate than engaged employees do. Whatever the engaged do (e.g., solving problems, innovating and creating new customers), the actively disengaged try to undo.
- **Engaged workers** (30 million) are the best colleagues. They cooperate to build an organization, institution or agency. They are behind everything good that happens there. These employees are involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work. They know the scope of their jobs and look for new and better ways to achieve outcomes. They are 100% psychologically committed to their work. And, they are the only people in an organization who create new customers.

LOVELY

Dig even deeper into the data and alarms sound at each consideration:

- Only 36% of managers and executives are engaged.
- Only 22% of U.S. employees are engaged *and* thriving.
- Baby boomers are more likely to be actively disengaged than other age groups.
- Those with college degrees are more likely to be running on autopilot at work.
- Only 41% of employees can relay their company's brand and key differentiators.

In summary, America's most mature, experienced, empowered and educated workers are less than focused or energized. In business, the top 25% of teams are responsible for nearly 50% fewer accidents and 41% fewer quality defects than the bottom 25%.

What does engagement look like?

Gallup has identified what it calls Q12 — the dozen best predictors of employee and workgroup performance. They're essentially affirmations of engagement.

- I know what is expected of me at work.
- I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.
- At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
- In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
- My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
- There is someone at work who encourages my development.
- At work, my opinions seem to count.
- The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
- My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
- I have a best friend at work.
- In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
- This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.

These indicators are maximized through healthy feedback. As engagement increases, so too will the levels of productivity, customer satisfaction and innovation.

Success lies in the care that's taken. They say you can do anything you set your heart and mind to achieve. When you don't care, you don't perform. You undermine others.

“The general consciousness about the importance of employee engagement seems to have increased in the past decade, but there is a gap between knowing about engagement and doing something about it in most American workplaces.”

— Jim Hatter, Gallup

AMPLIFICATION

Of the three recommendations that Gallup makes for accelerating engagement, one stands above the rest. Develop strengths!

*“Success is achieved by developing our strengths,
not by eliminating our weaknesses.”*

— Marilyn vos Savant

It’s not without hesitation that I’ve included a section on this. Many Americans have a bloated sense of self worth that can quickly cross over to entitlement and wasted opportunity.

Tell the typical American to focus on his strengths and you succeed mostly at stroking an already damaging ego. You promote the fluffiest form of positivity. The only change you may affect is to get a little more from existing talents.

Unless you speak expressly to weaknesses, or at least mix in discussion of failure with success, you merely scratch the surface of strength training. He remains exposed. Destructive patterns repeat. The work rate is too casual to build the strength that matters.

*“When a batter swings and I see his knees move,
I can tell just what his weaknesses are.
I put the ball where I know he can’t hit it.”*

— Satchel Paige

This said, if you can produce an environment whereby strengths are amplified and weaknesses are also fortified, then your critiques will produce fruit more easily. Data shows that engagement alone increases productivity by 7.8%.

Here’s the critical path of least resistance:

- Identify how someone naturally thinks, feels and behaves.
- Build on those talents to achieve more consistent performance.
- Create new strengths.

“Build up your weaknesses until they become your strong points.”

— Knute Rockne

Remember that the process of discovering talents will be embraced by significantly fewer people than the more concrete action of building upon strengths.

To jumpstart strengthening, Gallup promotes its Strength Orientation Index:

- I set weekly goals and expectations for my strengthening.
- I can name the strengths of five people.
- In the last three months, I’ve had a meaningful discussion about my strengths.
- My environment is one of building upon strengths.

Research shows that only 3% of the U.S. workforce strongly agree with the index.

Gallup conducted a study with a random sample of 1,003 U.S. employees to determine how much they agreed with two statements: “My supervisor focuses on my strengths or positive characteristics” and “My supervisor focuses on my weaknesses or negative characteristics.” Employees who did not agree with either statement were placed in an “ignored” category.

- 25% of American workers fell into the ignored category.
- 40% of these were shown to be actively disengaged.
- Managers who focused on weaknesses cut active disengagement to 22% (roughly in half), proving that “negative” attention is better than no attention at all in employees’ eyes.
- By contrast, 37% of American workers were amplifying strengths.
- Active disengagement among this group fell dramatically to 1%. Nearly two-thirds (61%) were engaged, twice the U.S. average (30%).

Attention to either strengths or weaknesses increases engagement. There’s a positive association. The simpler of two approaches, amplification (building upon strengths), doubles engagement. Locked-in workers embrace change, represent quality and increase profitability.

As with physical fitness, strengthening talents also improves your health and well-being.

The more you use strengths to do what you do best, the less likely you’ll experience worry, stress, anger, sadness or physical pain. 52% of Americans who amplify three hours a day or less feel stressed. This falls to 36% with 10 hours or more of strengthening.

Moreover, amplification boosts your energy. You’ll be more positive. You’ll increase your reservoir of energy, feel well-rested, say you’re happier, smile or laugh more, learn something interesting and find yourself being treated with greater respect.

A REGIMEN

*“We suffer primarily not from our vices or our weaknesses,
but from our illusions.*

*We are haunted —
not by reality, but by those images we have put in their place.”*

— Daniel J. Boorstin

I'd like to suggest augmentations to Gallup's program for building upon strengths:

- Don't assume that others know their strengths. People often take their most powerful talents for granted, or may be unaware of them.
- Many are at least somewhat uncomfortable with their weaknesses. Expect resistance. Use a firm but gentle hand in dealing with the lesser side of someone.
- Be sure to strike a balance between building strengths and fortifying weaknesses.
- Leaving weaknesses as they are prolongs exposure to marginalization and defeat.
- Find ways to apply strengths in a team setting to achieve common goals. Help teammates learn and understand each other's strengths and how their talents complement those of others on the team. Consider posting each person's top five strengths publicly.
- Use team meetings to help teammates deepen their understanding of critique.
- Assign team projects based on employees' strengths.
- Ask for teammates to help one another. Overcome weaknesses as a unit.
- Help others to align talents to the expectations and responsibilities of their roles.
- Incorporate strengths and weaknesses into performance conversations and reviews.
- Help employees set goals based on their strengths and weaknesses.
- Create a community of advocates and champions who act as internal experts in critique and amplification processes. They help with the initial launch. They sustain the effort.

Critiques are rarely breezy. They're a struggle at first, followed by the sweetest of victories. Hard work that pays dividends is especially rewarding. It's why I've spoken to the tough love in this. The ones who care the most deeply will appreciate this cycle inherently.

*“Let us speak, though we show all our faults and weaknesses,
for it is a sign of strength to be weak, to know it, and out with it.”*

— Herman Melville

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IV. INNER WORKINGS

PRACTICES AND OBSTACLES

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

CRITICAL THINKING

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

PRACTICES AND OBSTACLES

Presenting objective, well-meaning critique is also known as *constructive criticism*. Doing so in a friendly manner is crucial to collaborative work and living. If you're serious about *personal development*, then you need to be able to form, deliver and receive helpful feedback.

*“Every human being is entitled to courtesy and consideration.
Constructive criticism is not only to be expected but sought.”*

— Margaret Chase Smith

As you develop yourself and others, be cautious not to levy a personality attack. Balance *critical thinking* with effective *interpersonal communication*. Knowing that you care deeply makes you a partner in her well-being. The right tenor keeps defensiveness at bay.

“How do I respond to criticism? Critically. I listen to all criticism critically.”

— Paul Thomas Anderson

Be aware that the most sensitive among us may adopt a passive, defeatist attitude to any situation that's perceived as personal, pervasive or permanent. This response is characterized by psychologists as *learned helplessness*.

Feedback generates heat. That is nearly inevitable.

Every once in a while, despite your best intentions and careful handling of situations, reception will be lost. A fire or a retreat is started. At times like these, you'll want to lean on *conflict resolution* skills. Remember the iconic phoenix — beauty rising from the flames.

“To love without criticism is to be betrayed.”

— Djuna Barnes

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Are you committed to self-improvement? Was that decision made recently? For those new to this, or for those who've been at it a while but seek a refresher, Wikipedia provides a great list of topics commonly associated with the field — spotlighted here for your reference.

Personal development includes the following investments:

- Improve [self-awareness](#).
- Expand [self-knowledge](#).
- Build or renew [identity](#).
- Develop strengths or [talents](#).
- Improve wealth.
- Amplify spiritual connections.
- Identify and improve [potential](#).
- Increasing employability or [human capital](#).
- Enhance [lifestyle](#) or the [quality of life](#).
- Fortify health.
- Fulfill aspirations.
- Initiate a life enterprise or personal autonomy.
- Define and execute [personal development plans](#).
- Solidify [social abilities](#).

The concept isn't limited to self-help. It also includes formal and informal development of others. Teachers, guides, counselors, managers, life coaches, mentors, family members and more are all engaged in forms of personal development.

Perhaps the toughest aspect of personal development is embracing objective measures that determine whether or not goals are being reached. Frameworks include creating a roadmap, setting benchmarks, assessing progress, passing milestones and earning rewards.

Charting change requires a healthy feedback system.

More than perhaps any endeavor in life, personal development is all about the journey. When you reach a destination, you've already enjoyed and celebrated dozens of victories. The end is, at best, the second most impressive stretch of the road.

CRITICAL THINKING

If you're a reasonable person (and I mean that literally here), then you reflect on what to believe and how to act. *Critical thinking* helps you to decide which journey to pursue and what's true and false in the challenges that arise along the way.

“Always turn a negative situation into a positive situation.”

— Michael Jordan

The process can be traced to the Socratic method in the west and to the Buddhist Kalama Sutta and Abhidharma in the east. It's leveraged by every student, professional or bucket-lister on a path of personal development and enlightenment.

Critical thinking is a personal development tool that involves:

- conceptualizing,
- applying,
- analyzing,
- synthesizing,
- evaluating.

Beliefs and actions are guided by:

- observation,
- experience,
- reflection,
- reasoning,
- communication.

Critical thinking is also understood to be a practice of participatory democracy. You imagine or remain open to considering alternative perspectives. You integrate new or revised perspectives into your way of thinking and behaving. You foster criticality in others.

Critical thinking outlines goals, examines assumptions, discerns values, evaluates evidence, achieves actions and assesses conclusions. It's not meant as disapproval or negativity.

Noted expert Dr. Richard Paul identifies two kinds of critical thinkers:

- *Weak critical thinkers* are highly-skilled but selfishly motivated. They work to advance agendas without seriously considering ethical consequences and implications. They resort to the pursuit of unjust ends.
- *Strong critical thinkers* uncover the logic in problems to see without egocentric or social bias. They actively, systematically, reflectively and fair-mindedly build insight through sensitivity to obstacles that compromise quality thought and learning.

“The critical habit of thought is a way of taking up the problems of life.”

— Dr. William Graham Sumner

Strong critical thinking prepares an argument for acceptance, further consideration or rejection. It cultivates valid and true premises. A critical thinker can be viewed as either a credible or suspicious source of knowledge.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

One-on-one conversation is the process by which ideas and feelings are exchanged. *Interpersonal communication* skills are a complex series of learned behaviors. They can be advanced through knowledge, awareness, exercises and feedback.

“I much prefer the sharpest criticism of a single intelligent man to the thoughtless approval of the masses.”

— Johannes Keppler

You can address these components:

- listening,
- persuading,
- asserting,
- posturing.

Choose or Create a Suitable Environment

The conditions that precede and surround a conversation are its *context*. The wrong setting can cause your feedback and good intentions to seem like a sneak attack.

You can manage these contextual factors:

- Physical — e.g., season, weather, location.
- Situational — e.g., learning, confrontation, shopping.
- Cultural and linguistic.
- Maturity and emotional state.
- Complementary or contrasting roles — e.g., boss and employee, parent and child.

Reduce Uncertainty

Many people struggle with *uncertainty*. Seeking information from others provides a respite from what's unknown. Unfortunately, this doesn't naturally include encouraging critique. Sweet nothings soothe easily (albeit falsely) and upgrade any status quo from drab to fab.

You can minimize uncertainty in one of three ways:

- passively — through observation,
- actively — through third-party inquiry or research,
- interactively — by asking questions or through self-disclosure.

Critiques present an interesting opportunity. They're beneficial interactions that increase confidence. However, they begin by producing uneasiness. Rather than reinforcing your counterpart's position, you're challenging and redirecting course. It's disconcerting for many.

To shorten the distance that's initially created by a critique, try a non-verbal assurance. A short, non-invasive touch can be the perfect gesture. Be careful that you don't patronize or violate someone's space. Keep it short but sincere.

Focus on the Proposition

Often, the major force in interpersonal relationships is satisfaction of self-interest. A common concern is over-indulgence. As covered earlier, self-correcting makes you a stronger teammate. Furthermore, knowing and communicating weaknesses and efforts to improve lead you to the goodwill that's needed to establish or augment momentum.

Social exchange theory states that “relationships grow, develop, deteriorate and dissolve as a consequence of an unfolding social-exchange process, which may be conceived as a bartering of rewards and costs” (Huston & Burgess, 1979).

Conversations can be compared to economic transactions (minimized costs, maximized rewards). Be sure to create value through your critique. You've made mistakes. You're not perfect. You'd like to point out something that a person smarter than you once shared. It helped you, and you'd like to share the good fortune with someone who's like you.

People reveal information when the cost-reward ratio is acceptable to them. As long as the eventual rewards of your feedback continue to outweigh their initial costs, exchanges will extend and intimacy will deepen.

Peel Back the Onion

Social penetration theory refers to behavioral reciprocity between two people in a relationship. Personalities have layers. Deepening intimacy promotes new levels of disclosure. At some point, two people cannot go back — just as you can't replace the skin on a peeled onion.

There are four stages associated with peeling back the onion:

- orientation — strangers exchange very little because they're cautious in their interactions,
- exploratory — counterparts become more relaxed with their communication styles,
- affective — high amount of open communication (usually between friends or partners),
- stable — continued expressions of open and personal interaction.

Avoid offering too much (if any) feedback in orientation. There isn't enough trust in place to produce the comfort that's needed to support critique.

During orientation, your words will lack weight and consideration. The critique could pry too early. Save what you have to offer for the exploratory phase and beyond.

Manage Egos and Expectations

You'll need to consider a phenomenon called *ethical egoism*. Many of us try to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. When you're perceived as a drag, your influence is diminished. That's because your feedback acts as a pleasure inhibitor.

Associate your message with the care and high hopes you intend. Shift the focus away from the immediate difficulty of change and on the long-term lift of self-improvement. Relate critiques to a form of investment.

Remember that new relationships and acquaintances come with a lower *depth of penetration*. Exchanges are assumed to include impersonal information only. Critiques are and always feel personal. Poorly-constructed feedback seems like an attack.

Patterns of Interaction

As you move to critique, be mindful of the dynamic.

There are two types of relationships:

- *Symmetrical relations* are any exchange that features like tone and response (e.g., two people yelling at each other, or two people whispering).
- *Complementary relations* are a counterpoint. Assume the opposite approach of the person you are critiquing. He may get heated. You stay calm and practical. Reason with him.

Relational Control

This dynamic refers to who's in charge of a particular interaction.

There are three kinds of *relational controls*:

- *one-down responses* are submissive to (or accepting of) another's assertions,
- *one-up responses* are in opposition to (or counter) another's assertions.
- *one-across responses* are neutral in nature.

**Generally speaking, your goal isn't to create submission.
Focus instead on fostering engagement and exchange.**

Critique is most productive when positive vibes flow two ways. One-up, while potentially more contentious and exhausting, provides for the collaborative, working spirit you need in this type of conversation.

The Impact of Social Media

Online communication follows a different set of rules regarding depth of penetration.

Internet interaction can easily occur on an anonymous level. Participants have the freedom to forego interpersonal 'rules' of self-disclosure. Rather than a measured revelation of personal thoughts, emotions and feelings to others, anonymous chat fosters immediate disclosure of intimate details — often without consequence.

Relational experts have noted that Facebook users self-disclose through personal posts of information, pictures, hobbies and messages. Studies find that any user's level of self-disclosure is directly related to the level of interdependence on others. This may result in negative psychological and relational outcomes.

Facebook users are more likely to disclose personal information on public walls than they would in face-to-face communication. This is due to the heightened level of control found in the context of various social media channels. Those with poor social skills may prefer Facebook to show others who they are because they have more control.

Relying too heavily on social media communication may lead to an avoidance of face-to-face communication. This harms interpersonal relationships. Self-disclosure is risky, in a sense, because individuals undergo a sense of uncertainty and susceptibility in revealing personal information. The possibility of being judged in a negative way is high. This is why face-to-face communication evolves in stages.

On the flip side, social media may be a place where a higher concentration of critique may be welcomed (or at least accepted). The variety of self improvement memes that many publish is a testament to that possibility.

Communication Privacy

There are boundaries which separate the public from the private in exchanges. How people negotiate open versus closed with regards to communication is its *privacy*.

The permeability of privacy boundaries is ever-changing. Certain portions of the public will gain access to information belonging to an individual. This occurs only when the individual has weighed their need to share information against their need to protect themselves.

Risk assessment is used by couples when evaluating their relationship's boundaries. Disclosure of private information to a partner may result in greater intimacy, or it may also result in the discloser becoming more vulnerable.

**Consider privacy and risk in staging your feedback.
You can't transform an overly-protective person.**

Co-ownership

When someone reveals private information to another, they're making that person a shared owner of the information. *Co-ownership* as a status comes with rules, responsibilities and rights which the discloser and receiver should negotiate.

Examples of such rules would be:

- Can the information be disclosed?
- When can the information be disclosed?
- To whom can the information be disclosed?
- How much of the information can be disclosed?

Negotiation of rules can be complex. They can be explicit or implicit.

Provide feedback and extract responses with care. Don't project indifference. Don't create turbulence, which creates conflict now and apprehension in the future. This is a shared endeavor. Revelations are powerful, rare and cherished moments in a relationship.

Cognitive Dissonance

Most of us seek consistency. We attempt to reduce dissonance and discomfort in situations. If a critique does not gel with pre-existing assumptions, then *cognitive dissonance* is likely. People are motivated to reduce this state by avoiding causal or amplifying experiences.

Belief that a healthy lifestyle is paramount yet avoiding workouts or a proper diet is an example of cognitive dissonance. Your beliefs and actions don't mesh. You may be inclined to avoid those who will point out the fact that your attitudes and beliefs are inconsistent.

There are three types of cognitive relationships:

- consonant relationships,
- dissonant relationships,
- irrelevant relationships.

Consonance is when two elements (e.g., your beliefs and actions) are in equilibrium with each other. Dissonance is when two elements are not in balance. Irrelevance is when two elements lack a meaningful relationship. They're unrelated and don't cause dissonance.

Attribution

Making inferences about observed behavior is natural. We make *attributions* (or social judgments) as a way to clarify or predict behavior. Whether we voice these (or how we voice these) is the core matter of this book.

There are three steps in attribution:

- observe the behavior or action,
- judge interactions and the intention of that particular action,
- assign an attribution that's either internal (where the cause is related to the person) or external (where the cause of the action is circumstantial).

An example of attribution is when a worker fails at a task. The observer may attribute the action to 'internal' causes. Perhaps preparation was insufficient, or the worker has a poor work ethic. The action might also be attributed to 'external' factors. Maybe the task was particularly difficult. Perhaps something outside of work was a stressor that led to distraction.

Attribution can also come in the form of a self-critique. You may find yourself offering an internal attribution such as, "I don't have the skill to do that." You could make an external attribution such as, "The request isn't something we should be handling."

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Even when there are opportunities to avoid unpleasant circumstances and/or gain positive rewards, some will retreat to accept an unsavory fate. This is known as *learned helplessness* (Martin Seligman, 1967), or conditioned defeat.

Those who have been ineffective and are less sensitive in determining the consequences of their behavior are said to have “acquired the condition.”

Critiquing a particularly insecure, weak or beat-down subject can lead to a helpless response.

Below is a summary of Seligman’s trials on dogs.

- An animal is repeatedly hurt by an adverse stimulus (which it cannot escape).
- The animal will stop trying to avoid the pain.
- It will behave as if it’s utterly helpless to change the situation.
- When opportunities to escape are presented, learned helplessness prevents any action.
- The animal copes by putting up with the discomfort stoically — not expending energy in the presence of adverse stimulus.

There are several aspects of human helplessness that have no counterpart among animals. One of the most intriguing aspects is ‘vicarious learning’ (or modeling). People can learn to be helpless through observing another person who encountered uncontrollable events.

There seems to be only one cure for this condition. In order to change expectation and recover from helplessness, subjects must be be forcibly exposed to the fact that responding produces reinforcement.

Build the value of adopting feedback. Paint a vivid picture of the brighter future that you envision. Expect skepticism. If your counterpart acts helpless, then express contempt that he would accept such a gloomy fate. Lay it on thick.

Learned helplessness can contribute to poor health when people neglect diet, exercise and medical treatment — falsely believing they have no power to change. If someone perceives

events as uncontrollable and unpredictable, then the more stress he experiences, the less hope he feels for making changes in his life.

Specific consequences of learned helplessness include disruption of emotions, aggression, physiological shifts, cognitive loss, problem-solving issues and passivity.

Learned helplessness becomes a motivational problem. If someone failed at tasks in the past, then he may conclude erroneously that he's incapable of improving performance.

Many will use learned helplessness as an excuse or a shield. Describing someone as having learned to be helpless can serve as a reason to avoid blaming him or her for inconveniences. He or she may give up trying to gain respect or advancement.

In social settings, the condition can be adopted by the lonely and the shy. Helplessness offers a stable explanation for passivity, anxiety and depression. However, studies starting in 1985 began to show that people who cite helplessness in social settings are viewed poorly by others. That reinforces the problematic thinking.

Another form of the condition shows up during the aging process. Some mature adults may neglect medical care in response to deaths, the loss of income and the onset of late-developing health problems.

Finally, it's important to note that helplessness doesn't just take to the seemingly helpless. When someone who normally is positive and could otherwise be helpful believes he's incapable of stopping a pattern of behavior, he may give up trying to do anything for you.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The methods and processes involved in facilitating a peaceful end to contentious affairs are known as *conflict resolution*. Non-violent resistance measures employed by conflicted parties in an attempt to promote effective resolution fall into this category of tools.

The study is a relatively new one. George Mason University was the first to offer a PhD program in it.

Methods used in conflict resolution include:

- negotiation,
- mediation,
- diplomacy,
- ceasefire,
- peace building.

Critique can cause additional conflict before it achieves its purpose of resolving it.

Dual Concern

Most prefer to deal with conflict in one of two underlying themes or dimensions:

- concern for self (i.e., assertiveness),
- concern for others (i.e., empathy).

When engaged in the critical process, look for the following five coping mechanisms:

- **Avoids Conflict.** Characterized by inactivity and passivity, *avoidance conflict style* is typically used when an individual shows reduced concern for her and others' outcomes. Avoiders assume a 'wait and see' attitude. Conflict phases out on its own (without personal involvement). By failing to address high-conflict situations, avoiders risk allowing problems to spin out of control.
- **Accommodates Conflict.** Contrast avoidance with yielding or *accommodating conflict style*. His behavior will be characterized by an elevated concern for others coupled with a low concern for himself. This passive, pro-social approach emerges as he derives personal satisfaction from meeting the needs of others. When faced with conflict, accommodators will surrender to your demands out of respect for the social relationship.
- **Competes with Conflict.** Fighting, or *competitive conflict style*, is when your recipient exhibits high levels of assertiveness (i.e., concern for himself) and minimal amounts of

empathy (i.e., concern for others). It's all about dominating others. Conflict is a win/lose opportunity. Competitors counter and submit others to their personal views by deploying power tactics (e.g., arguments, insults, accusations and violence). They're for intimidation.

- **Cooperates with Conflict.** In the face of critique, those favoring *cooperation conflict style* show an active concern for both pro-social and pro-self behavior. Cooperators collaborate with others in an effort to find an amicable solution. They will want all parties to exit the feedback process with a satisfied feeling. They see conflict as a creative showcase. They invest time and resources toward producing win-win solutions. This should be the preferred response to critique and conflict resolution.
- **Compromises with Conflict.** *Conciliation conflict style* is characterized by an intermediate level of concern for both personal and others' outcomes. Compromisers value fairness. They desire mutual give-and-take interactions. By accepting some demands of others, compromisers attempt to meet halfway in conflict resolution. It's a mix of both yielding and cooperative strategies.

Perhaps the greatest tool available to a critique is active, sympathetic listening. It requires no psychological training. It can be highly effective in work environments.

Active Listening as Counseling

When conflict leads to frustration and loss of efficiency, counseling may prove to be a helpful path. Few can afford the luxury of a trained conflict resolver. The good news is that you shouldn't need one. Start with the advice and training in this book. Develop your capacity. This doesn't require formal education or a professional certification of any kind. All you need to do is offer the floor. Listen carefully. Listen with understanding.

Active listening nurtures a problem-solving state of mind. He'll cope better with his difficulties. He has an ally.

The beauty in this counseling style lies in its simplicity. The initial tone of a critique quickly moves from feeling accusatory to diagnosing, releasing and interpreting emotions. Listening with sympathy and understanding rarely escalates a conflict.

IN SUMMARY

Critique won't spread like wildfire because of this book. Few will lose sleep in anticipation of the critical process. It will remain at least slightly uncomfortable — even among those hungry for self-improvement. My focus is on sensible, accessible awareness and tools.

The goal is to move the dial a notch or two — maybe even rotate it 45 degrees. Any amount of knowledge, ease, balance, intuition or more I can bring to critique will immediately make a difference in lives. There's an outside chance it can impact a nation.

It doesn't matter whether you're the one offering a critique or you're making yourself more attractive to free advice, feedback, suggestions, etc. All of us should participate and exemplify what we seek from others. Only then will critical processes gain greater acceptance.

In order to be successful at any new or previously avoided activity, expect a learning curve. If this was easy work, and it didn't require some level of demystifying and practice first, then everyone would already be proficient. As a culture, we're not. We think we're fine, as is.

We avoid critical.

We cringe when someone offers feedback.

We look a gift horse in the mouth.

Hackneyed critiques. terrified targets — it's time we mature into a less passive, less accepting, more productive people.

Below is what you can do RIGHT NOW.

- Take inventory of something or someone you've been avoiding.
- Take a deep breath and collect your thoughts.
- Push through the stagnation and avoidance to engage someone on a core issue.
- Speak your mind directly, sincerely and freely — don't hesitate once you start.
- Balance your offering with sympathy, calmness, humility and active listening.
- Reinforce that you're there to strengthen — that someone has done the same for you.
- Always illustrate the benefits of growing through feedback — a vibrant future lies ahead.
- Remember that this is a shared process — we are always greater than I.

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