

Taking Criticism and Leading Change

Taking criticism

Criticism is the constant companion of any leader, and certainly of any Christian leader. It's simply the air we breathe – the painful and sometimes crushing air we breathe. One reason for this criticism, which can feel constant, is that we're rarely able to please everybody. There will always be people who thought the other idea was better, and they will let you know. Another reason is that, as a leader, you're not trying to just do what everyone wants. Rather, you're trying to do what's right – whether it's popular or not. It's true that if you're a leader but no-one is following you then you're actually not leading; you're just out for a walk. But it's also true that you're not really a leader unless you go for a walk because you know it's right and you're willing to have no-one come with you. Henry Ford, inventor of the motor car, once said that if he did what people wanted then he would have invented a faster horse. He didn't give them what they knew they wanted; he gave them what he knew they needed. What all this means is that if you're a leader then people will criticise you. They'll criticise you when you do a bad job and they'll criticise you when you do a good job.

You can't tell, therefore, whether you're doing a good or a bad job based on the level of criticism – because you'll be criticised either way. Criticism is an ever-present reality. (If it's not, that might be because either you're not actually leading anything or you've trained people to not communicate the criticism directly to you, which means just means they're telling it to everyone but you).

So if criticism will be an ever-present reality for us as leaders, then the question is this: What do we need to know in order to cope and deal well with it?¹

Proverbs has a lot to say on taking criticism – Prov. 10:17; 13:18; 15:31-32; 19:20; 27:6,17

Proverbs 9:7-10

- the mark of a scoffer/mocker is that he hates you for correcting him
- the mark of a wise man is that he loves you for correcting him
- Why?
 - The wise man knows it is the only way to learn (v9)
 - The deeper answer: the wise man knows the Fear of the Lord and has an experiential knowledge of the Holy One (v10). The holiness of God is the burning passionate jealous love of God, the root of his judgment and his salvation. The fear of the Lord is the right response to that holiness – it is a humbled recognition of who God is in his glory, majesty and grace (cf. Isaiah 6). In NT language this is about knowing the Gospel of a Holy God who sends The Holy One to die for the unholy to bring us into the Most Holy Place. Knowing that, recognising that, means that you respond differently when people criticise you. If don't know God and his gospel then focus on me, my performance, my trying to look holy and good → pride or despair, and defensiveness – “I might be found out!” Conversely, if I focus on Jesus and his holiness and his saving me a sinner → freedom from trying to prove or defend yourself.

So when facing criticism:

- Remember the Gospel – knowing you are an appalling sinner who has been completely justified by Christ → freed from: a) Being too thin-skinned – over-sensitive (defensive, making excuses) b) Being too thick-skinned – not sensitive enough (brushing off valid criticism, another way of being defensive)

¹ Craig Hamilton, *Wisdom in Leadership*.

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- Process the pain – using Psalms – e.g. Psalms like Ps. 25 where there is a mix of awareness of personal sin, awareness of internal/emotional pain and awareness of external pressures.
- Downgrade praise & criticism – “Those who praise us are probably as much mistaken as those who abuse us” (Spurgeon, *Letters to My Students*)
 - Be aware that there are flatterers (Prov. 26:28; 28:23) and critical spirits (Prov. 26:21; 27:15)
 - Listen to the middle 50% who are not consistent fans or committed critics but are sometimes positive and sometimes negative.
- Establish a culture of appropriate, godly criticism
 - public/church/team/private – depending on the issue, (in)appropriateness of criticism in different contexts
 - cultural sensitivity – some cultures very direct, others very indirect and face-saving – need to be aware of, acknowledge and help each other deal with the strengths and dangers of different cultural forms of criticism
 - Eph. 4:15 – truth in love – meaning, in context the truth of the gospel (with all its radical grace and sharp edges) delivered within in a relationship of love shaped by the gospel
 - Col. 3:16 – admonishing ‘in all wisdom’ (meaning the riches of Christ, the fear of the Lord and with emotional intelligence), with gratitude (meaning gospel-driven rebuke (as Paul models in his letters) and meaning a dominant positive tone wherever possible)
 - teach the dangers of:
 - Saying too much (Prov. 10:19; 13:3) – where words multiply so does sin
 - Saying too little (Prov. 10:11, 21; 15:23; 25:11) – words can be a fountain of life
- A.I.M.:
 - Appreciate – love them for giving you criticism
 - Investigate – weigh don’t count – the feedback may be 2:10 but the 2 may be far better qualified to judge than the 10
 - Move on – don’t lie in bed thinking about it

Helen Thorne - <https://ninethirtyeight.org/resources/blog/post/handling-criticism>

Leading change

Change is necessary and good for us

Jer. 48:11

The Scripture saith, 'They have no changes, therefore they fear not God,' Ps. 55:19; and so they go down to hell quietly and securely. Oh! but it is otherwise with God's children. They are tossed up and down. God will not suffer them to prosper, or live long in a secure, drowsy, sinful state... but will shift and remove them from vessel to vessel, from condition to condition, till he have wrought in them that disposition of soul that they shall regard and love him more and more, and have nearer and nearer communion with him.²

² Richard Sibbes, Love of Christ, end of sermon 9.

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But change is hard for most of us and most congregations

Different types of resistance to change require different medicine

Root of resistance	Examples	Medicine
Opposition to gospel	"We don't believe in evangelism" "There need to be prayers for the dead"	Pray and preach
Systems issues	"We won't be able to see the screen." "We didn't get the information."	Better processes and communication – may be a valid practical issue
History	"We tried this before ten years ago and it didn't work then." "I can't work with those people because of what they did twenty years ago."	Hear the stories
Suspicion of cultural bias	"This change will exclude me." "This change will perpetuate or harden an unfairness."	Give power ³
Desires & fears	"I'm anxious about..." "I feel threatened..." "I love how things are."	Soft skills, listening, biblical counselling

- Easy for pastors to interpret all opposition as opposition to the gospel and to develop a martyr complex when actually people have a range of issues
- Good pastors who are theologically sound, can preach well and who love the congregation sacrificially, who fail at the point of being able to take people with them through a change process through lack of soft skills

Managing change (Craig Hamilton)

1. Help people see the urgency – there needs to be urgency (otherwise why bother changing?) and you need to help people to visualise the problem
2. Gather allies – power/interest matrix – work with those who have high interest
3. Develop the vision for change
 - a. Develop options – having realistic A, B, and C options at an early stage shows a real willingness to listen and also shifts the argument from Present versus Future to a choice between different futures
 - b. Engage with feelings – listen carefully for fears and desires
 - c. Craft a poster (strapline), trailer (elevator pitch) and short film (vision evening)
4. Plan how to address:
 - a. Understanding – clarity and simplicity of information presentation – answer the What
 - b. Motivation/presentation – how to engage feelings, get people excited – answer the Why
 - c. Physical space/systems – have answers for those who want to know the detail of how this will work in practice – answer the How
5. Go public and implement – keep talking vision and be honest
6. Ensure easy wins – show quickly and tangibly how the new is having a positive effect
7. Remove obstacles – because they make people want to go back
8. Build on the change – because it makes it difficult to change back (occupy the land!) and it keeps momentum, keep improving, tweaking
9. Embed the change into the culture – so it becomes the new normal

Culture change = modelling + consistency + normalising + communication + time

³ <https://utumishicourse.blogspot.com/2018/08/ethnic-privilege-and-ministry-privilege.html>.