

Can Critique Feel Good?

The idea of critique and how it happens well is an interesting analogue that allows us to explore how we can provide balance in a creative conversation.

In my work, and in much creative work, we continuously navigate around the need to give critique on a weekly, sometimes daily, basis. I've found that it's only through clear, articulated, and humane rules that critique can become an accepted part of the daily flow of work. Critical assessment is a necessary component of our day-to-day lives. It happens between teachers and students, employers and employees, within families. Sometimes critique entails one person giving feedback to another or to many, but a well-considered approach to the rules of how that happens can shift the feel of critique and increase everyone's comfort with it.

Given that we've just discussed time and pacing in a previous section, I won't belabor the fact that the most essential rules of critique center around when and how fast critique happens. Never offer critique the day before something is supposed to be done—that time frame is useless. No critique at the end of the day or the end of the week—those are the rules set by circadian rhythms. Choose instead the times our bodies and minds are most resilient. Schedule critique at the beginning of the day, not at the last exhausted moment left at the end of a long afternoon. And critique warrants real time spent on it. I often schedule ninety minutes for review and critique of ideas; it shifts the conversation from review to collective work.

But the most important element of critique is boundaries. So I start with questions that set the boundaries of what's up for review: *What do you love? What can't be touched? And what are the specific things you need help with?* This specifically establishes the terrain of the conversation, what can be worked on, and what needs to be left alone.

When you start a critique this way, you're giving the people about to be critiqued permission to set the constraints of what can be critiqued. It's a moment of collective negotiation that lays the ground for a safe, albeit challenging, conversation. This is really not that different from the Code Duello—the one challenged to the duel gets to set the rules for the duel.

Like anything, there are fads in the realm of critique and a tremendous amount of effort is put into leadership training on “how to give feedback.” There are homespun methodologies, like “give a feedback sandwich”—a piece of critique between two points of praise. And there are the far more complicated frameworks like the two-by-two explored in *Radical Candor*. In my experience, little training on feedback can be a dangerous thing. Too often, leaders are taught to open with, “Can I give you some feedback?” But I've found that it's far better to ask, “Can I give you feedback on _____?” Make it specific. Like a design critique, it's helpful if you can point at “something” as opposed to “somebody.”

One thing that happens when you open a critique with a question and invite someone to set the constraints is that it's perfectly reasonable for the other person to reply, “Not now.” Constraints are not just about what you engage on, and how, but the “when” of engagement too. The benefit of establishing and co-creating constraints around critique is that it creates a balanced relationship and greater honesty can be achieved.

With the right constraints, a critique can shift from the realm of the painful to the relatively joyful. My editor and I have worked pretty closely for the last two years on this book about conversation, passing chapters back and forth. So, we have a fairly well-tuned set of constraints for our critique. Now he can write me a note about a chapter that says, “There's something wrong in your head.” And not only do I agree, but I think it's funny. Constraints can absolutely set you free.