

PERSONAL LEADERSHIP:

HANDLING PERSONAL ATTACKS AND CRITICISMS

When they come our way, we all need to be able to recognize personal criticism and attacks and know how to deal with them effectively.

Recognizing personal criticism and attacks

The first step is to be able to recognize personal criticism and attacks for what they are and know the difference between them and constructive criticism. Personal criticism is any comment about a person's performance that has the underlying motive of undermining their sense of well-being, and an attack is a more vicious continuation of the same process. It occurs when a person attempts to undermine someone in the eyes of other people. This behavior can involve talking behind their back or 'organizing' other people against them.

Here are two examples:

- 1) "My bearer always forgets to bring me my newspaper. He is an idiot and wouldn't remember even if I told him a hundred times!" While it may be true that the bearer forgets the newspaper, is it really true or helpful to note that he is an idiot?
- 2) "I don't think our party should give you the nomination because you are a man. Everyone knows that men are corrupt and greedy". This feedback was not intended to help the individual improve but to hurt and undermine him. This statement is a personal attack.

There are many factors to take into account when considering how to handle personal criticism and attacks. To begin, we have to be sure that we are really being attacked. Our own feelings of not being good enough can sometimes lead us to believe we are being attacked when we are not. We must be on our guard not to invent negative motives on the part of the other person.

Often we are being attacked because we have taken initiative. People find change difficult, particularly if that change involves challenging existing power structures. Hence, building close, dependable relationships to call upon during times of challenge and difficulty is important.

Stay calm under pressure

Once we are able to recognize that we are being attacked, we need to handle the situation effectively, especially if we are to maintain our credibility with other people.

The key points we need to remember are:

- Stay relaxed and confident. If we are to handle someone who is criticizing or attacking us, we need to be confident in how much we value ourselves and our leadership.
- Pay full attention, ask questions and listen with complete respect. We may need to listen to the other person for some time while making sure that we do not get defensive.

- Seek to understand where the attack is coming from. Ask appropriate questions and pay sufficient attention to the other person to see if there is anything we need to change and what we need to do to get the person who is attacking us to stop. Examples: “Can you help me understand why you feel that way?” or “What concerns you most about my action?” or “Correct me if I’m wrong, but what you seem to be concerned about is...”

Develop an appropriate viewpoint

It is possible to view most personal attacks as requests for help. People are either trying to make sure that everything goes well - in which case our job is to appreciate them and help them do it even more effectively - or they are indicating what they are unhappy about. This expression of displeasure might take the form of complaining about and blaming others. In this case, our job is to work to understand their underlying concern and, if we decide to do so, to help them address that concern. It is important to adopt an attitude of ‘not taking it personally’.

Admit it if we have made a mistake

Where it is clear we have made a mistake, we should admit to it and apologize. For many people, apologizing is considered a sign of weakness when it is really a sign of great strength. People are always going to make mistakes; indeed, making mistakes is how people learn and improve. Admitting to an error and offering to fix it should stop the attack and take the conversation in a productive direction.

Tell the person to stop it

Occasionally, we are faced with completely irrational attacks that are personal and hurtful. For these attacks a different approach is needed. In these circumstances we need to understand that the other person has decided to attack us regardless of what is right or wrong. We can then communicate that we require the attacks to stop immediately and refuse to engage in any further conversation, correspondence or explanation until this happens.

This approach is not a rejection of the person but a rejection of the behavior. Sometimes it is not possible to have a rational conversation with another person because s/he is so ‘caught’ in an attacking pattern. In these circumstances the appropriate response is to withdraw until the person has decided to stop. Example: “Your comments are personal and hurtful. I believe they are irrational and I will not respond to such an attack.”

Organize allies to support you

Some attacks are so destructive that anything we do or say will be used against us. Under these circumstances it can be helpful to think with our allies about how they can step in to stop such attacks. This response will require them to act with great confidence and skill on our behalf. Having the support of others who are not directly involved can bring reason to a situation that has gotten out of hand.

NOTE: Sometimes in politics, responding publicly to personal attacks can simply give the attacks and the attackers more profile. In other words, sometimes we make the strategic decision not to respond because the “story” then just goes away. This is more likely to be the case during a public campaign or another situation that is likely to attract media attention than during day-to-day interactions with people.