



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 57, No. 11
(First published: October 1950)

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, NOVEMBER 1976

On Criticism

EVERY person, and particularly every business person, should know two things about criticism — how to give it and how to take it.

Neither is an easy art. We are likely to be very pert at criticizing others, and reluctant to accept their advice.

There are many kinds and degrees of criticism. The business person, out of whose good judgment there comes a suggestion for a change in method of production, is displaying a constructive kind of criticism. The person in high position who finds relief from personal worry by making continual complaints, and the office manager who constantly finds fault with the office boy, are using a very low form of criticism.

Criticism can be used and met constructively or destructively. It can be the means by which people receiving it climb, or it can be used to bolster the critic's vanity.

Criticism in its highest sense means trying to learn the best that is known and thought in the world, and measuring things by that standard.

But let us look at the other kinds. Captious criticism takes note of trivial faults; its author is usually unduly exacting or perversely hard to please. Carping criticism is a perverse picking of flaws. Cavilling criticism stresses the habit of raising petty objections. Censorious criticism means a tendency to be severely condemnatory of that which one does not like.

Ordinary faultfinding seems to indicate less background and experience than the art of criticism requires. It is wholly concerned with tearing down and scolding, whereas criticism is the art of analysing and judging the quality of something.

There are several grades of criticism involved when we talk about art, literature and music. An essay which tells one's opinion about a work of art may be a critique, a review, a blurb or a puff.

In art, true criticism implies expert knowledge in the field, a standard of judgment, and a desire to evaluate the work under consideration. A review permits less exhaustive or profound treatment, giving in general a summary of a book's contents and the

impression the book produces on the reviewer. A blurb is a short fulsome essay, usually a publisher's description of a work, printed on the jacket of a book to advertise it. "Puff" became common in the eighteenth century to describe an unduly flattering account of a book, play, or work of art.

Silence is sometimes the severest criticism, not only in the world of literature and art but in the world of business.

How to criticize

Perhaps the first lesson in learning how to meet criticism is to learn how to criticize intelligently.

In its best sense, criticism implies an effort to see a thing clearly and truly, distinguishing the good from the bad in it, and seeing the whole of it fairly in its proper setting.

There are some hints about criticizing which can be observed by both business people and critics of literary works. Socrates observed a good principle: Before starting to criticize a person's action, I stop and ask how I measure up beside him in the things which I criticize. Dale Carnegie suggests that we start with praise and honest appreciation, and, on occasion, call attention to people's short-comings indirectly.

Criticism should have good manners and honesty, coupled with a sense of personal dignity, but it needs proportion, too. The objective should be appraised. All one's big guns should not be brought to bear in case of a minor peeve. It is not worth the same effort to capture a flock of sheep as to lay low a great army.

When the purpose of criticism is to reform what one believes to be a wrong, particular care is needed. Reform refers to two distinct individuals: self and somebody else. It usually means making over our neighbour's conduct to conform to our own ideas of conduct. In fact, many people seem to think that their duty to society consists in considering and deciding what other people ought to do. For A to sit down and think: "What shall I do?" is commonplace; but to decide what B ought to do is interesting, romantic, self-flattering, and public spirited all at once.

Even the most tolerant man has difficulty in refraining from being a bit irritated at the social superiority assumed by the habitual social critic. If you do not agree with the critic you are lacking in sensitiveness, and belong to the morally "great unwashed". If you tell him that to your way of thinking the grandest thing in the world a man can do is to educate himself, mind his own business, and take care of his family, you are said by the critic to be lacking in public spirit.

Another annoying kind of criticism is the back-handed kind. The favourite word of these critics is "but". Their method goes something like this: "The author presents a thoughtful, high-calibre article, full of meat and inspiration, but . . ." A good example is that of Sir Fretful Plagiary in Sheridan's play *The Critic*. Sir Fretful says: "I say nothing — I take away from no man's merit — am hurt at no man's good fortune — I say nothing. But this I will say . . ."

Philosophy of criticism

There can be pleasure in criticism, both taking and receiving it. A talk between two persons of similar taste, just and sympathetic, critical yet appreciative, is a high intellectual pleasure. Even if one is hurt in such an encounter, one learns.

No one really escapes criticism, and the more eminent one is the more criticism may be expected. That is a price one pays for holding a distinguished position. It is, as Addison said in his essay on *Censure*, folly to think of escaping it and weakness to be affected by it. There is no defence but obscurity.

If you wish to avoid criticism, shun employers who are given to checking up the qualities of their workers; undertake only such duties as you can readily perform; always double check to make sure you are doing what other people want you to do. The person who consistently dodges criticism may be counted on as a business pigmy, but may be happier so.

Who is a critic? Few of us will step out in answer to this invitation. The truth is that we are all critics. The woman who dislikes the cut of her neighbour's dress or the way she brings up her children is a critic. The man who calls an employee on to the carpet for neglect of business or who tunes out one radio programme in favour of another, is a critic. This woman and this man are discriminating according to their personal preferences, their individual standards.

This, of course, implies judging. There are some who say it is ridiculous for anyone to criticize the work or actions of another unless he has distinguished himself by his own performances, and others who say no one has any right to set himself up as a standard by which to judge others.

These two objections would seem to rule out all criticism whatsoever, but they really point only to a need for great discretion. Epictetus, the Roman philosopher of the first century, gave this sage advice: "Doth a man bathe himself quickly? Then say not

wrongly; but quickly. Doth he drink much wine? Then say not wrongly, but much. For whence do you know if it were ill done till you have understood his opinion? Thus it shall not befall you to assent to any other things than those whereof you are truly and directly sensible."

The written word

Writing is made difficult by the fact that it is closest of all the fine arts to our ordinary experience. It bears the burden of the difficulty of communication of ideas in regard to the humdrum as well as the most exalted matters. Many a writer has bitten his pencil in two with his teeth, struggling with the shades of meanings of words, in despair of ever saying exactly what is in his mind. And a critic is sure to appear with the precise word needed.

Another hazard in writing, of the business kind as well as of the professional kind, is the lack of information in the reader's mind about the conditions surrounding the writer. A business man, for example, writes a letter, then he moves on to new experiences and to other letters on different topics. When a critic writes to tell what is wrong in the first letter, the business man has a feeling of irrelevance. Did I write that? How odd! Today the problem is altered; the circumstances aren't the same. How could so-and-so know the troubles I had that day?

Thoughtless critics see what is before them, and do not take the time or use their intelligence to assay what was written in the spirit of the person who wrote it. So, when you receive a letter of criticism it is well to remember that it was written in ignorance of the circumstances you know of — or it may simply have been written to give the writer a feeling of importance, or lift him out of a sense of inadequacy.

The business man, or anyone else who writes things for people to read, should be under no delusion. He may have matured into self-reliance, self-criticism and self-understanding, but when he writes for others he invites their criticism, he exposes himself to it, and there is no escaping it.

What is fair criticism?

Fair criticism implies a desire on the part of the critic to judge with clarity and say with honesty what he believes to be true. His judgment will be based upon his own experiences, his disappointments, his burned fingers, and his beliefs. At the same time, he will make an effort to get the other fellow's point of view and take the gentle and indulgent side of most questions.

Particularly should the business executive see the good qualities in a person or a proposition before pronouncing on the bad features. Thomas Carlyle says truthfully in his essay on Burns: "The ship comes into harbour with shrouds and tackle damaged; the pilot

is blameworthy; he has not been all-wise and all-powerful. But to know *how* blameworthy, tell us first whether his voyage has been round the globe, or only to Ramsgate and the Isle of Dogs."

Fair criticism does not judge without factual information. It considers the event on which it is to pass judgment in the light of these factors: what was said or done? what did the person mean to say or do? what was his reason for saying or doing it? what is the effect of what he said or did? why do I object to it?

Fair criticism does not exaggerate. All but a few careful and considerate persons seem to be urged either to overstate things by one hundred per cent or to understate them by fifty per cent, in order to criticize them with greater enjoyment. It does not constitute fair criticism of an opponent who seems rather dull to call him a "gibbering maniac".

We must admit, if we are to be fair critics, that we resent a few little things which happen to irritate us more than we appreciate a great deal for which we ought to be grateful, and govern our criticism accordingly.

Fair criticism means taking every precaution to be correct. It is not so serious when a mistake causes only the doer to suffer, as when Lord Byron the critic thought *Childe Harold*, the product of Lord Byron the author, was useless, and gave it away. But when a mistake involves a victim, that is serious.

Fair criticism does not include common gossip. Gossip may be merely friendly talking, or useless chatter, but it too often degenerates into mischievous comment on neighbours or business associates.

Good criticism

Having told, then, about what is not fair criticism, it behooves us to consider the constructive quality of good criticism.

Our judgments should be positive, not shaken and carried away by casual commendation or censure of others. Knowledge, up-to-date and accurate, must be the critic's great concern. His question about every case should be, not whether it is good or bad, but whether it is supported by facts.

The ideal critic would know the topic, he would be dispassionate in weighing the evidence, he would have ability to see clearly what follows from the facts, he would be willing to reconsider the facts, if that seemed advisable, and he would have courage to follow his thoughts through to the bitter end. He would not, in all this process, brush aside the help of advisors. He would retain a keen and lively consciousness of truth.

In making his criticism known, the ideal critic would have regard for the feelings of the other fellow. Courtesy is easily the best single quality to raise one — even a critic — above the crowd. Mrs. Thrale, biographer to Dr. Johnson, sounds the keynote when she says of her distinguished friend's disposal of someone

whose work he did not like: "He undeceived him very gently indeed."

Charming ways are quick winners. When an end is sought, why browbeat and shout and storm if one can persuade? The critic who is judicial in his approach to the matter, bland in his manner of debate, and soft-spoken in his judgment, can be a far more forceful critic than the one who blusters.

The good critic will not force the person he criticizes too far. It is always good strategy to let the other fellow save face.

About meeting criticism

If we are on the receiving end of criticism, we must school ourselves to rise above all that is petty and to accept and use what is worthwhile. There are times to fight back, but these must not be decided by inclination but by answering the question, after searching consideration of the criticism: Is it right?

The fatal blight that strikes some persons under criticism is to develop a feeling of persecution. Criticisms are not to be measured by the degree in which they hurt, or by the motives of the critics, but by their rightness.

We have our individual "tender spots". We will take all manner of abuse in many sectors of our lives, but usually there is one where the least breath of criticism hurts. It was revealed at the Nuremberg trial of war criminals that Goering, number two Nazi, could accept calmly criticism of the murder of millions as a military or political expedient, but broke into anger when accused of lying.

One calming thought for most of us when subjected to criticism might be: he little knew my other faults, or he would not have mentioned only these.

Complaint letters

No excuse is needed for paying some attention to the answering of business complaints, because every complaint is a criticism that must be met.

There is this difference between criticism and complaint: I may *criticize* you as a car driver because of your disregard of others' rights, but I *complain* of you when you drive on my lawn and upset my flower urn.

Business people would rather receive complaints than have customers abandon them and trade elsewhere. Not all business houses subscribe to the slogan: "the customer is always right," but practically every one will say: "the customer is entitled to a fair deal."

When it becomes evident to a complaining customer that the business firm is trying to treat him fairly, he is likely to be won over to staunch support and vocal endorsement of the firm.

There are two ways of meeting a business complaint: (1) get angry, bristle and growl; (2) try to capitalize on the complaint.

The first is so obviously wrong that nothing need be said in detail about it. If you are in business, you know that growling never won an order, being angry never settled a dispute in your favour, and telling a man (in whatever circumlocution of language) that he is a fool never satisfied a complaint.

There are three principal points to think of in writing a good answer to a complaint:

- (1) Make your critic feel that you are taking the complaint seriously;
- (2) Go as far as you honestly can toward meeting the complaint;
- (3) If the critic is quite wrong, be honest and sincere in answering him, in restrained and proper language. Ten to one he will accept your explanation.

A good answer to a complaint will always make it evident that the firm does not object to receiving complaints, but looks upon them as opportunities to serve customers. Never let the customer glean the idea that you are giving him the run-around. Suavity and soft soap may settle your correspondent's blood pressure, but they do not settle complaints.

A dishonest approach is bound to be detected. Far better to go into the complaint in detail, show the facts, and go as far as you can toward meeting the customer's wishes. In some cases of complaint, even though the customer be wrong in his expectations of what the goods or services would do for him, there may be enough goodwill derived from giving him the benefit of the doubt to more than compensate for the cost of settlement. Whether allowing the claim or rejecting it, thank the customer for telling you about it.

If your firm is to blame, admit it in the first paragraph of your letter, frankly and with an expression of regret.

When the customer is at fault, show him that you have sifted the evidence thoroughly. Be sympathetic and understanding, without fawning. Tell him all the facts in the case, so that he will see without your saying it in so many words that he was wrong. Explain cheerfully, not grudgingly, what you intend to do, and give him suggestions which will save him from annoyance like this in future.

There are, of course, chronic complainers. They carp about the service they get in streetcars, trains, stores and banks. Nothing satisfies them; a conciliatory adjustment letter merely sets them off on another bout of complaint. There is not much of a constructive nature you can do in dealing with such people, but you must not allow them to make you callous, or drive you into snapping at all complaints.

Even enemies help us

It is likely correct to say that we resent criticism because it might be true, or because it lowers our dignity. Yet it is because a criticism usually contains at least a grain of truth that it is valuable.

It is foolish to be so sensitive to unpleasant comment that we allow it to crush us, but at the same time we must not become so thick-skinned to any criticism that we do not even learn that others dislike the things we do or say or write.

The man who uses criticism to get a clearer view of his conduct is the opposite of the man who goes around suspecting the motives of everybody. The second man wants to pick up the stones of criticism and throw them back; the first man knows that the stones that critics hurl may be used by him to build his monument.

Not often thought of, but nevertheless true, is the idea that criticism by an enemy or a competitor may be more valuable than that of a friend and colleague. It doesn't matter if the critic is trying to compensate for his own inferiority by humiliating us. He may be trying to harm us, but he is really doing us a favour if we step up from criticism and not down. Even a crude blow may be effective if it gets us over an unwarranted self-satisfaction.

It is a dividend-returning attribute in an executive when he prefers censure which is useful to him, to praise which deceives him. As the clown says in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: "Marry, sir, they praise me and make an ass of me; now my foes tell me plainly I am an ass: so that by my foes, sir, I profit in the knowledge of myself".

There is, too, self-criticism. Like charity, criticism can sometimes make its best beginning at home. But it must not go too far. Introspection, the psychologists tell us, is good in moderation.

The man who makes a habit of selling himself short, of talking people out of paying him a compliment, is giving the world a false picture of himself. Friends may argue a little with him when he makes a disparaging remark about himself or his business, but the remark will stick. By and by even his best friends will gather the idea from his own attitude that he is pretty much of a second-rater.

Society could not exist without criticism. Discontent is the first step in the progress of a person or a nation. Criticism, of the constructive sort, accompanied by suggestions for improvement, accelerates advancement.

Criticism is the essence of democracy. Rigid social systems like Communism will never tolerate it. As Robert Ayre remarks in an article in *Canadian Art*: Once criticism gets its foot in the door, the walls of tyranny come tumbling down.

But all critics, whether social, business, art or personal, should look at all sides of a case before passing judgment. They might have inscribed over their desks a few words from Burns's *To the Unco Guid*:

Ye high, exalted, virtuous dames, Tied up in godly laces,

Before ye gi'e poor Frailty names, Suppose a change o' cases.