

## Criticism Equals Growth

*By Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE*

**A**bsolutely no one enjoys being criticized! Yet, you've got to overcome all your natural instincts and actively seek feedback—good and bad.

As a professional speaker, I know how it is. I face thousands of critics every week, called audiences. Not only do they rate me with their applause and laughter (or lack thereof), but also frequently they are asked to complete written evaluations, providing feedback for the meeting planners. I want those meeting planners to look like heroes, so I do everything possible to keep in top form. That means that I embrace and value criticism. I study those "evals" and listen to all comments, no matter how off the mark they may seem. And, even though I have been speaking professionally for more than two decades, I still pay speech coaches regularly to be my toughest critics.

If you want to advance, you need to develop a positive, flexible and creative attitude toward feedback. Here are some practical ways to toughen your hide and change your perception.

1. Diffuse attacks. To give yourself breathing room, turn "attacks" of criticism into information exchanges. The natural human reaction is to become defensive and offer a list of reasons why the comment is untrue. This quickly locks both sides into fixed adversarial positions from which it is hard to retreat. Break the cycle. As hard as it may be, respond to any negative criticism by immediately agreeing it may be correct. Then ask for more specific details, enlisting the accuser as your ally in improving the situation. You'll get lots of useful feedback, both negative and positive.
2. Use the Olympic-scoring rule. Throughout your life, you'll get a wide range of commentary on how you're doing. Discard your highest and lowest ratings. Bill Gove, past president of the National Speakers Association said, "In any audience, ignore the 10 percent who think you walk on water and the 10 percent who think you are no good at all. Then listen to the middle 80 percent."

3. Consider the source. Do your critics have the right background and experience to judge your work accurately? Are they in a position to give you valuable input? You can't change to satisfy everyone. ("A camel is a horse designed by a committee.") In my career, I've been given some really good advice and some really bad advice. The key is deciding which is which.
4. Separate intent from content. Any negative comments about our actions, appearance or attitudes automatically seem very personal. Yet, amazingly, the commentator may have had the best intentions. Recognize that different people have different personality styles and communication skills. They may sincerely mean to help, but deliver negative comments in a way that is hard to process and accept. On the other hand, an ill-wisher often provides valuable insights. Decide that it is never productive to take comments personally.

### **Ill-wishers often provide valuable insights**

5. Seek criticism. Some jobs offer regular job performance evaluations where employees receive feedback. If you don't have such a program, ask for personal feedback anyway, from both your manager and those you manage. One successful AT&T executive sits down on a regular basis with his staff and asks them, "What things am I doing well? What would you like me to do more? What should I do less of or stop doing?"
6. Recruit your customers as allies by asking them to be your critics. Don't be defensive. Keep your clients happy by being as eager to please them as your competitors are. In any selling situation, you're still selling after the sale. It won't be long before a rival asks them, "What do you want that your current suppliers aren't providing?" Get the jump by asking the same question. Seek the criticism before your competitor does!

# Leading Like Colin Powell

By Celeste McLaughlin, MS, Associate, ManageMentors

Orn Harari first published leadership lessons learned from Colin Powell in the *Management Review*, December 1996. In his new book “The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell” (McGraw-Hill), he further illustrates each of the lessons with examples from the general’s life and work. This brief overview will provide a taste of this must-read book.

## Know When to Irritate People

While ever the gentleman, Colin Powell has consistently demonstrated that he is ready to challenge the status quo when necessary to move the organization forward and get the job done. A “leader’s job is to build a direction and foundation for sustained change.” What’s customary is a powerful barrier to change. Be ready to demonstrate “a commitment to creative disruption.”

## Promote a Clash of Ideas

In a transforming organization “ideas matter.” A good leader depends on an honest dialogue of observations, data, insights and suggestions from employees. He will position himself to receive feedback. “Powell openly sidesteps rank, hierarchy and red tape in order to open communications.”

## The Ego Trap

“Never let your ego get so close to your position that when your position goes, your ego goes with it.” We are all aware that our “cheese” is constantly moving. “Be flexible, be willing to change your opinions in the light of new facts, and don’t get hung up on a particular course of action if it is not essential to your mission.”

## Don’t Go Looking for “No”

The usual and customary methods of bureaucracy are strong impediments to change. Powell encourages leaders to “push the envelope, bypass entrenched processes and habits, and ignore traditions that don’t work anymore.” After all, it is easier to seek forgiveness than permission. Be a risk taker.

## The Chief Disorganizer

Change is dynamic and inevitable. Powell discourages complacency. He believes that “a disorganizer is someone who continually picks at and harasses the routing of the organization.” Once the facts are revealed and data collected, the leader can shape a more realistic organizational plan.

## When to Challenge the Pros

A lesson Powell learned during his Vietnam years is the devastating effect of embracing a false reality. In this instance the leaders in the field kept up a charade by telling the secretary of state that we were “winning the war.” Barry Rand of Xerox has said: “If you have a ‘yes-man’ working for you, one more of you is redundant.” Do your homework, get the data, develop solutions and be prepared to challenge the pros to enhance the value of your organization.

## Close with the Enemy

A plan is nothing without the zeal to execute it. “Take on a clearly defined battle that can be won, and won decisively.” Each endeavor

should have clarity of purpose, consistency with the mission and the commitment of those who will carry it out. Two caveats to this lesson: a leader should not negate peripheral vision and temper passionate commitment with tactical prudence.

## People Over Plans

“Endeavors succeed or fail because of the people involved.” He holds two premises related to personnel:

- People are competent.
- Every task is important.

Look for people who are growing and developing and contributing to your organization—and work for them.

## Vigilance in Detail

“If you are going to achieve excellence in big things, you have to develop it in little matters.” Excellence is not an exception, it is a prevailing attitude. “Attention to details versus analysis paralysis “keeps leaders fully engaged, fully in touch, and fully in the know.” It is this type of attention to detail that will yield great execution.

## Situation Dictates Strategy

Powell abhors the latest management trends and/or fads. He believes they stifle the creativity, flexibility and imagination needed to move an organization forward. Harari summarizes:

- Be ready to change on a dime.
- Don’t fight the last war.
- Ride change, rather than managing it.

## Powell’s Rules for Picking People

“Look for intelligence, judgment and, most critically, a capacity to anticipate, to see around corners.” Intelligence is not just IQ—he wants people who demonstrate inquisitiveness. Look for “those capable of seeing beyond the horizon.” Other qualities include:

- Loyalty
- Drive
- Integrity
- Balanced Ego

## Trust Those in the Trenches

“The people in the field are closest to the problem, closest to the situation, and therefore that is where the real wisdom is—quite simply decentralize and listen to those in the trenches; support them. That is where the war is won.”

## Take Leave When You’ve Earned It

Believing in balance in his own life, Powell believes you should:

- “Have fun with your command.”
- Don’t always run at a breakneck pace.
- Take leave when you’ve earned it
- Spend time with your family.

## Optimism is a Force Multiplier

Powell believes in the power of positive thinking. People who believe they can influence their environment are more likely to be optimistic. Promote optimism in your organization.

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## Criticism

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"When a customer offers a criticism," advises Bob Treadway, a Denver based speaker, "invite them to be more specific." For example, if they say, "This delivery should have come sooner!" ask them in a genuinely friendly tone, "How much sooner, specifically, would you like it next time?" If they say, "You could have done a better follow up," say, "Tell me how exactly you'd like us to follow up in the future."

Treadway advises asking open-ended questions that can't be answered with a "yes" or "no." For example, "How could we help you with that?" or "What improvements would you like to see?" Then summarize what they have said: "It sounds like we could do a better job if..."

7. Feedback your feedback. Paraphrasing what you've just been told helps to eliminate misunderstandings, honoring and acknowledging the criticism, and compelling you to really listen. "Nothing," Bob Treadway says, "demonstrates better to a client, boss or spouse that you have heard them than paraphrasing their statements." It also helps you to filter and focus on the useful information.
8. Protect yourself. We're not always in shape to cope with negative comments. It's appropriate to seek and give feedback when you and your customer can best benefit from the exchange.
9. People learn to treat you the way you teach them to treat you. Dear Abby once ran a letter from a slender, attractive woman whose mother never failed to remind her of how fat and unattractive she had been as a teenager. Dear Abby suggested that she say, "Mother, let's not discuss that anymore." So simple, yet so hard to withdraw permission after years of negativity. It's your job to communicate that you will respond better if you can receive the criticism in a different way, time or place.
10. Don't expect everyone to love you. Praise and approval are wonderful. We all thrive on them. But we all need a dose of reality now and then. Just because people notice imperfections and point them out doesn't make them your enemies. If you've armed yourself with a positive attitude toward criticism, those very people are going to be among your best friends.

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When NASA first started sending astronauts into space, they quickly discovered that ballpoint pens would not work in zero gravity. To combat this problem, NASA scientists spent a decade and \$12 billion developing a pen that wrote in zero gravity, upside down, underwater, on almost any surface including glass and at temperatures ranging from below freezing to over 300 degrees Celsius. The Russians used a pencil!!!

—Leslie

## System Sensitive Leadership Part 2

**T**he first four systems represent ancient cultures. The first two were responsible for the first civilizations. The System One world view envisions a world that is uncertain and threatening. The compelling drive of individuals in System One is physical survival.

The future is not a concern, as life is a series of short-term actions to meet physical needs. Life is for the moment. Everything is perceived in feelings. Armour and Browning states "Do I feel hungry? Do I feel cold? Am I thirsty? In Essence, System One equates well-being with satisfaction of physiological drives."

System One is active during the first months of life. And although we outgrow it, it frequently is revisited in times of severe stress, such as catastrophic droughts, depressions, and devastating illness. Famine has brought many in the third world to System One.

There is little organization or socialization in System One. It is based on individual survival. There is no leadership in System One, because there is no vision, no thought of a future. Armour and Browning use an example of "packs of desperate people scouring for food together. But once food is found, the pack quickly reverts to every man for himself."

System One does give us a few positive attributes. It provides strong resilience when faced with life-threatening situations. It focuses on life's basic essentials and promotes self-reliance. However, it is entirely self-centered, lives for the moment and has no ability to organize.

System Two begins to overtake System One as a child begins to speak. Safety replaces survival for the top spot. Forces that cannot be seen dominate the world view. One becomes a preoccupied with these forces. This gives rise to superstition and magic. This is the mythology of ancient cultures, and the fairy tales of toddlers.

The driving force is safety from the unseen monsters, whether under the bed, or in the lake. Thus System Two begins to show signs of tribal behavior to confront the unknown.

There is a development of ceremony and ritual that are believed to ensure safety. The child who wants the same routine before bed is an example. "Since I did this last night and the monster didn't get me, I want to do it again tonight."

Strengths from System Two include the development of a rich imagination, the building of lasting relationships, spirituality, and a closeness with nature. Weaknesses are gullibility to deception, suspicion of outsiders, absolute dread of the unknown, obsessive and compulsive behaviors, superstition, black magic and the occult and strong resistance to change.

## Leadership

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### The Powell Way

“When a leader inspires people to tackle new kinds of issues, consider alternative approaches, aspire to new things, and strike out toward new terrain...and that leader ‘takes the lead’ people will follow...out of curiosity,” if for no other reason.

“Demonstrate the key attributes and personal traits that are likely to build people’s confidence in you.”

- Competence
- Character
- Confidence
- Selflessness
- Courage—moral, physical, spiritual
- Loyalty—up, down, sideways
- Empathy—understand them and their anxieties
- Sacrifice

### Prepare for Loneliness

When all is said and done, a leader often stands alone. With all the input from many people the decision and the resulting action is yours—in the end you will and must “own it.” “Loneliness...is an integral part of the leadership experience.” In Powell’s own words: “Leadership is not rank, privilege, titles or money. It is responsibility.”



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