

WISDOM // January 24, 2019

13 Smart Ways to Respond to Constructive Criticism

Before you get defensive, get curious.

By [Marina Khidekel](#), Head of Content Development at Thrive Global



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Here at Thrive, one of our core cultural values is [compassionate directness](#): We're empowered to speak up, give feedback, and surface problems and constructive criticism immediately. The thinking is that when we share feedback and new ideas as well as tension points with compassion, [empathy](#) and understanding, the whole company benefits and we can course-correct and grow as individuals. And it's

also how many of our best ideas come to light.

Receiving feedback without becoming defensive is a skill that can help you win in work and in life. While you might not have control over the feedback you hear, you do have control over how you react. So we asked members of the Thrive Global community how they've learned to receive constructive criticism gracefully — and use it to boost their success.

Use feedback as a trigger for change

"I've always found criticism hard to give and hard to take, which was probably holding me back. My instinct when receiving criticism, however helpful, was to get defensive. Three years ago, I joined a CEO peer-to-peer mentoring group and one of the things we learned very early on was how to give feedback in a way that inspired progress, how to use it as a trigger for change, and how to create a plan to make that happen. Because we meet monthly, we report on its impact at the next meeting, and over time, it's become clear that the attitude of acting on it, rather than brushing it away, causes phenomenal improvements in our companies, careers and family lives."

—Erika Clegg, agency co-founder, England

Look at it objectively

"Constructive criticism has been key to my success in becoming a physician and has helped me continue become the best doctor for my patients. It can be tough to hear not-so-positive feedback sometimes, but I've tried to look at it objectively, rather than reacting emotionally, to figure out whether the feedback has validity and how I can learn. Visualize the situation from a bird's eye view, rather than a first-person narrator perspective."

— Anna M. Laucis, resident physician, Ann Arbor, MI

Say thank you

"I've learned to take constructive (and negative) criticism by always and immediately thanking the person for their help. Then, I take a few moments to process. At first, this seemed a little inauthentic, but over time, it's changed the way I feel about criticism. Instead of immediately responding defensively, I come from a place of conciliation and gratitude. Then I think about what was said and try to find something that might be helpful to me. I acknowledge the beneficial input and say how much I appreciate it, which may spark

more dialogue. It always makes me think about about what people are saying, rather than how I feel about it. This has given me some amazing ideas that I never would have thought of own my own. It's a process, but 'thank you for your thoughts' or 'I really appreciate you telling me this' are truly magic words. On the other hand, when I need to deliver criticism, I've learned to take all emotional judgment out of it."

—Kathy K. Johnson, executive director, Cheboygan, MI

Look forward, not back

"When I was told that I needed to be more sensitive about what I say at work, it was hard to swallow. I wasted time thinking about what I had said until I realized that this wouldn't actually do anything. So I took action and was more careful when choosing my words. Make your changes now so that your change take you forward."

—Christian J. Farber, writer and marketer, NJ

Turn to your "go-to" people

"As an entrepreneur, speaker, and writer, the online comments and feedback flood in almost daily. Getting bad review of my book, hearing a hurtful comment, or getting honest feedback that I wasn't their cup of tea are things that used to ruin me. But I realized that the more content I put out, the further it spreads, and the more feedback I'll get. So I have a list of three go-to people. If I'm speaking or writing, I always go to them for honest feedback because their opinion matters. It's not coming from someone, as Brené Brown says, 'in the cheap seats,' but someone who is on the same path as me and will provide constructive, growth-oriented feedback. Everyone is entitled to their opinion, and not everyone will like your work (and that's ok), but this can't stop you from continuing to do what you do!"

—Lisa Pezik, business strategist and content expert, Ontario, Canada

Reframe it as a gift

"Realizing that constructive criticism is a gift helped me learn to receive it better. For example, my CEO noted several years ago that I was assuming the burdens of others at the detriment of myself. At first, it stung, as I saw myself as a 'corporate superhero' protecting others. Then, I realized that he was right: swooping in to save the day prevented people from learning how to advocate for themselves. Acting on that feedback helped me create more balance while

promoting team growth.”

—Shira Miller, chief communications officer, Atlanta, GA

See it as a consequence of doing something that matters

“I’ve learned to cope with feedback by accepting that I will always take things personally. And rather than fight that battle, I choose to embrace this new paradigm: that I’ll be knocked down and must build myself up, over and over again. One might say that’s an insane contract to sign, but I say it’s the consequence of doing something that really matters to you.”

—Julia Djeke, writer and yoga teacher, New York, NY

Approach it with mindfulness

“The older I’ve gotten, the more mindful I’ve become. This has taken practice, but the bonus skills that come with a fully-present mind are acceptance of what is without being triggered, and increased curiosity, wonder, and inquiry. These character strengths have helped me be more open and bear witness to what others say in a more kind and neutral way.”

—Lisa Cypers Kamen, optimal lifestyle management expert, Los Angeles, CA

Focus on the message, not the messenger or delivery

“It helps me to focus on the message, rather than the messenger or the delivery. Even in the most inarticulate deliveries or messengers, there may be a nugget of truth I can learn from.”

—Stacy Cassio, CEO, Charlotte, NC

Know that it will make you better

“Even though I’m a business owner, I dedicate myself to continuing my education — this involves fitness workshops and seminars. Sometimes, the coaching critique is very harsh. In the beginning, I felt like I was the worst coach ever. But then I realized that the more criticism I received, the better I would become, and the more successful my business would be. I just had to keep telling myself, ‘this will only make you better.’”

—Jessica Murden, business owner, Lodi, NJ

Have an open discussion if you're not on the same page

"Staying objective, grounded, and acknowledging my own emotions are the key factors I rely on when receiving any feedback. The positive kind is easy to accept, but the negative or constructive kinds take a lot more effort to process. If there's any truth to the feedback, I accept it and focus on how to improve myself. If I don't quite agree with it, I'll try to have an open discussion. But sometimes, I have to respectfully disagree."

—Cynthia Leung, pharmacist, Kingston, Canada

Use this 4-step process to make it a win-win

"First, I use my breath to calm my nervous system. I take a long breath in, then a long breath out. Second, I consider whether I want to be or stay offended. Third, I ask if there's anything to genuinely learn from the feedback. Usually, there is. Fourth, without passing judgment or shaming myself, I thank the person for the course adjustment and for being my teacher. This last step is the most important one because it helps me appreciate that the other person is coming from a good place. They, in turn, feel good about offering useful feedback. It's a win-win."

—Maria Baltazzi, PhD, MFA, happiness mentor and television producer, Los Angeles, CA

Tap into your curiosity

"Before you get defensive, be curious! When I find myself reacting strongly to criticism, I step back and get really curious about the ideas and intentions behind the comments — even my own knee-jerk reaction. It opens my mind and helps me build on the feedback to create value."

—Diana David, board director, Hong Kong, China

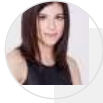
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Marina leads strategy, ideation and execution of Thrive Global content company-wide, including cross-platform brand partnership campaigns, editorial tentpoles and partnerships, and the voice of the Thrive app. In her role, she helps people tell their personal stories of going from surviving to thriving, brings Thrive's audience actionable, science-backed tips for reducing stress and improving their physical and mental well-being, and shares those insights on panels, at conferences, and in national outlets like NBC's TODAY.

Previously, Marina held senior editorial roles at *Women's Health*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Glamour*, where she edited award-winning health and mental health features and spearheaded the campaigns and partnerships around them.

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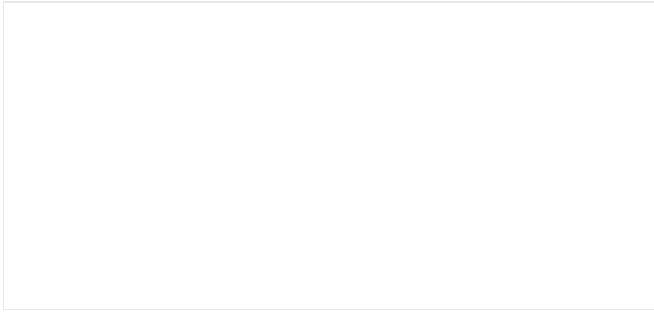
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