

A Note to My Younger Self – Today’s Thoughts, How To Respond to Criticism, Both “Constructive” and “Destructive”

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It's me, Angie Batterson, and I am back with my latest edition of notes to my younger self. We all struggle with receiving criticism, and I wish I could tell you that eventually you will be perfect at handling it, but alas, it is not a perfect world, and you may struggle with it forever. Some tips might help, or not, but here it goes.

First. Take a deep breath. You are so reactive—the first to lash out, strike back, and respond. **DON'T DO IT!** There are many types of criticism you will receive, like the email that says “I am not sure what you are getting at” vs. “do you have a point here” vs. “do you have any idea what you are talking about” (I actually got one of those once from a partner I worked with when I was younger), for example. The younger me, well, all of those emails instantly mean the sender is a complete jerk; they think you are stupid, they want you to quit your job, and you are not worthy. Let's see if we can take a deep breath and decide if these emails are constructive or destructive.

As a general rule, most people are just being constructive, but some even well-intended people have the ability to lose all humanity in email translation. You need to take pity on those people, they can't help it, and they are not worthy of your reaction. They sound like jerks in email, and they don't even know it. So you need to decide: who is this sender, friend, or foe? There are real foes in the world, and their intent is truly destructive. The good news is that there are not that many of them that you face in your career. There will be a few standouts for sure, but, I digress, maybe the next note to my younger self edition will cover those jerks, we'll see. For the most part, more often than not, none of these emails are from a destructive person. So breathe, relax, go for a loop around the hallway (did you ever notice how all offices have a big loop? I think they were designed for this very reason), buy shoes online, and do something to break your potentially destructive response to the constructive email. Your nasty gram back will make you look like the jerk, and the jerk will look bright and shiny in comparison.

Second. Always try not to be that person. You will be notorious for shooting off quick, swift, and sometimes one-word emails. At one point in your career, you will actually be reported to HR for replying only “yes” to an email and being described as being a “foe” to someone who wasn't even on your radar screen, let alone someone who rose to the level of garnering your attention or ire. I am not advocating writing novels to answer yes-or-no questions, but try to learn from the tone of the emails that set you on fire. **DON'T BE A FLAMETHROWER.** Okay, I know, those of you who know me well are chuckling now, but really, I am trying to get better even after all of these years. Anyway, if you look at your own emails and your intent in your own words, it can help you decide if your email sender is really a friend or foe. Try to think of what they might have meant. Is there any positive criticism you can take from their email? A big note to self: you are not perfect; there is always room for improvement. Is there anything in the sender's message that might actually have hit home? Is this why you are so upset and years later find yourself writing this article, taking time out from online shoe shopping to try to help make a difference? Not sure, but if you emailed me this morning, hmm, I'm just sayin'.

Third, let's assume the sender is one of the career-crushing jerky big-time foes. Well, the advice is the same. Take a deep breath; don't be a flamethrower. You can actually learn more from these people than from anyone else. As a true foe, they have no reason to pull their punches, and their criticism, while maybe meant to be destructive, can be some of the most constructive you will ever receive because they don't care if they hurt your feelings with truth. So, buy the expensive shoes, buy the shoes you really want, feel great about that, and then go back and look at the email. Really look at it. I am so sorry to say, but about 95% of the time they have a point. Even if it was meant to be destructive, turn that email into a constructive piece of advice for your day.

Finally, criticism can suck. That's just all there is to it. And to be wrong stinks. But alas, you will continue to be wrong on so many occasions. For example, today I dressed down; I thought it was a firm holiday, so I look a little bit like a late middle-aged woman who can't decide if she is boarding a plane to the beach or just pulled something from the 80's out of the back of her closet. I walked into the break room and got a stare and a strange comment about my attire. I was about to be a flamethrower when it hit me. Next week is vacation day, and the firm is really open today. So see, the only real truth is that I am wearing nice shoes, beachgoer or 80's wanna be, it will really be okay in the end!