



10 Tips for Handling Criticism in Ministry

By Margaret J. Marcuson

Dealing with criticism and complaints is an issue in almost every area of ministry. Church leaders have had to deal with complaints from the beginning. (See II Corinthians for Paul's experience. It is nothing new!) Here are a number of tips for dealing with complaints in ministry:

- 1. Do not take things too personally.** The less personally you take complaints and criticism, the better off you will be emotionally and the more effective you will be in ministry. Sometimes, however, you cannot avoid getting hooked. Remember that your mother was right: take a deep breath and count to ten before responding. Whether the criticism comes after the service, in a meeting or via e-mail, try to stay thoughtful and not reactive.
- 2. Notice when the petty everyday stuff starts getting to you.** Some days, it will wash off your back, and other times it will be like fingernails on a chalkboard. This is about you and your own emotional state, and finding some ways to get a little distance physically or emotionally will help. Pay attention to your own responses to others, and when you need to, spend some time doing whatever is most fun for you. When you can view those others as characters rather than as nemeses, you will know you have made progress.
- 3. Avoid getting defensive.** Defensiveness takes energy and it undermines your effectiveness as a leader. Even if you feel defensive, do your best to be thoughtful about what is going on with the other person, with you, and in the congregation as a whole. Defensive leaders can rarely lead creatively and positively. While we can all get hooked emotionally by criticism, an important leadership skill is getting off that hook as quickly as possible.
- 4. Recognize that sometimes improvement is needed.** Sometimes complaints are about an area where you or the ministry needs to improve. Sometimes the sermon really was too long, or the new program simply did not work. Maintain some humility, take responsibility for your own growth, and look for areas that you need to develop. However, you do not need to stay awake all night with *mea culpas*. A simple openness to your own need to develop as a leader will do.
- 5. Apologize when necessary.** It will go a long way toward defusing criticism. It is easier to apologize calmly and sincerely when one is appropriately humble and in control of defensive feelings.
- 6. Expect criticism and complaints when you take a stand as a leader, or when the church begins to move in a clear direction.** This is not about you; it is about the whole system reacting to an upset in the balance. Stay on course, and do not let it throw you. Coach other leaders to do the same. It boils down to this: You cannot lead and get away with it. In other words, when you move forward, someone will react. When you are prepared for this, you are less likely to be caught off balance, and will be better able to respond neutrally to criticism. The clearer you are about where you are going, the better.



7. Notice that complaints may bubble up in areas that are not related to the direction you are moving.

For example, if you make a move to develop worship in a new way, problems may come up in the youth group or the building committee. This is normal. Churches, like other systems, resist change in a variety of ways. It is worth assessing the hot spots in your particular church – children and music are common areas. Can you guess where the challenges may arise? Observing the church system in this way will help you be more neutral and less vulnerable to potential criticism.

8. Watch how people express their views. Those who can define their position in terms of themselves are more mature than those who say “you should,” or “you shouldn’t,” or “they always,” or “they never.” This will give you a clue about who is more mature. It is more important to have people who can say “I think,” “I believe,” “I agree,” or “I disagree” than it is to have people who agree with you. The potential for honest conversation about the church’s mission and direction is much greater. Those who can define their own views on an issue are the best candidates for leadership positions themselves.

9. Use care when expressing your views. Try not to react; think through your response first. As above, define your position in terms of yourself rather than others: “I” rather than “you” or “they.” Take responsibility for your own position. Do this in every medium: from the pulpit, in the newsletter, in meetings, private conversations, and e-mails. Practice defining yourself to those you lead.

10. Work on relationships with those who disagree with you. What would it be like to take your worst critic to lunch? You do not even have to talk about church. This time is best spent with those who have some ability to learn and grow and adapt their behavior. These critics can be seen as the “loyal opposition,” and have the potential to become significant allies, if you treat them with respect. Just because people disagree with you does not mean they are enemies. You rarely need to go head to head with them, and you may learn to appreciate their abilities and perspective.

When we keep our eye on our own ministry goals while steadily working on the relationships with those we lead (including the complainers), the goals will be more within reach, and the relationships can be sustained over the long term. (For further reading, see Edwin Friedman’s *Generation to Generation*, and Ronald Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church*.)

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