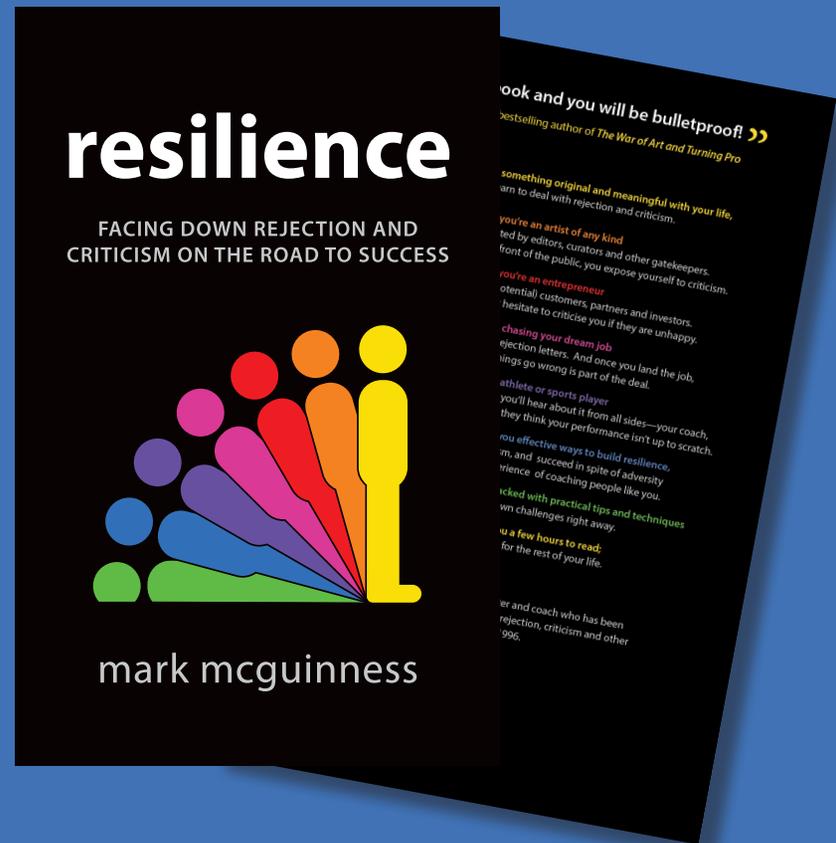


HANDLING REJECTION & CRITICISM AS A CREATIVE

Mark McGuinness
CREATIVE COACH



HOW DESIGN
LIVE 

SPEAKER SESSION
MAY 5, 2015

DELEGATE NOTES Exclusive full-chapter excerpts from Mark's book
Resilience: Facing Down Rejection and Criticism on the Road to Success

HOW DESIGN LIVE 2015 | DELEGATE NOTES
MARK MCGUINNESS

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RESILIENCE

Facing down rejection and criticism on the road to success

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resilience

FACING DOWN REJECTION & CRITICISM ON THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

BY MARK MCGUINNESS

**Lateral
Action**

LATERAL ACTION BOOKS

INTRODUCTION



CHAPTER 3

Why do rejection and criticism hurt so much?

“Just don’t take it so personally.”

“Why are you so down? It’s not a matter of life or death.”

“It’s not like it’s the end of the world.”

“Sticks and stones...”

If anyone has ever said any of these words to you in the wake of a brutal rejection or stinging criticism, you’ll know how stupid and feeble they sound—however gently spoken, and however well-meaning the speaker.

When you’re hit by rejection or criticism, it shakes you to the core. It feels impossible *not* to take it personally. Logically, it may not be a matter of life and death, or the end of the world, but it sure as hell feels like it. And words most certainly can hurt. Paper dragons breathe real fire.

WHY YOU CAN’T HELP TAKING IT PERSONALLY

When you put your heart and soul into something—whether a work of art, a performance on a stage or sports field, a business, or a job you passionately want to succeed at—then it becomes an extension of yourself. It’s not just an object or a game or a business or a job.

The end result is not a ‘product’ or a ‘performance’—it’s a part of *you*.

And when you identify with something that is then rejected or torn to shreds by a critic, it’s impossible not to take it personally. As the novelist Gustave Flaubert put it more poetically:

A book is essentially an organic thing, a part of ourselves. We rip a piece of gut from our bellies, and serve it to the bourgeois. Drops of our hearts’ blood are visible in the characters of our writing. But once printed, goodnight! It belongs to everyone.

This is why you flinch when the envelope comes through your letterbox, or the email lands in your inbox, or the phone rings and you know you’re about to learn your fate.

This is why it hurts when you fail to land that job, or that part, or that contract.

Or when a reviewer trashes your work.

Or when someone you respect damns it with faint praise.

You put everything you have into your work, so any judgment on the work feels like a judgment on you as a person.

But this is a good thing.

Because when you feel rejection and criticism personally, it shows you care about your work and you’re pouring yourself into it. If it stopped hurting, it would mean you had stopped caring.

This is true for everyone who is passionate about what they do, no matter how much they achieve or how successful they become. Believe it or not, it’s even true of writers of books about dealing with rejection and criticism...

Poetry is my own art form, and for several years, I’ve been attending Mimi Khalvati’s classes at the Poetry School in London. High-quality criticism is my main motivation for doing the class. Not only is Mimi one of the most sensitive and helpful readers of poetry I’ve ever come across, but the class is full of experienced

poets who offer insightful critiques of each other’s work. But the thing is, it’s usually easier to appreciate the quality of the feedback while we’re discussing *other people’s* poems.

But when it’s *my* poem on the table, it’s a different matter.

Now, I’ve worked with hundreds of artists and creatives on how to deal with feedback and respond to it constructively. I know I shouldn’t take it too personally. I should remember that the comments are a judgment on the work, not on me. Obviously. But that doesn’t keep my heart out of my mouth when I stop reading and wait for the first response.

And sometimes it doesn’t stop that little voice starting up in the back of my head, wondering: “*Why did you read out such a load of crap. No wonder they’re sitting there in silence. They’re cringing at how bad it is, and wouldn’t you?*”

You can probably relate a similar story from your own experience. When assessing other people’s performance, you may well have a finely developed sense of judgment. But when it comes to critiquing your own work, it’s incredibly hard to look at it with anything like objectivity. It feels too close, too personal, too painful.

OK—now for the good news.

It will—and should—always hurt.

But the sting does get less sharp with time. As we’ll see in Chapter 9, repeated exposure to any stimulus—including rejection or criticism—will desensitize you to it. And when you sharpen your own critical thinking skills, which I’ll show you how to do, you’ll be less likely to take criticism at face value.

YES, IT IS A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

The pain of rejection and criticism isn’t confined to taking it personally. It’s also accompanied by a sense of dread that—our friends try to reassure us—is way out of proportion to the actual

threat posed by a situation such as not making the hockey team, or having a manuscript returned by a publisher.

Or is it?

The psychologist Abraham Maslow famously proposed a hierarchy of human needs, stacked up like a pyramid. The bottom level contains basic **physiological needs** (oxygen, food, sex, sleep), with the next level up **safety needs** (security, employment, shelter). The next two levels are **love and belonging** (friendship, family, sexual partnership) and **esteem** (self-esteem, confidence, respect). Right at the top is **self-actualization**, where we fulfill ‘higher’ needs such as creativity, morality, personal development, and wisdom.

According to Maslow’s original paper, we need to prioritize lower-level needs (survival and safety) before we can move on to higher needs (social interaction and personal development). ‘Belonging’ is clearly a need that is threatened by rejection, and ‘self-esteem’ is threatened by criticism. So Maslow’s pyramid seems to confirm that rejection and criticism are *not* life-threatening.

Since you’re reading this book, the chances are your goal falls into the category of self-actualization: you’re not looking for mere survival or acceptance, you want to realize your potential and make a contribution to the world. Now I have a lot of respect for Maslow’s work, but if we take his pyramid at face value, this kind of goal can look a bit like a luxury item—something you pursue if you can afford it, once your other needs are being met.

But this doesn’t quite add up when you consider all the people who have prioritized self-actualization over ‘lower level’ needs such as survival or social acceptance. For example, the stereotypical starving artist; or charity/public sector workers who accept a reduced income in pursuit of a cause in which they believe. An extreme example is someone like Gandhi, who put his life on the line many times, including going on hunger strike in protest at violence, demonstrating his willingness to sacrifice his own survival for the greater good. Even if you haven’t gone to this extreme,

I’m sure you can think of times when you chose to sacrifice some of your own needs in pursuit of higher principles or ambitions.

Another challenge to Maslow’s hierarchy comes from psychological research that suggests we experience social exclusion with the same intensity as a threat to our survival. In *Your Brain at Work*, a superb book about applying the findings of neuroscience to everyday challenges, David Rock highlights the research findings that the same neural networks are used to process both social and survival needs. So whether we feel hungry or cast out from the tribe, we experience the same terrifying sense of threat.

Humans have survived and evolved by collaborating. How else did we outwit the proverbial saber-toothed tiger? We certainly didn’t out-muscle, out-run, or out-bite it. But we found safety in numbers, and in our combined ingenuity. So for most of human history, membership of the tribe was a matter of life and death. If you were excluded for any reason, your chances of survival dropped dramatically.

And what is rejection but exclusion from your chosen tribe? If you want to be a sports player, not making this year’s team means you’re out of the tribe—and you may never get back in. It’s the same story if your book manuscript is rejected—it feels like another nail in the coffin of your ambitions to join the tribe of writers. Ditto failing to land a job: excluded from the tribe of [insert name of your desired profession], you start to wonder whether you should go back to waiting tables, sweeping chimneys, or whatever is your personal definition of the job you’d least like to have.

In each of these scenarios, rejection feels like being cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and grinding of teeth. (And licking of lips by saber-toothed tigers.)

How does this relate to criticism?

Just recall the difference between someone criticizing you in a private conversation versus bawling you out in front of the whole group. Or between receiving a scathing comment about

your work in a private email and in a review in the biggest newspaper in the land.

Public criticism can lower your status in the eyes of the tribe. And the people who tell you not to worry about other people's opinion obviously don't know about the research into the effects of social status on monkeys.

Like humans, monkeys organize their society hierarchically—every member of a monkey tribe knows his or her place in the hierarchy, and it's possible for outsiders (human or monkey) to identify an individual monkey's status from its body language.

Researchers have discovered that when a monkey moves up or down the social ladder, this has direct, measurable, physiological effects—including the release of hormones, gene activity, white blood cell count, and the strength of the immune system. Every time a monkey moves down the ladder, its nervous system downgrades itself. And each time its health and vitality is downgraded, its chances of survival shrink a little more.

So each time you are publicly criticized, you feel as though your social status is slipping a notch or two. You may not be out the door yet, but you're one step closer to the exit. One step nearer the outer darkness. Which is why rejection or criticism *feels* like a matter of life or death, however much you try to tell yourself it isn't.

But it doesn't have to feel like that forever. As we'll see, there are plenty of things you can do to lessen the impact of rejection and criticism, and to develop the quality that will keep you going in spite of them: resilience.

NOTES

Mimi Khalvati: www.mimikhalvati.co.uk

The Poetry School: www.poetryschool.com

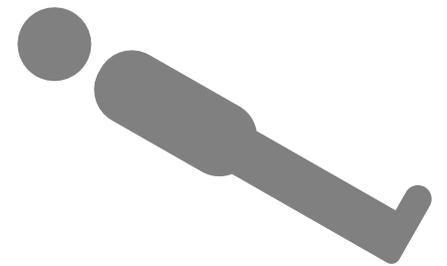
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REJECTION



CHAPTER 10

Roll with the punches

When I started learning aikido, the first thing we were taught was how to fall and roll. The idea was that until you knew how to receive an attack, you weren't ready to be attacked.

We rolled forwards and backwards, sideways to the left, and sideways to the right. We practiced single rolls and double rolls, rolls in small tight circles, and big loping ones. Sometimes a student held a wooden sword out a few inches from the ground, for us to roll over. (The higher your grade, the higher the sword was raised.) Sometimes a student knelt on the mat and we rolled over him—without touching. Sometimes there were two or three students lined up, and we had to leap over them, Evel Knievel style, landing and rolling on the other side. At that point, technique became very important!

Rolling out of the way of an attack does two things. Firstly, it protects you from the full force of the blow. If you stand and resist it, you are liable to be injured by the blow itself or to be knocked over and injured by the fall. But by accepting the force of the blow and moving with it, you have a much better chance of avoiding injury. Secondly rolling takes you away from the attacker, giving you a split-second to stand and face the next attack.

The same principles apply to rejection. If you try to resist it, by pretending you don't care, it will hit you just as hard—only you won't be prepared.

Remember, *it's supposed to hurt.*

In private, allow yourself to really feel whatever emotions rise up—such as fear, anger, embarrassment, or sadness. Don't try to rationalize them or explain them away. Roll with the punches and trust that you'll come out the other side. And don't keep it to yourself. Talk to someone—a friend, partner, teacher, or mentor—anyone who cares about you, understands your situation, and will listen to you (without trying to 'fix' the situation by offering advice).

Therapist John Eaton likes to point out that if you suppress your emotions, they don't go away—they keep pushing to be released, because they have something important to teach you about your situation. But if you acknowledge the emotion and express it—in words or actions—it fades away, having done its job.

John likes to quote these lines from William Blake's poem 'A Poison Tree':

I was angry with my foe,
I told it not, my wrath did grow.
I was angry with my friend,
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.

Bottling up your feelings just means you'll end up carrying them around with you in the bottle, which has a tendency to break and release the contents—in the form of a temper tantrum or floods of tears—at the worst possible moment.

I remember reading an interview with one of my sporting heroes, the football (soccer) manager Martin O'Neill, where he said he allows his players 48 hours to celebrate a win or to feel sorry for themselves after a defeat. If the team has won, he doesn't want them getting carried away. And if they have lost, he *wants* to see them sitting disconsolately on the bus home, to see that they care.

Supposing you gave yourself 48 hours after a rejection, to roll with the punch and process the emotions it brings?

During that time you're allowed to take a break, spend time with friends, treat yourself, or have some quiet time alone—whatever it takes to deal with it. If it's a major disappointment, 48 hours won't be enough to recover completely, but it's a good starting point. By disciplining yourself (that's right, it's a discipline) to take a break after each rejection, it will help you recover more quickly and learn more from the experience.

YOUR NEXT STEPS

1. Next time you're rejected, give yourself 48 hours (or whatever time frame feels right) to roll with the punch.

Give yourself permission to take a complete break, give yourself a treat, spend time with a friend, go for a walk—whatever it takes to give yourself a breathing space and process the experience.

2. During your daily mindfulness practice (you haven't skipped it already, have you?) pay particular attention to your feelings, and the sensations in your body. What emotions are you experiencing?

3. Give yourself permission to express your emotions in a safe context e.g. crying, yelling, talking to a friend, or writing an angry letter to the person who rejected you, but whatever you do, don't send it!

4. Ask yourself: What can I learn from this experience? What will I do differently in future?

5. When the 48 hours (or however long you've chosen) are up, get back on your feet and back to work.

NOTES

Thank you to Sensei Tony Ecclestone of Meridian Aikido Club for introducing me to aikido. www.meridianaikido.org.uk

John Eaton's blog about the brain, the mind, and personal change: www.reversethinking.co.uk

Play the numbers game

Imagine you're an actor who has been out of work for months. The landlord's patience is at breaking point, not to mention your long-suffering partner. And today you have an audition for a part that could solve all your problems. You know you can play the part and you're desperate to do yourself justice. But this is the only audition you have, and everything is riding on it. It feels like your last chance.

How confident are you of delivering your very best performance?

Now imagine you're just as short of cash, but today's audition is just one of half a dozen you have lined up, any one of which could put you back in the black and back in everyone's good books. On the way to the audition, you get a call from your agent urging you not to agree to anything even if it goes brilliantly—she's just found another opportunity she thinks could be perfect for you.

Now how confident are you of doing yourself justice?

Maybe you thrive on pressure and like to live on the edge. But typically, the more options you have, the more relaxed you are about any one of them. Which paradoxically means you will perform better, and have a higher chance of success in each instance. So even if you only want to boost your confidence, it makes sense to play the numbers game, by making sure your 'opportunity funnel' is constantly filled with new options.

Sadly, not everyone is going to love your work, even if it is amazing. You sometimes have to knock on lots of doors before you'll find someone willing to give you a chance. But the more you put it out there, the more chances you have of finding the people who *do* love it.

Start with a list—of the gatekeepers, companies, publications, agencies, or other hubs around which opportunities cluster. Then work through it, first researching how to approach them, then gritting your teeth and making the approaches. Assume you will have to hear a lot of 'no's before you hear your first 'yes.' That will help you prepare for the worst, and make the surprise all the sweeter if you get an early win.

The numbers game is another reason for finding and hanging out with your tribe—the more people you know on the scene, the more likely it is that *your* name will crop up in conversation next time a new opportunity is discussed.

YOUR NEXT STEPS

1. Make a list of all the potential opportunities you have right now. Next to each one, write the next step you are going to take towards making it happen, including the date.

Use whatever system is easiest for you—a notebook, a Word document, a spreadsheet, or contact management software. Personally I'm a fan of Bento, as it allows me to organize data with the flexibility of a spreadsheet, but to display it in nice-looking templates instead of the hideousness of Excel. See the Resources page for this book for some other options: lateralaction.com/resilience-resources

2. Now make a list of all the different people and places you can apply to for more opportunities—publishers, sports clubs, agen-

cies, companies, trials, competitions etc. Research the application process for each one.

3. Set up a system for applying for opportunities. Do it however you like, as long as it includes the following elements:

- Regular times for searching for new opportunities.
- A methodical approach to preparing each application.
- Tracking the progress of every application.
- If you can only make one application at a time—e.g. sending out a manuscript to publishers who don't allow simultaneous submissions—make sure you have the next application all lined up and ready to be sent out the moment you receive the next rejection.

Your aim is to keep your system in perpetual motion—constantly identifying and applying for new opportunities.

4. Make a list of the most important gatekeepers and influencers in your field—the kind of people who could send opportunities your way, if they knew and cared who you were. Research each of them thoroughly.

Pick one or two whose ideas resonate for you, and look for opportunities to connect with them via your network—online and offline. Read their blogs and leave comments. Go to their lectures and ask questions. Read their books and write about their ideas online. Follow them on social networks, where etiquette allows—following them on Twitter is probably a good idea, asking to be Facebook friends, not so much. LinkedIn is particularly good at helping you check whether any of your contacts know them.

Look out for opportunities they advertise. If they are open to speculative applications, then approach them yourself—with a meticulously prepared pitch.

5. Make time to hang out with the tribe you identified in Chapter 17. DON'T keep hustling your peers for opportunities—that's a big turn off. Remember, *the purpose of networking is to build your network*, not to close a deal in every conversation. Focus on making a genuine connection with people and look for opportunities to help *them*, and eventually the opportunities will trickle through to you as well—even if it takes a while.

Make rejection irrelevant

The opposite of rejection isn't acceptance—it's *attraction*.

The world is changing. In the past this is how opportunities were allocated:

1. A gatekeeper advertised the opportunity.
2. Applicants applied.
3. The gatekeeper accepted or rejected them.

Now you can reverse this process:

1. You advertise yourself.
2. Gatekeepers approach you with opportunities.
3. Both of you decide whether you want to work together.

In this world, rejection becomes irrelevant. Since you're not applying, no-one can reject you. And the other party isn't applying either, just approaching you to see if there's a good fit between your skills, priorities, and resources, and theirs. It's a more equal conversation between potential partners—and if there's not a good fit, it's no big deal. At the very least, you both have a potentially valuable new connection in your network.

This is the world I entered by blogging. Realizing cold calling was a monkey-with-a-typewriter way to build a business, I decided to advertise myself by blogging tips and inspiration for

creative people. It took a while to figure out an approach that worked, but a few months in, I had a steadily growing audience of subscribers—and the enquiries started to come in. Creative directors—people who would never have taken my phone calls a few months earlier—started emailing and calling *me*, inviting me in to talk about how I could help them. When I arrived, I didn't have to make the usual sales pitch—they asked me what I would *advise*.

A few years down the line, it's a lot more fun to check my email inbox than it used to be.

Some of the emails are coaching enquiries, from people across the globe. Some of them are notifications of sales of my ebooks and e-learning courses. Others are consulting enquiries from organizations, mostly in the UK but also from abroad: in the last twelve months I've worked on-site for clients on three different continents, including speaking at one of the biggest design conferences in the United States, HOW Design in Boston. Over and above the business benefits, every day I hear from interesting, inspiring, charming, and funny people spread across the four corners of the globe.

As well as new clients and customers, I receive unexpected offers and opportunities. I've been offered several book deals. (I decided to publish this one myself, but it's always nice to be asked.) I spent two years running a business in partnership with Brian Clark and Tony Clark, two partners in Copyblogger Media (www.copyblogger.com), a successful online marketing business. Brian and Tony are in the States and I am here in the UK. We've never met in person, but I'm sure we'll get round to it at some point.

None of this would have happened if I hadn't decided to take the initiative and build myself an **opportunity magnet**—which in my case was a blog.

If you are truly sick of rejection and want to make it irrelevant in your life, then I suggest you start building your own opportunity magnet.

An opportunity magnet has several characteristics:

- It's a self-started project. No one will give you the incentive of a reward or a deadline.
- It takes time.
- It will feel like a waste of time some days, and demand plenty of resilience.
- It will become more valuable as time goes on—bringing you more and better opportunities with less effort.
- It will take on a life of its own, because of the contributions made by other people.
- It will connect you up with a vast network of people and possibilities.
- It will connect you with your sense of purpose.
- It will be one of the most rewarding things you ever do.

So what shape will your opportunity magnet take? A blog is an obvious format—it's served me well and I would encourage you to consider it. It helps if you're good at writing, but you don't need to be Shakespeare—you can go a long way with enthusiasm, something valuable to share, and a willingness to learn. If you're a better speaker than writer, maybe podcasting or videos would work better for you.

But it doesn't need to be an online project. Maybe you'd rather put on a live event, or a series of meetings or classes. Maybe you want to write a book, or record a film or album, or make a piece of software as your calling card. And opportunity magnets are not just for the self-employed. You could build one to help your career, by establishing yourself as a thought leader in your industry.

A great example of an event-based opportunity magnet is Speaking Out, started by Laura North in London:

Speaking Out helps people, particularly women, get more comfortable and confident with public speaking. I started it because

I was terrified of public speaking and avoided it for many years. But I realized that I was missing out on opportunities and saw that there were a lot of other people in the same boat. I also noticed that there were far more men than women speaking at the conferences that I was going to.

Running Speaking Out has illustrated my theory that if you speak in public then you attract opportunities. A woman who worked for the Mayor's Office was in the audience at my first event. She really enjoyed it and invited me to put on my second event at City Hall. On another occasion, I did a presentation about Speaking Out and was offered funding to develop a new project, even though I wasn't pitching for any funding.

I keep getting requests to do public speaking—ironic as it's the one thing I was avoiding for so long!

Laura North, Speaking Out, SpeakingOutEvents.com

Whatever format you choose for your opportunity magnet, make sure it has these three essential qualities:

1. **SUSTAINABILITY**—you are passionate about it, and can see yourself doing it for a long time.
2. **VISIBILITY**—it will get you on the radar of the right people.
3. **SIGNIFICANCE**—it will make a positive difference to your field, over and above the opportunities that come to you personally.

When you start building your opportunity magnet, you stop waiting to be invited, accepted or rejected, and take the initiative. You throw your hat in the ring, announce your presence to the world, and ask it to pay attention. You lift your head above the parapet. And when you do that, of course, you expose yourself to criticism...

YOUR NEXT STEPS

1. ARE YOU UP FOR THE CHALLENGE?

Consider the facts that there are no guarantees, you will have to invest a lot of time and effort up front, and you will probably have to go up a few blind alleys before you find a way to make it work.

Do you still want to build an opportunity magnet?

2. TAKE THE LEAD

This is the most important step. When you start building something of your own instead of applying to others, you stop being an applicant and start becoming a leader. Like all the best things in life, it's both exciting and scary.

Becoming a leader is partly an attitude of mind—instead of waiting for others, start thinking what needs to be done. It's also a habit of action—once you have an idea you are passionate about, start planning and doing to make it happen.

3. BRING SOMETHING NEW TO THE TABLE

Ask yourself:

- Who do I want to reach?
- What difference do I want to make to them?
- What's in it for them to join me on the journey?

Once you've identified the 'tribe' of people you want to help, do some research about the kind of publications they subscribe to (magazines, newsletters, blogs etc.) and the kind of events they attend (gigs, exhibitions, conferences etc.).

As well as noting what is already popular with this group of people, ask yourself what's *missing*: is there an obvious gap in the market that you could fill by offering something new?

4. PICK A PLATFORM THAT SUITS YOU—AND YOUR AUDIENCE

I'm a writer. I also have a young family and want to spend as much time as possible with them. So blogging is a natural fit for me. My audience love to read, it's a great way to rise up the search engine rankings, and it allows me to reach a worldwide audience of tens of thousands a week from my home office.

But maybe you're a better speaker, musician, or artist than a writer. Maybe you think there's no substitute for meeting face-to-face. Maybe you want to reach people who prefer watching video to reading, or who do their networking in person, not online.

In choosing the format of your opportunity magnet, look for the best fit between your talents (writing, speaking, singing, coding, etc.) and what your prospective audience likes to do (watch video, read, socialize, play games etc.).

Here are some of the options:

- blog
- newsletter
- podcast
- videocast
- webinar
- online forum
- live networking event
- conference
- live workshop
- book
- recorded music
- film
- software app

5. GIVE MORE THAN YOU ASK FOR

Generosity is key to making your opportunity magnet work. Make it freely available, or at least have a low-cost version of it. And

give away something of real value—your knowledge, skills, ideas, contacts. As Brian Clark of Copyblogger.com likes to say, if you feel like you're giving away too much for free, you've probably got it about right!

At my website lateralaction.com I not only publish a free blog, I give away a free 26-week careers course for creative people. Of the thousands of people who sign up, most will never buy anything from me, but enough of them do to keep my business growing. You could say it's an inefficient way to grow a business, but I've always made my living by helping people, and I love the fact that the technology allows me to achieve my goals by helping thousands of people to reach theirs.

An opportunity magnet has a two-way current—you create opportunities for yourself by doing it for other people first. When you do it right, it takes on a life of its own. It starts pulsing and creating unexpected connections. Opportunities come to you, as surely as iron filings line up in the force field of a magnet.

So when in doubt, err on the side of giving too much—when it comes to an opportunity magnet, it's less risky than giving too little.

6. CONNECT PEOPLE

Opportunity magnets attract something more valuable than iron filings: people. So make it part of your mission to facilitate connections and conversations and relationships between members of your audience, not just with yourself and them.

If you're organizing a live event, this will happen naturally. If you're working online, there are several public venues where you can host and contribute to conversations, such as blog comments, forums, and social networks. And make it your business to connect people behind the scenes as well, by looking out for people who could benefit from knowing each other and making introductions via email.

7. GET PERMISSION TO STAY IN TOUCH

There's no point attracting people if they just go away again. You need a way to stay in touch. Which means you need to earn people's trust and gain their permission to contact them.

Marketer Seth Godin describes permission marketing as: “the privilege (not the right) of delivering anticipated, personal, and relevant messages to people who actually want to get them.” (sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2008/01/permission-mark.html) In other words, you should be sending them messages that are so valuable (to them) and so relevant (to them) that they will be happy to hear from you—and they'll miss you if you stop contacting them.

When it comes to getting people to pay attention to your messages, it's hard to beat email. Most people check their email every day, even at weekends. They will at least scan the subject line of every email that lands in their inbox. The same cannot be said of every tweet or Facebook post from their ‘friends.’ So if you really want people to come to your event, or read your blog post, or take any kind of action, it pays to get permission to contact them via email.

Because email is so powerful, it is easily and widely abused. Here are some essential tips for building a mailing list that adds value for *everyone* who comes into contact with it:

- **Never add someone's email address to the list yourself!** Apart from being rude, this is illegal in many places. Always ask for permission first.
- **Include a one-click ‘unsubscribe’ link in every email you send.**
- **Use a professional email service** that will automate the sign-up and delivery process and help you manage the list. See the *Resilience* resources page for recommended services: lateraction.com/resilience-resources

- **Invite people to sign up to the list** and explain what's in it for them—on your website, when you speak in public, when you meet them in person.
- **Remember: give more than you ask for!** Send them valuable information, tips and advice; share the news that matters to *them*; surprise them by delivering more than you promised.
- **Don't just treat it like a sales channel!** (Or a ‘request channel’ if you're not selling anything.) Sales messages and requests are fine, as long as they are super-relevant and they aren't all you send. Otherwise people will unsubscribe in droves.
- **Write compelling subject lines.** Most people scan their inbox, so a message like ‘April newsletter’ is hardly going to inspire them to open your email. Give them a reason to open it, with a subject line that explains (a) what's inside and (b) why it matters to them. For example, ‘Tango for beginners—free class Monday 12th April,’ or ‘Four simple strategies for tackling any problem.’ To learn how to write better subject lines, read Brian Clark's series on Writing Magnetic Headlines: www.copyblogger.com/magnetic-headlines

8. MAKE IT SUSTAINABLE

Building an opportunity magnet takes time, and the rewards are not immediate, so you need three things to sustain your efforts long enough to see them bear fruit:

- **PASSION**—You **MUST** be passionate about the subject and about connecting with your audience, in order to put in the time and effort required to make it a success.
- **ORGANISATION**—Finding time for a medium-to-long-term project is rarely easy. To do it, you'll need to be good at organizing your time—my free ebook *Time Management for Creative People* will help you: www.wishfulthinking.co.uk/time-management-ebook

- **SUPPORT**—As your project grows, it may well get to the stage where it's impossible for you to run it all by yourself. Fortunately, this can only happen if you're attracting plenty of enthusiastic people who share your passion—so don't be too proud to ask for help!

9. BRACE YOURSELF...

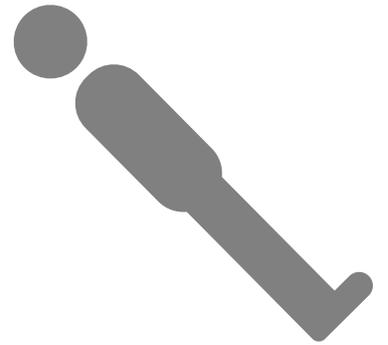
You will be doing something wrong if you don't get plenty of praise and enthusiasm from the people you have set out to help. Enjoy it. And brace yourself for the inevitable criticism—we'll look at how to handle that in the next section...

NOTES

Speaking Out: SpeakingOutEvents.com

Seth Godin, *Permission Marketing: Turning Strangers into Friends and Friends into Customers*, (Pocket Books, new edition 2007)

CRITICISM



CHAPTER 24

Is constructive criticism a myth?

“Can I give you some constructive criticism?”

Seven of the most terrifying words you will ever hear. This is partly because we all have our own definition of ‘constructive’ and partly because, however well-intentioned the critique, very few people are good at delivering it. And partly because some people use it as a convenient term to take you down a peg or two while pretending to be nice.

For one reason or another, criticism usually feels a lot more ‘constructive’ to the giver than the receiver.

So is ‘constructive criticism’ a contradiction in terms?

I’ll put my cards on the table and say I believe criticism *can* be constructive—in fact, it’s essential if you want to become outstanding. But because it can mean so many different things, I’ll start this section by clarifying what I mean by different types of criticism:

- Feedback
- Constructive criticism
- Destructive criticism
- Personal abuse

FEEDBACK

This is a nice neutral sounding term. Business coach Steve Roesler points out that it got into circulation via the aerospace industry:

Feedback started as a term used to describe the signals sent from a rocket back to Earth in order to determine the accuracy of the rocket's course. By tracking speed and trajectory, ground crews could determine when and where to make corrections.

At some point in time, the term Feedback was incorporated into business language as a way to talk about performance. And, as in rocket flight, it has been determined that the best way for a person to stay “on course” is to assess where one stands at any given moment in relation to the task or goal at hand.

Here's the really important point: The chances of impacting performance increase with frequency and timeliness of feedback. That implies the need for ongoing “How are we doing?” conversations. It's our best chance at knowing whether we're on track or not.

Steve Roesler, “What, Why and How: Feedback” www.allthings-workplace.com/2012/05/what-why-and-how-feedback.html

Unfortunately, the term feedback has taken on a lot of negative connotations, effectively becoming a code word for criticism. As Steve says, its meaning has morphed from “Here's how I think we're doing” to “Here's what you need to correct.” Which is why, when clients ask people like Steve and me for tips on ‘giving feedback,’ they generally aren't talking about praise.

But for my purposes here, I want to reclaim the neutral meaning of feedback, so that it refers to **any process that raises your awareness of your performance and helps you improve it.**

It can take various forms:

- A genuinely neutral, observational description of your performance, e.g. “the ball landed two inches inside the back line.”
- A video or audio recording of your performance.
- An instruction that directs your attention to a specific aspect of your performance.
- For example, “As you speak, I want you to notice the sensation in your throat, whether it feels relaxed or tense.”
- A question that directs attention to a specific aspect of your performance. For example, “How do you feel you handled the dialogue in that chapter?”
- A measurement of some specific aspect of your performance. For example, the average minutes per mile in your last run, or the percentage of visitors to your sales page who made a purchase.

Feedback is often sadly neglected in favor of advice.

To observers it seems *so obvious* what the performer should do differently that we can't help telling them. But being told what to do isn't always the best way to learn. For one thing, most of us have a natural resistance to it (I know I do). And for another, it's far more powerful to see—really *see*—something for yourself than to be told about it by someone else.

This is why many experienced coaches and teachers see their job as creating the conditions for the performer to see and feel for themselves where they are going wrong. When I first started giving presentations, I would occasionally receive feedback that I wasn't very expressive, and could do with showing more emotion. But it wasn't until someone showed me a video of myself presenting that I saw it for myself and laughed. After that, it became obvious what I needed to change and much easier to do it.

Feedback isn't always enough, but since it's often neglected, using it could well give you a competitive advantage.

CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

This is when **someone has a definite opinion on your work or performance, and expresses it in a way that is helpful**. It can take the form of either helpful advice (telling you what to do next), or just an insightful critique (in which case you work out what to do next).

Constructive criticism can be either positive or negative, that is the critic may either like or dislike your work, and offer either praise or suggestions for improvement.

Here are some of the characteristics of constructive criticism:

- **PERSPECTIVE**—the critic makes their own viewpoint clear, without claiming to be all knowing.
- **SPECIFIC**—the criticism is detailed enough to make it clear *exactly* what the critic is talking about, and what criteria they are using for judgment.
- **EXAMPLES**—the critic backs up their judgment with specific examples.
- **RELEVANT**—the critic focuses on the most pertinent aspects of the work.
- **NUANCED**—the critic recognizes that performance can be measured in fine gradations, and that there may be alternative ways of evaluating it.
- **RESPECTFUL**—the criticism is not personal and there is no implication that you are a bad performer. The critic talks about you in a way that implies you have the ability to make any necessary improvements.

Whether constructive criticism is encouraging or discouraging is up to you. Of course you are likely to feel encouraged when someone offers you praise. But even if a constructive critique

exposes multiple errors and flaws, I'd suggest you shouldn't feel discouraged (even if you don't feel over the moon).

If it's genuinely constructive, then it presents you with an opportunity to fix the problems and improve. I can think of a few times when a critic has respectfully but thoroughly 'shredded' my work, and I have left the room excited to explore the new possibilities they have shown me.

One of your career goals should be to find good sources of constructive criticism. Like feedback, it will give you an advantage—especially over all the people who are too precious to expose themselves to any kind of criticism.

DESTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

This is when **someone has a definite opinion, but either they don't know what they're talking about, or they don't know how to express it properly—or both**.

I call it destructive because of its effect: if you're not careful, it can seriously dent your motivation, your creativity, and your ability to learn. It would be just as accurate to call it **incompetent criticism**, since it reveals more about the critic's failings than the performer's. If criticism is an art, incompetent critics are the ones who can barely draw a stick man.

Here are the typical characteristics of destructive criticism:

- **LACK OF PERSPECTIVE**—the critic speaks as though he or she is the ultimate authority, rather than a human being with a limited viewpoint.
- **VAGUE**—the work is dismissed in general terms ('awful,' 'terrible,' 'no good') without specifying what criteria the judgment is based on.

- **NO EXAMPLES**—the critic fails to back up their judgment with specific examples.
- **IRRELEVANT**—the critic introduces irrelevant criteria, or focuses on an irrelevant aspect of the work.
- **EXAGGERATED**—sweeping, black-and-white judgments, with no acknowledgment of fine grades of quality, or alternative points of view.
- **DISRESPECTFUL**—the critic is rude, aggressive, or otherwise insensitive to the performer’s feelings.

If the incompetent critic is a reviewer, heckler, or internet troll, you may decide to just ignore them. If it’s a boss or a client, you have a problem—see Chapter 37 on how to deal with them.

PERSONAL ABUSE

Personal abuse is when **somebody makes negative or insulting comments about you personally, with malicious intent**. It should not be confused with criticism.

People who resort to personal abuse tend to do it out of ignorance, prejudice, or because they have ‘lost the argument’ and realize they can’t get at you via legitimate criticism, but it generally doesn’t help much to know this.

We’ll look at how to deal with personal abuse in Chapter 35 and Chapter 36.

YOUR NEXT STEPS

Next time someone offers you some ‘criticism,’ ask yourself which of the four categories it fits into:

1. Feedback
2. Constructive criticism
3. Destructive criticism
4. Personal abuse

Then go to the relevant step below for how to deal with it.

1. FEEDBACK

Welcome it. Not only that, you should actively seek out sources of accurate feedback, such as:

- Measuring and recording key data.
- Recording yourself on video.
- Working with a good teacher or coach.

Make time to consider the feedback and ask yourself what you can learn from it.

You can also give yourself feedback, by asking yourself the following questions when you finish a performance or piece of work:

- What specific things did I do well?
- How can I maintain that in future?
- What specific things didn’t I do so well?
- How can I fix that in future?

2. CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

As with feedback, you should actively look for people who can give you informed and constructive criticism.

Learn to recognize the characteristics of constructive criticism. Whenever you encounter genuinely constructive criticism (positive or negative) ask yourself what you can learn from it.

When receiving constructive criticism in person, engage with the critic, by asking them to explain anything that isn’t clear, and

letting them know how much you value their critique and what (if anything) you are going to do with it.

3. DESTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

If destructive criticism comes from someone who isn't directly involved in your work, ignore it.

If it comes from someone who is involved (e.g. a teacher, client, or boss), talk to them and get them to clarify their criticism. I'll explain how to do this in Chapter 37.

4. PERSONAL ABUSE

See Chapter 35 and Chapter 36 for advice on dealing with this.

Who do they think they are?

When you're faced with criticism, it's easy to take it at face value. But as Leonard Cohen's story shows us, **who is talking** is at least as important as what they are saying.

You might not take kindly to an armchair tennis player giving you advice about your backhand, but if the same words came out of the mouth of a grand slam champion, you'd be all ears, however brutal their assessment.

So before deciding what to do about a piece of criticism, always consider where it's coming from. Here are some of the usual sources:

HATERS AND TROLLS

These people get a kick out of making nasty, offensive, and abusive comments. Many of them don't have the guts to criticize you to your face, so they are particularly common on the internet, where they are known as **trolls**. They are a tiny minority, but a vocal one.

It's generally best to ignore them. I've occasionally received an embarrassed apology when I've replied to an abusive comment or email, but most of them aren't interested in dialogue. If they persist see Chapter 36 for how to deal with them.

If it helps, look on it as a positive sign that you're attracting enough attention for the haters to notice you and get annoyed. Trying to avoid upsetting anyone is a recipe for mediocrity.

THE PEANUT GALLERY

This is the term my friend Sonia Simone uses for all the people who have an opinion on your work, but who are irrelevant to your goals. They include the nit-pickers and 'yes-butters' who will always find a flaw in your argument, and the well-intentioned nice people who keep asking you to do something different, even though you're not remotely interested in doing it.

You can safely ignore these people too. Be polite, and make a brief reply if you want to, but don't take them too seriously. And don't get sidetracked into playing their game.

THE PUBLIC

I'm not a fan of Henry James's novels, but even I had to feel sorry for him when I heard that story about him being booed off stage by the public at the premiere of one of his plays. There's no humiliation like a public humiliation.

How seriously you take the public's opinion will depend on what business you're in. If you're the editor of a national newspaper, or commissioning a piece of public art, you will probably pay more attention to it than if you're an avant-garde novelist, or a creator of fine art that only the richest of the rich can afford. If you're in a punk band, it would be downright embarrassing to discover everybody and their grandmother tapping their feet and singing along to your songs.

So forget 'the public' and decide who *your* public is. Once you know who they are, then you can start worrying about what they think of you.

THE PROFESSIONAL CRITICS

These are the people whose job it is to critique the work and careers of performers in their field. Traditionally they have been newspaper reviewers, literary critics, academics, and TV or radio pundits. These days they are just as likely to be bloggers and social media power users.

There are basically two kinds of professional critic: the ones who 'get' what you're trying to do; and the ones who don't. Pay more attention to the former than the latter. And as we saw in the last chapter, the sharper your own critical thinking skills, the more confident you will be in assessing the judgment of professional critics.

But don't be too quick to criticize the critics. Sometimes they tell us just what we need to hear, even if we don't want to hear it.

YOUR PEERS

The obvious thing to watch out for here is rivalry. Are they delivering constructive criticism, or trying to take you down a peg or two? Often it's a bit of both. And maybe that's no bad thing—creative tensions have been at the heart of many artistic partnerships and friendships (Wordsworth and Coleridge, Kahlo and Rivera, Lennon and McCartney).

And remember, there is one thing your peers can offer you that no one else can—the perspective of someone in a situation very similar to yours.

YOUR MENTOR(S)

A mentor is an experienced pro who shares what he or she has learned. Roshi, Yoda, and Mr Miyagi are classic mentors. If you're lucky enough to have a mentor who knows you well enough to make an informed judgment about your work, and who cares enough to tell you where you need to improve, then you owe it to them—and to yourself—to listen.

Tennis player Andy Murray had been teetering on the brink of major tournament success for years, but it was not until he hired veteran champion Ivan Lendl as his coach that he won the Olympic Gold Medal and US Open in quick succession. Murray had the talent and stamina to get within touching distance of a major trophy—but he credited his mentor with helping him reach out and seize it.

Mentors are not infallible, and sometimes you reach the point where you've outgrown them. But it often pays to give them the benefit of the doubt, and consider their criticisms carefully instead of dismissing them. (Just ask Darth Vader.)

YOUR NEXT STEPS

Next time you encounter criticism, ask yourself who is speaking:

- **HATERS AND TROLLS**—ignore them. If that doesn't work, see Chapter 36.
- **THE PEANUT GALLERY**—ignore them. Or be polite but don't take them seriously.
- **THE PUBLIC**—firstly, separate the general public from your public (your fans and/or potential customers). Ignore the former; listen to the latter, even if you don't always do what they want.

- **PROFESSIONAL CRITICS**—firstly, separate the ones who 'get' what you are trying to do from the ones who don't. Feel free to ignore the latter. Analyze the former's words carefully, to see whether there's anything you can learn from them.
- **YOUR PEERS**—firstly, try to distinguish between rivalry and genuine criticism. Secondly, ask yourself whether they have a point, and what you can learn from them.
- **YOUR MENTOR(S)**—listen carefully to what they say and consider it over time. If it's not clear, ask them to explain further. When in doubt, give them the benefit of the doubt.

NOTE

For Sonia Simone's take on the 'peanut gallery' see: www.copyblogger.com/smart-people-peanut-gallery

Criteria (part one)—What game are you playing?

One of my enduring memories of school is the outdoor playground—a huge tarmac space under a gunmetal sky, with pupils in black and gray uniforms running in all directions.

The only colors I remember are the criss-crossed markings for different sports—tennis, badminton, football (the soccer kind), basketball, netball—painted on the tarmac. They were all overlaid on top of each other, which would have been horrendously confusing, if they hadn't been different colors—yellow for tennis, red for football, orange for basketball, and so on.

We didn't give it a second thought at the time, but the first thing we had to do before we started playing was to adjust our vision to the markings of that particular game. Like a Magic Eye illusion, if you were playing football, those red lines had to pop out at you. Your ability to play to them was critical once the game started. It made all the difference to how hard you hit a pass, whether it was worth sprinting to keep the ball in play, and whether the goalie had handled the ball outside the area. Play to the wrong line for an instant and you could lose the game.

Even within the markings of individual sports there were variations, such as the different boundaries for singles and doubles tennis. In football, it was usually agreed that the goalkeeper wasn't allowed to leave the penalty area—but were outfield play-

ers allowed to *enter* it? And were we playing the rule that meant attackers were only allowed to shoot once they had crossed a certain line? These questions had to be settled before the whistle blew to start the game.

Obviously there would have been chaos and arguments if one team started playing basketball while the other began playing football. The players would have had different goals in mind, and their strategies and tactics would have been completely out of sync. Fair play to one team would be an obvious foul to the other. If you're going to play together, you need to agree on the rules of the game you're playing.

This is blindingly obvious when it comes to sports. But in other spheres, it's amazing how often human beings start collaborating, competing, and judging each other *without any clear agreement about exactly what game they are playing, what the rules are, and what success or failure looks like*. Everyone is playing a different game, so it's no wonder there are arguments, disappointments, and recriminations.

Whenever you work on a project or compete for an opportunity, one of the first things you need to know is: **what are the criteria for success?**

Criteria are like the markings on the playground—reference points that mark out the field of endeavor, indicating what is and isn't acceptable, and how success is defined. They don't predetermine the outcome, but they narrow the options.

Once you understand how criteria work, a lot of confusing and frustrating conversations will make more sense. And it will be a lot easier to understand and deal with the criticism that comes your way.

In poetry, for example, for the last hundred years or so there has been an ongoing debate about the merits of traditional verse forms (with regular meter, rhyme, and so on) versus 'free verse' (with no established patterns for such things). One well-known

criticism of free verse is that it's 'like playing tennis with the net down,' that is, too easy to be worth doing. On the other hand, some advocates of free verse describe formal verse as a 'straitjacket' that constricts poets' freedom of expression.

With our 'criteria goggles' on, we can see that 'difficulty' is a positive criterion for some traditionalists, whereas 'freedom' is more appealing to those on the free verse side (as the name suggests). So it's perfectly possible for two poetry enthusiasts to have a completely different assessment of the merits of a poet's work, depending which side of the fence they are on.

Personally I enjoy both types, even if my own verse tends towards traditional forms. And it's not just an academic distinction. If I'm in a workshop and someone criticizes my sonnet for using an 'old-fashioned' verse form, then I know they aren't interested in the game I'm playing, and we'll have to agree to disagree. But if they make suggestions about my handling of the form, and point out some ways I could improve on it, I'll be interested in their critique.

Supposing Max, an engineer, goes for a job interview. Before the interview, he spends a lot of time boning up on his technical knowledge, anxious to demonstrate how much he knows. During the interview he talks at length about the technical parameters of a proposed project. In his enthusiasm he even contradicts one of the interviewers and argues that they are going about things the wrong way. He's confident that he's won the argument and demonstrates his expertise. But he doesn't realize the interviewers are keen to recruit a team player with excellent communication skills, who will put colleagues and clients at ease. Knowledge is an important criterion for them, but (as they said in the job spec) "the successful candidate will also have excellent communication skills."

So whether you're talking about poetry, a job interview, or any other kind of performance, the key questions to answer right at the beginning are:

- What game are we playing?
- What are the rules and conventions?
- What are the criteria for success?

You should also ask these questions whenever you're on the receiving end of criticism. Knowing the critic's criteria will help you decide how relevant and useful it is and what to do with it.

Depending on the context, you can get the answers to these questions in several ways...

Sometimes the critic will spell out their criteria. They'll say things like:

- "Needs to work on her technical skills." (Criterion: technical ability.)
- "A promising plot, spoiled by wooden characterization and stilted dialogue." (Criteria: well-structured plot, convincing characterization and realistic dialogue.)
- "Great vision, but the numbers don't add up." (Criterion: value for money or profitability.)
- "The team was well-organized in defense, but they lacked the attacking flair to create opportunities." (Criteria: organization and creativity.)

If you're in communication with the critic, you can ask them or challenge them to spell out their criteria.

If they don't spell them out, or if you don't have the chance to ask, you may be able to reverse-engineer their criteria, by looking at the kind of work or people they have approved in the past.

If you are pushing the boundaries of conceptual art installations, and you receive a withering critique from a specialist in 18th century landscape paintings, you probably shouldn't lose too much sleep. You may even take it as a compliment!

Once you've established a critic's criteria, you know what game they are playing. But is that the game you want to play? Or are

you trying to do something entirely different? Your answers will tell you a lot about the kind of opportunities you should pursue, and the kind of critics you should pay attention to along the way.

YOUR NEXT STEPS

1. Next time someone criticizes you or your work, start by trying to identify their criteria.

Do they spell the criteria out? *If so, go to step 3.*

Or is their criticism vague and general? *If so, clarify it at step 2.*

2. If they give you vague or general feedback, and you get the opportunity, ask for clarification:

- What specifically did you do or not do that led to their negative judgment?
- What specific behaviors were they looking for that you did not demonstrate?
- What specific characteristics of the work failed to meet their approval?

3. Once you understand their criteria, ask yourself whether you share them? Is this a game you want to play?

If so, the next chapter will help you get better at playing it.

If not and it's FYI criticism: what kind of game do you want to play? Who is playing that game? Look for fellow performers as well as critics and gatekeepers who share your criteria, and look for opportunities to connect with them.

If not, and it's action criticism, you need to negotiate with the critic—see Chapter 37.

About the Author

Mark McGuinness is a writer and coach who has been helping people achieve remarkable things since 1996.

Based in the UK, his blog at LateralAction.com is read by thousands of people every week, and he coaches clients all over the world via the magic of the internet. He is a co-author of the book *Manage Your Day-to-Day: Build Your Routine, Find Your Focus and Sharpen Your Creative Mind*, and the author of a series of popular ebooks, including *Time Management for Creative People*, downloaded over 100,000 times. Mark's work as an agent of change has been featured in publications including *Creative Review* and the *Wall Street Journal*, and in a TV documentary for the Discovery Health Channel.

He holds a BA in English Language & Literature from Oxford University and an MA in Creative & Media Enterprises from the University of Warwick. He is a psychotherapist registered with the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP).

Mark's own creative medium is poetry—he writes about classic and contemporary poetry at MarkMcGuinness.com

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