Is a Critic Disrupting Your Team? Here’s How to Turn Their Negatives into Positives

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As the saying goes, “everyone’s a critic.” But people who may not understand how to constructively communicate their criticisms can come off sounding harsh, hurting team morale and dampening creativity. When the rest of the team can’t see through that biting criticism, everyone starts to consider this person “The Critic,” with nothing nice to say or positive to add. One thing I’ve learned is that oftentimes this person’s negative communication style and energy don’t align with their well-meant intentions.

When faced with a critic, you can either fuel the fire or put it out. While the critic’s actions are their own, we play a role through our response. Do you shut the person down and further alienate them? Or do you engage them, listen to their concerns and move forward together?

There are very few unwinnable situations if we can step back from our emotions, analyze objectively and approach people with empathy. The critic may not be pleasant to work with at first, but they may be saying something worth hearing, or they may just need a little support and guidance to communicate more effectively. If we can defuse the critic, we will not only be able to achieve our goals for the project, meeting or workshop, but we will also leave someone better off than when we found them.

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Who is the critic?

The first step is identification. We must identify that a critic is in our midst in order to address their behavior and create a more productive dynamic. The critic can have many reasons for their actions, but what makes them a critic is how they express themselves in the workplace. They may shoot down ideas, disrupt meetings and generally focus on why we "can't" do things. But this isn't their entire personality – often they do this because they don't feel needed, their talents are being ignored, or they're unsure how to communicate serious concerns in a positive manner.

We need to remember to have empathy for everyone. We don't know what a person is thinking or going through at all times. In order to create positives out of this perceived negative, we need to lead with empathy when it comes to addressing the critic's critiques.

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Observe first

When someone is acting like a critic, the assumption is that they're simply an unhappy person, but that is not always the case. There are many reasons why someone might be a critic, and each underlying cause needs to be handled differently. Before jumping in to fix everything, be patient, observe the situation, and figure out *why* the critic is acting this way.

The critic might be someone who fears change – "If we change our strategies, will I still be needed?" They may not buy into the company processes yet and are struggling to trust those in charge. Conversely, they may have genuine and valuable

concerns but are not effective communicators.

You have to understand what you're dealing with before you decide how to act. Is this someone who is insecure and fears change? Is this someone we need to work on building trust with? Or is this someone who sees something the rest of us are blind to? When you understand the underlying causes, you can form a plan of action. Acting rashly will only exacerbate the situation.

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Engaging the critic

When it comes time to intervene, put aside your judgment and any bruised ego from a critic's disdain and focus on how to best alleviate the situation. We have to be objective: How do I address the root of this person's behavior?

If they are afraid of change:

- Validate their worth to your company, and ask them to trust the process. Ensure them that you are building something *together*, and that they are in the room because they are experts and have value to add.

If they want to feel important:

- Give them something they can own. Make them a team leader, or assign them a specific research project to bring back to the group. You can also ask them to do a deep dive into one of their concerns – they will either solve the problem they voiced or discover that it is not a problem after all. With these tactics, you are both empowering the critic and putting the ownership on them to investigate the concerns they so readily voice.

If they have legitimate concerns:

- Talk with them about how their behavior affects the other people in the room to give them an alternative script to use when voicing their concerns. Make them part of defining the solution.

If nothing else works:

- I've only ever used this approach three times. If someone is being so unprofessional that they are ready to tear down everyone and everything in their wake, you may have to take the "nuclear" approach. Pull the person aside and give them the option to leave: "It is clear that it's extremely frustrating for you to be here. If you want to, you can leave." I have never had anyone take me up on it, but when presented with the option, they are often jolted out of their rage and can see the severity of their behavior. The decision to stay or leave is now on them, and they can engage with less disruption.

No matter what type of critic you are dealing with, if you lead with empathy and meet the critic where they're at, you can disrupt the dynamic so that all parties feel heard and ready to drive toward more positive outcomes.

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