Theodore Roosevelt Was Wrong. Critics Do Count.

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Last week, the Museum of Natural History decided to remove the statue of former President Theodore Roosevelt from the Central Park West entrance where it has stood since 1940. Since it's already been a bad month for Roosevelt, let me take this opportunity to further knock him off his high horse.

In his famous "The Man In the Arena" speech, Roosevelt said: "It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming…"

I carried a copy of this speech in my wallet for years and often referred to it for inspiration, especially when I was starting my business in the mid 1990s. But over time, I have come to believe that while there is much to admire about "The Man in the Arena," Roosevelt was wrong when he said, "It is not the critic who counts." There is a certain blind arrogance and danger in not just ignoring one's critics, but in creating a world where you have none. Critics are invaluable. I learned this lesson while writing my book, aptly named *Don't Take Yes for an Answer*.

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A true “yes” is earned

After handing in what I thought was a masterpiece manuscript, my editor proceeded to rip it to shreds. Like anyone with pride in his work, it was a bitter pill to receive such an emphatic “no” after all that effort. I reluctantly went back to the drawing board and started over, but once I realized that my editor had offered me the gift of wisdom, I embraced it. While I didn’t agree with every suggestion, they were mostly right and made the book vastly better. That critique and input led to a brand-new manuscript, and my heart leapt when my editor said there was basically nothing she would do (except a few minor edits) because it was ready for print!

I don’t expect my book to eclipse sales records and sit among the pantheon of the best business books of all time. That is unlikely. But it did make it to print and has thus far been well-received – it was even nominated for The Next Big Idea Club (curated by Malcolm Gladwell, Adam Grant, Susan Cain and Daniel Pink). And that would not have happened had my publisher given me a “yes” after that first manuscript. Now that the finished product is out in the world, I’m almost embarrassed that I even turned in that first draft.

All this is to say that contrary to Roosevelt’s words, the right critic does count. Someone who is qualified and cares about you and your goal can point out how and where you stumbled and how you can do better. It’s true that criticism that is not constructive is usually unhelpful, and tough love without love can be petty and mean. But if you are truly married to excellence and not your ego, you will learn to welcome and love criticism.

In my book, I state that if you want to find out what you’re truly made of and reach your utmost potential in your work and life, you must stop taking YES for an answer. We get a lot of positive feedback that we don’t actually deserve, which means

you can’t trust all the yeses you hear. In fact, if you’ve checked off all the obvious boxes necessary for a stellar career in your field – education, credentials, years of experience – but still aren’t where you want to be, that lack of honest feedback is probably part of what’s holding you back. Because face it, if you’re doing just fine but you’re not truly killing it the way you always dreamed you would, I don’t care what anyone tells you – you’re doing something wrong.

Don’t you want to know what it is?

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Beware the echo chamber

If you’re frustrated because you’re falling short of your potential and you want to know why, you have to be willing not only to accept criticism, but also to seek it out. You have to find someone who cares enough to tell you when you aren’t all that, and accept that a “no” is often more helpful than a “yes.” An honest “no” will help explain why you haven’t been able to move your business or career further. A default “yes” will keep you stuck in a vortex of mediocrity. You will stay unaware of your true strengths, unconscious of your weaknesses, and probably unmotivated to make any significant change that will elevate you further than your current plateau.

I failed to follow my own advice when I wrote the first draft of my book. For the first year of research and writing, I surrounded myself with well-meaning friends and family. I was immersed in an echo chamber of “yes.” People kept telling me that they loved what I had written, or they said nothing, which I incorrectly took for praise. Those yeses made me feel great, but it wasn’t until I received an honest – and necessary – “no” from my editor that I realized my book was

mediocre at best. The guy who coined the term “the vortex of mediocrity” got trapped in that vortex without even realizing it!

It’s temptingly easy to fall in love with your own work, ideas and self. My advice: get narcissistic nausea. If you cannot find at least one person to criticize some aspect of your being, it’s a warning sign that you’re operating in a distorted reflection of reality. Welcome criticism. Demand it and then embrace what resonates with you after careful introspection.

Don’t believe Roosevelt’s words that critics don’t count. Instead, take the metaphorical advice of another President: Abraham Lincoln. Rather than ignore his critics, Lincoln appointed them to his cabinet, creating a “team of rivals” that worked together to preserve the Union and win the Civil War. Once you get off your own proverbial high horse, you’ll be amazed at how much further you can climb.

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