

Taking Criticism While Privileged

We must learn how to respond constructively when less privileged and powerful people on the campus say we've hurt them, writes Pamela Oliver.

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How should you respond when a student says something you said or did was domineering, insensitive, racist or sexist? What if you think that criticism is unfair or inappropriate? What if you think the critic has a good point and you feel bad about it?

Many professors think it's important for students to be able to take scholarly criticism as a normal part of learning to be an academic, but they are nevertheless outraged if anyone expects them to take criticism about the way they give criticism to others. Many people who view themselves as liberal social-justice advocates are hurt at being told that others view their personal style or comments as patronizing or demeaning.

This essay is especially for powerful or privileged people about how to deal constructively with criticism that you are hurting other people. Being able to respond calmly and constructively to criticism, whether it is fair or unfair, is an important skill for getting along with other people, for learning new things and for growing and developing as a human being. It is also an important skill for making positive contributions to your institution's climate and for communicating across hierarchies and difference. The punch line is about being who you are (no personality transplants) in a way that respects both yourself and others.

I have a high level of expertise in the matter of taking criticism, because I receive a lot of it. My spouse and children, as much as they love me, will tell you that I can be difficult and annoying. I am blunt and outspoken. My colleagues have often reprimanded me for saying something they felt was inappropriate. I have frequently been told that I have talked too much in a meeting or said or did something that has offended others.

I am liked a lot more than you might think I deserve to be, and part of that is due to my adaptive strategy: apologize early and often. I try to make it as easy as possible for people to criticize me, because that's my only chance of getting feedback that will allow me to find out where a disconnect exists between what I'm intending and what the other person thinks. I've also been told that I have "cultural competence," which does not mean I never say anything stupid or hurtful but that I usually react well when my insensitivity is called to my attention, and that I am aware that my cultural way of being may bother other people.

That's not to say that I agree with all the criticism I've received. I reserve the right of self-judgment, and I think about what I have heard. Sometimes I feel remorse and realize I have been wrong. Sometimes I think the criticism arises from a misunderstanding. Sometimes I think the critic is being completely unreasonable or is biased. Sometimes I recognize the validity in the other person's view but keep doing what I was doing anyway. Sometimes I find out years later that I hurt someone and never knew.

So how can you take criticism constructively, neither overreacting and feeling destroyed by it nor underreacting and failing to attend to important information about your relationships?

First, pay attention to power relationships and axes of social privilege. Bosses criticize subordinates but do not expect subordinates to criticize them. Professors criticize students but get upset if students criticize professors. It is my impression that women are used to being criticized, while many men seem to believe that they should never be. White people are often upset at being criticized by people of color.

If you are on the more powerful or privileged end of a relationship, you should assume that the less powerful or privileged people will not generally be candid with you when you have hurt them. You may even feel that your students or subordinates have no right to criticize you, that they ought to just adapt themselves to your style and preferences.

I have heard some white men vocally reject the idea that they should ever have to adapt to somebody else's interaction style. "This is who I am; you just have to put up with it." That statement is an assertion of privilege in a nutshell. It becomes especially obvious when the person becomes angry and offended by being spoken to in the same tone and manner as they speak to others, especially if those others are women or minorities. They expect deference, they expect to be able to assert the privilege of domination and not have to adapt to others, and they are angry and offended if challenged.

Instructors from marginalized groups often face challenges to their authority from students from dominant groups, and this essay cannot address the pain and complexities of teaching in that context, except to remind privileged instructors that you are not the only ones dealing with conflict.

Second, let people know that you are open to criticism. The best way to do this is to say so. I tell people that I am naturally awkward, insensitive and poor at human interactions (all true), and that makes me appear more approachable.

I tell students that I am what some people call a "task independent" person. It's not that I am uninterested in your life if you want to tell me about it, but I may not ask, partly because it feels intrusive to ask personal questions and partly because I focus on whatever our task is. If our task is personal conversation, I can do that, but if our task is your master's thesis, I'm probably not going to

think to ask about your life.

I learned to consider this after a diversity training years ago in which minority students said that impersonality made them feel excluded. Faculty members said, "But I'm impersonal to everyone -- I don't talk to anybody in the halls." And the minority students, bless them, pushed back and said, "It does not matter whether you treat everybody the same. We are not all in the same position. We enter here feeling marginalized, and we need more overt efforts to make us feel welcome."

One thing you can do in a classroom is explicitly say to students, "It is my goal to make every student in this class feel included and welcome and to help everybody learn this material. I know that we all have different backgrounds and experiences -- and that I may unintentionally say something that offends you or makes you feel uncomfortable. If this happens, I hope you will tell me."

I buttress this in my courses by requiring written lecture feedback after every class and encouraging students to tell me about things that went wrong in it. My students do tell me when they are offended. If it seems appropriate, I apologize, as I did when I ad-libbed an unfortunate rape analogy that upset a lot of people. Sometimes I reach out to the individual students and communicate with them privately. Other times, I report to the class that some students appreciated and others were offended by something I said about a controversial issue.

Saying you are open to criticism only works if you actually are open, which means that you don't freak out emotionally. No retaliation, no emotional displays, no making the other person feel bad about making you feel bad, no trying to argue them out of their opinion. The internet is full of self-help on the topic if you search "taking criticism." You slow your initial defensive response; control your emotions and stay as calm as possible; ask for more information about the person's concerns; listen calmly, thoughtfully and respectfully; and then ask for time to think about the issue before giving your response. If the conversation goes well, you may even be able to have a dialogue about the different ways of looking at the situation and end up with greater mutual understanding and respect.

The attitude underlying these and other self-help ideas about taking criticism is a view of people as not dichotomously good or bad and an acceptance of yourself as an imperfect being who can grow and change in response to feedback from others. You do not have to accept every negative thing that is said about you, and wallowing in self-hate helps neither you nor anybody else.

Third, you need to get to a point of genuinely respecting cultural differences and variations in personal style. You must truly internalize the idea that people can be different from you and still be smart and have something to say worth hearing. People whose style is brash and confrontational, people whose style is timid and self-effacing, people whose style is meandering and indirect -- they all have something of value to say. The problem is not that styles are right or wrong. The problem is

negotiating those style differences to find a way to communicate. It is like communicating when one or both of you is speaking in a second language.

My own style is direct and abrupt. I usually work well with other direct, abrupt people. But I have had to recognize that not everyone has that style and that I should adapt, depending on whom I am talking with. This is never seamless. It is hard work, and even when we are making efforts on both sides, it does not always go well. As an active-aggressive person myself, I find passive aggression to be particularly infuriating, and I find it stressful to deal with timid people. Still, I see it as my job to try to appreciate and adapt to others' styles.

The defense of cultural privilege can take subtle forms among people who see themselves as allies and advocates for women or minorities and want to mentor the other person into the "proper" way of behaving. Women are told to apologize less and to use male intonation patterns to assert authority. It does not really work, by the way: women who use male intonation patterns are just seen as angry and brash and inappropriate. People who are from cultures or genders with habits of deferential behavior and reticence to assert knowledge publicly are told that they must change their style to be good academics -- that they may as well quit graduate school if they cannot wade their way into a competitive male seminar debate, even as the gender and culture dynamics of the debate prevent them from speaking when they try.

Yes, of course, we need to teach students from other cultures what the rules of the dominant academic culture are, but we should do it in a way that recognizes it as a problem of cultural conflict -- not learning the "right" way to behave -- and respect the stresses and issues involved in cultural adaptation and learning to be bicultural. And we need to understand that the other person may think their culture is the right one or that their cultural way of being is an integral part of who they are as a person, and we ought to be the ones adapting to them.

Giving somebody advice about self-presentation is inherently patronizing. I was once in a mixed-sex committee where I could tell the women were angry with me, so I was apologizing a lot to try to mute their anger. (It didn't work; I was ultimately kicked off the committee.) A male professor who is younger than I told me publicly in the meeting that I should not apologize, that women apologize too much, that he trains his students not to apologize and that we should have a rule that you have to pay 50 cents every time you apologize. I took offense and said I was not going to pay 50 cents for apologizing. If you do not see why his action was so offensive, you need to return to privilege school. Although I was older than he and of equal professional status, he presumed to give me personal advice.

I have counseled some of my female advisees about appearing more self-confident, but I have tried to do it in a way that respected their sense of self and the different ways to enact womanhood and self-respect. We'd discuss other women academics whose style is more soft-spoken than mine as possible templates. Similarly, I talk to students from other cultures about the peculiarities of the

academic subculture and the white middle-class culture at its base, but as lessons in intercultural communication, not as how to be a “proper” academic.

In trying to provide constructive criticism to others, we must consider their backgrounds and experience. People from marginalized communities that are not well represented in the academy have often had a lifetime of microaggressions and acts of exclusion and may be experiencing the dominant culture of the academy as exclusionary. In that context, remarks that may be meant entirely as supportive and constructive can be experienced as negative.

I was once trying to talk an African-American student out of her feelings of inadequacy and impostorism by telling her that I’d been doing this job 30 years and, objectively, she was in the top 10 percent of students I had ever worked with, an assessment borne out by her subsequent career. Why wouldn’t she just believe, I asked, that I knew what I was talking about? She said, “Don’t think you can make my lifetime of experience go away just by talking to me.”

That was one of the most useful things anyone has said to me. There is no magic wand to make larger social contexts go away just because you are trying to be a nice person. If you are privileged, you may get frustrated at having to deal with other people’s baggage arising from their oppression, but another way of looking at it is, why shouldn’t you have to deal with it? You have benefited from the same system that is making them feel bad.

Our world is both culturally diverse and hierarchical. Welcoming formerly excluded groups into the academy involves discomfort and cultural conflict. Avoiding conflict through excluding everyone who isn’t like the dominant group perpetuates hierarchies. The way forward is to accept the discomfort and look for ways to form connections across lines of difference. The way to do that is to be open to criticism about one’s ways of interacting – not because there is something morally wrong about your own culture or personality, but because naming and talking about the differences and points of conflict and offense are the only way of moving toward working relationships that treat all the participants as full human beings.

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