Ten guidelines for giving constructive negative criticism

[Written in the context of mission teams but equally applicable in other contexts.]

1. Pray

Something like, *"Lord please control and direct my expression of negative criticism. Restrain me from over-correcting my negativity and resorting to flattery. Restrain me from clamming up and remaining silent when I should speak. Please guard my words so that I speak my criticism wisely and judiciously so it will be constructive. Please prevent me from sowing discord among my brothers and sisters."*

2. Go directly to the person

Go directly to the person you wish to criticize, ***"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone."*** (Mt. 18:15) You should do this if you are a parent talking to your child. You should also do it if speaking to a neighbour, a friend, a co-worker, your local leader or an international leader. It holds true whether he is thousands of miles away or very nearby. This guideline is valid within our teams and Fields. If I disapprove of what a co-worker has said or done, my criticism should be expressed directly to him/her (no matter what his/her position). The exception may be when, in a hierarchical structure, it may be 'policy' to forward criticism through 'the line' of leaders. This is not so in our company.

E-mail is never a substitute for going directly. In circumstances like these direct face-to-face communication is essential. Our body language is a vital part of any communication – the smile, the look on the face and in the eyes all communicate a great deal that is lost in e-mail.

3. Go privately

Deliver the criticism in private. It is ***"between you and him alone"***. Criticising a person in the presence of others prior to discussing it privately is wrong. It is rude and it is a violation of, ***"Love is patient and kind"*** (1 Cor. 13:4). If he/she fails to respond then inform him/her that the criticism will be shared with a third person – his leader – who, together with you, will attempt to help him understand. ***"But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses"*** (Mt. 18:16).

It takes courage to criticize a person directly and privately. The easy way to criticize is behind his back. It is easy to by-pass him taking the complaint to his leader or to someone who supervises the leader. But this is a violation of a direct command in Scripture. If the person cannot in any way deliver the criticism directly and in person, it may be as a last resort to go privately (via e-mail) but in no circumstance should this be copied to anyone else. Such a procedure is not at all as satisfactory as direct communication and has caused many problems, but it may be better than suppressing a serious complaint or airing it through gossip.

Sometimes even when you go to speak to a person in private the relationship is so strained that when speaking face-to-face one of two things may happen:

- Your courage evaporates leaving you unable to fully speak out your criticism.
- The other person tenses up in self-defence so that his/her selective hearing mechanism prevents a full understanding of your criticism.

At a possible time like this it may be better to read out a paper you have written specifying your criticism – e.g. Bill has a worsening relationship with Bob until Bill can't stand it any longer. He goes to Bob and tries to talk through the problems without success. In desperation Bill contacts Betty with a cry for help. Betty goes to see Bob to give him a report on how Bill feels. Understandably Bob is hurt and says, *"Why didn't Bill tell me!"* Bill responds to Betty, *"But I did! I tried my best to get through to Bob, but he wouldn't listen."*

In such a situation Bill should write a statement of his complaints against Bob and request that Bob should sit down and go through a list of grievances one by one in discussion. If that fails, Bill should

request someone else (like Betty) to sit in on the discussion and prayerfully help Bill and Bob go through then list.

There are times when a person simply cannot express criticism through the spoken word directly – perhaps their English is inadequate – i.e. a cross-lingual, cross-cultural miscommunication. Equally the person receiving the criticism can't understand all that is behind the words. **It is essential** that the person expressing the criticism is helped to get it out of their system **in writing**. If it is not flushed out like this, the wounded heart is sure to fester and cause worse trouble later.

It is essential that we help such leaders (or other people) who are being criticised to see the grievances being expressed not only verbally but also in writing. Many cross-cultural difficulties can be avoided in this way. [The person who is bringing the criticism should write it down point by point in his own language and then translate it into the language of the person he is criticising. If he is unable to do this, he will need help in translation from some co-worker who is wise and keeps his mouth shut, except in prayer! Often a person is deaf to your spoken criticism. So then write him a letter clearly spelling out your complaints and grievances and send it to him and insist that he give you an extended time to discuss them one-by-one with him.

To Leaders: If one of your team members is unhappy with his relationship to you, insist that he comes to you with his grievances in writing so that together you can go through them with prayer together and with hope for a solution. This will enable you to transform destructive negative criticism into constructive action steps.

Failure to follow guidelines 1, 2 and 3 will cause damage to your team. Prov. 6:16-19 is very strong,

"There are 6 things God hates, seven that are an abomination to Him:

- ***haughty eyes***
- ***a lying tongue***
- ***hands that shed innocent blood***
- ***a heart that devices wicked plans***
- ***feet that make haste to run to evil***
- ***a false witness who breathes out lies***
- ***<u>one who sows discord among brothers</u>"***

Gossip can destroy a team. Too much complaining, grumbling and criticizing behind the backs of people – especially leaders – will destroy a team. Fields can survive many crises but a poisoned grapevine will be fatal.

4. When criticising a person lead with positive questions

It is effective to ask sincere, positive questions of the person you are criticizing. This will help:

- The one being criticized who can then explain his position back to the critic
- The critic who gains more information that may help him to modify his criticism
- The critic who may ask the person he is criticizing if he has considered alternatives

So prepare your positive questions beforehand. They must be positive. Don't use negative or loaded questions (loaded with hidden connotations). These will produce negative results. There are practical reasons for this procedure:

a. The one being criticised may have access to information the critic doesn't have. This additional information may help the critic to be satisfied that the other person actually made a good decision!

b. The person criticised may possess more information not possessed by the critic. Sharing this information may help the critic see the wider picture and the complexity of the decision-making process. He may still not agree with the decision but now he can sympathize/empathize with the difficulties of the leaders in making the decision.

But suppose the one being criticized isn't free to divulge the information. At such times the problem boils down to **a matter of trust**. If a person trusts his fellow team members and his leaders, he will return to the bottom line and go on with the fight against the enemy – not against his fellow soldiers.

5. Double-check your motives

Ask yourself these questions:

- Why am I expressing negative criticism?
- Has my ego been hurt and so I want to embarrass the other person?
- Is my motivation retaliation?
- Is my desire to advance my status by putting down another?
- Is my concern truly to help the person I am criticizing and to strengthen our team?

Honesty here may force you to cancel your plans to criticize.

6. Be honest and reveal your feelings

Let us communicate both verbally and non-verbally what we honestly think **and feel** and why. It is possible to make your complaints directly and lead with good positive questions and still not communicate your real feelings.

Many leave our company and in explaining their reasons they hide behind a smokescreen of statements that do not express their **true motives**. It is also true that many a team leader inwardly feels that a team member is failing to progress spiritually and in other ways, but lacks the courage to tell him/her.

So when you go to someone to criticize him, ask the Lord to give you the courage to **be honest**. Withholding information or concealing criticism that a person should receive is dishonest.

But there are times when it is not wise to express **all** we think and feel! **Timing is very important**. What we express must be true. A very great temptation is to tell a man something to his face in a measured, considered way, but to say things and demonstrate our feelings about him very differently to other people. To his face it is positive criticism, but behind his back it is negative with passionate feelings of disgust and anger. **This is being deceitful!**

7. Speak the truth in love

The first 6 guidelines are not enough. I can go to someone, lead with positive questions, speak the truth, reveal my feelings, but do all this in a manner that aims to produce bruises, bleeding wounds and crushed emotions! We use the occasion to give a façade of 'honesty' but it is really a vent to our hostility. So this guideline is an application of:

"Love is patient and kind; love doesn't envy or boast; it isn't arrogant or rude. It doesn't insist on its own way; it isn't irritable or resentful. It doesn't rejoice at wrong-doing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (1 Cor. 11:4-7)

So it is absolutely essential that we ***"Speak the truth in love."*** (Eph. 4:15)

I find that much of the criticism I wish to levy on others is actually rooted in my own impatience, lack of kindness, jealousy, conceit and my fiendish delight in pointing out the mistakes of others and bringing them into condemnation. Love that originates from the Holy Spirit is the only cure for such impulses. Genuine love together with truth will lead to effective criticism.

8. Be objective and specific

Support your criticism with **objective evidence** rather than subjective opinions. Do your homework in finding adequate data so you know what you are talking about. Sadly much criticism comes from people who are unfamiliar with the facts. They jump to conclusions and simply pour out an opinion. **Objective evidence** means evidence that anybody can observe if he so chooses.

It is evidence that is the same no matter who views it and so isn't dependent on the viewer's prejudices, feelings or commonly occurring linguistic or cultural misunderstandings.

Objective evidence should be specific. Are you dissatisfied with the training programme? Are you unhappy with the effectiveness of the team? If so, find objective information as to what is satisfactory in a training programme. If you are feeling that the team is ineffective, find out what is a measure of effectiveness in what the team is doing. Then you can go to your leader and explain why you are dissatisfied. Criticisms in terms that are vague and subjective do little good unless they begin the process of objective evaluation.

9. Earn the right to be listened to carefully

The purpose of criticising someone is to bring about change rather than to vent your anger and make someone else's life a misery. To accomplish change you have to earn the right to be heard. Your listener will listen much more effectively if he respects you and your judgement.

There is only one way to earn respect – to produce a record of deeds well done in the experience of the watcher. This takes time. Deeds done elsewhere – i.e. reputation – count for little. That is why **new** team members – regardless of academic background or deeds done elsewhere – risk a great deal if they quickly come on too strongly with negative criticisms. This doesn't mean that new team members should remain silent. They need to ask lots of questions and gather evidence! Negative criticism is more likely to be received with an open mind if you have first earned the right to be heard.

10. Suggest remedial alternatives

To blame a person and suggest no cure or possible alternative is evidence of immaturity. It is what little children do! Anyone can point out to us our weakness, but it takes creative maturity to propose solutions – a plan of action. It is sad when our critics are loud and long in describing our mistakes, but are silent when it comes to working out better alternatives!

- Organise your suggestion/remedies as follows:
  - What I think you should stop doing
  - What I think you should start doing
  - What I think you should continue doing – affirmation is always good. Perhaps give some hints as to how they could do it better.
- Always promise to pray for the person and keep your promise.
- Volunteer a little assistance to do 'the boring jobs' that the person has to do and that you have criticised.

Loveless criticism is a prime characteristic of the world. It is the burden of all leaders. The spirit of the world is gossip, ridicule, a focus on the mistakes of others and an emphasis on the ineptitude of leaders.

At a national level politicians not in power demonstrate this. They love to point out the faults of others both in the nation and in other nations. But they never say a word as to how to make things better! The same is true in industry and business and in our medical, educational and social institutions. It is very rare to hear a thoughtful, well-researched indictment kindly given with a commensurate list of viable options.

But we live in a world that is different, **for we are in the Kingdom of God**. So the tone and substance of our criticism should be radically different. May the Lord enable us to improve as critics.