

Criticism, Your Career, and Your Life

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Throughout your career, you will encounter a series of so-called friends, confidants, and others who will come up to you and let you in on various things that "people are saying about you." I am not talking about the sort of people who are happy to pass along *good* news; rather, I am talking about the sort of people who are mostly interested in passing along *bad* news about you, criticism of you, and more. There are people like this in every company and every organization, and the more you try to accomplish in your life and career, the more you will encounter these people.

When I was in college, I was in the process of deciding whether or not I wanted to run for a certain office. Someone who I thought was a friend of mine came up to me, sat me down for a serious discussion, and advised me not to run because people were saying bad things about me, and were apparently very disappointed that I had been late for a meeting a few days back.

"Being late for that meeting was a deal killer," the person told me. "No one is ever going to vote for you, from what I understand."

I went away from that encounter very upset, and I thought about no longer running for the office. Years later, I still remember this incident because it left such a bad taste in my mouth. It made me feel really bad about myself. Despite that person's "friendly advice," I ran anyway. Incredibly, the only person who did not vote for me was the person who had told me that I should not have run for in the first place.

This episode really left an impression on me because it was one of the first times I understood that there are a variety of people out there who are more than happy to pass along criticism to us, out of their own self-interest. In my experience, unwarranted criticism often has more to do with jealousy and people feeling threatened by us than anything else.

I went to an expensive private high school when I was around 16 years old. At the time, my father had just remarried a woman whose daughter, who was near my age, had dropped out of high school. When my father was not around, my stepmother used to say things to me like:

"Your father does not make enough money for you to go to that school. You should not be going there and you do not deserve to go there anyway."

This was not a nice thing to say to a kid my age, or to anybody really. I told my father about it and he told me that my stepmother felt that the money he was spending on the school should be spent on my stepsister instead. There was a lot of tension surrounding my going to this school due to the cost, and my stepmother made it clear to me on several occasions that she did not like my father spending the money to send me there.

In the first few months I was at the school, my father was working overseas in Japan. I lived a pretty lonely existence at home because my stepmother had a lot of hostility toward me. One Friday evening my friends and I went to a dance at an all-girls school that was in the neighboring city. We did not know a lot of girls at the school, but before I knew it, a friend of mine had met a girl and her friend, and the four of us were headed to my house to watch television in the downstairs area of the house. That was all we planned on doing and the entire thing was pretty innocent. My stepmother was out for the evening, so I thought it would be okay.

We got to the house and went downstairs and started watching television. Around 20 minutes later, my stepmother barged downstairs. She accused me of having girls over to the house without anyone's permission, being "out of control," and all sorts of negative things. Even though there was absolutely nothing funny going on, her reaction was pretty alarming. Everyone promptly left.

- The next day (Saturday) my stepmother stopped speaking to me entirely. She would simply walk away if I spoke to her, not saying a word. I was very confused by the entire situation, and I had never seen someone completely *turn off* and stop communicating like she did.
- The day after that (Sunday), in the afternoon, she came into my room and told me she was so upset that she thought I was going to have to move out of the house, and that she was going to send her brother over to speak with me. She told me that it was completely unacceptable that I had had women over to the house without supervision, and a bunch of similar things.

While all of this would have made perfect sense were she religious and if our household had a strict moral code, for example, this was just not the case. My stepsister actually had a good friend who was a very promiscuous eighteen-year-old stripper, and she used to sit in our kitchen talking about her exploits with my stepmother, and they all laughed about it. Four sixteen-year-old kids watching bad horror movies at 9:30 on a Friday night hardly seemed to qualify as a major moral transgression.

By Sunday afternoon I had not spoken to my father yet and she had not either. I was really taken aback by the entire incident, and I was horrified by my stepmother's behavior. I had moved in with my father and stepmother recently from my mother's home, which was more than an hour's drive away. I sulked around the house in fear the rest of the day, not sure what to do. On Monday morning as I was going to school I heard my stepmother speaking to my father on the phone. She was talking very loudly because this was in the mid-1980s, and international phone calls were typically of poor quality:

"I think he should move back in with his mother and attend the public school there. I have not called the school yet. Do you think they will give the tuition money back?" I heard her say.

I was not able to speak to my father until that evening and, when I did, I realized that he was not that upset about anything. I think he must have been confused by my stepmother's reaction, but he needed to take her side to however minimal a degree, since she was his new wife.

What I realized out of this terrifying ordeal was that people often seek to criticize us for reasons that are more self-serving than anything. Here, my stepmother was resentful and jealous about the household budget that was going toward paying for the private school I was attending, and she sought to undermine this by blowing out of proportion a very small incident.

There is nothing wrong with positive criticism, of course. If someone has a person's best interests at heart, then criticism can help that person become better. However, most criticism you will encounter in your career, in your family, and in social settings is not intended to build you up; instead, it is intended to tear you down.

At work, in social relationships, and elsewhere there are always people who will speak negatively about us, blame us for something, or blow small incidents way out of proportion. When this occurs, the person blowing things out of proportion and speaking badly about you usually has no interest in helping you and, instead, is simply trying to bring you down. This sounds like a terrible thing to say, and to an extent, it even sounds a bit paranoid, but for most people this is the case.

When you are doing well in your career and life, instead of being happy for you, many people will become jealous and resentful of your success. In order to make themselves feel better, they will find fault with how you are doing by criticizing you, either to your face or behind your back. How many times have you heard someone say something like the following:

- "That person may be rich, but they are unhappy."
- "That person may be famous, but look at how unsuccessful their relationships are."

Instead of being happy for people for what they have done, or what they have achieved, the reaction is to attack them for what does not seem perfect in their lives. This is a tool that many people use to feel better about themselves when they are threatened by others and their success.

I spend a lot of time trying to build people up with career advice and by helping people realize their potential. There are so many rewards and benefits to gain from pursuing your dream life; however, one thing that you simply cannot escape or ignore is the fact that the more successful you become and the better that you do in every area of your life, the more criticism you will face.

If you get a promotion, you may be accused of being a brown-noser. If you meet the person of your dreams, you will threaten that person's friends, if they are single, because you are taking their friend away from them.

I grew up with sisters. I was always amazed at how their single friends reacted when any of my sisters got a boyfriend. In almost every case, the friends would look for various criticisms of the man, which they would quickly voice. I have seen this occur so many times, it seems like it is almost a natural sort of response. The girls were feeling *threatened* because they were getting less time with their friends, once their friends entered into a relationship. Men often do the same thing with their friends. They often feel threatened when their friends meet women. The woman may be called controlling, manipulative--and all sorts of things.

In most cases, your personal and professional success will invoke a bit more criticism than compliments and congratulations.

The ability to deal with criticism is one of the most important lessons you will ever learn. If you are going to improve and constantly strive toward your goals, you will need to learn how to deal with criticism. Most people stop and pull back when they are criticized, or they simply do not act at all, for fear of being criticized. If you live your life in fear of criticism, you will never accomplish everything you are capable of accomplishing in your life.

The best way to deal with criticism is to simply not let it bother you. If you get upset and stay upset about criticism then your ability to be happy, achieve more, and push forward has been limited. Once you allow others to limit the happiness you can experience, the person who has criticized you has achieved his or her objective.

Everyone has various associates who will try to bring them down with negative words and actions. It does not matter what their objectives are; however, you need to be aware of them. These sorts of people will destroy you if you allow their negative words to influence you, slow you down, or make you angry. The most dangerous of these people are the ones who appear to be your friends but are instead, your mortal enemies. They can do you massive harm. There are countless people out there who have allowed others' negative opinions of them to control and destroy their lives. Many people do everything they can to make others like them, to not upset people, and this ends up taking over their lives. As a result they are never pleased with themselves.

You cannot make everyone happy. It is impossible. The more you base your actions on trying to make others happy all the time, the more trouble you will experience. You cannot stop people from talking negatively about you and criticizing you. The more you try to get others to approve of you, the more mediocre you will be--and the unhappier you will be. Guaranteed.

When someone is critical of you, the best thing you can do is to simply shrug it off and move forward. *Who cares?* It doesn't do you any good to listen to criticism that is intended to limit you; do not pay too much attention to it because people will find fault no matter what you do. Not everyone is going to be able to understand you and where you are coming from. Moreover, when you try to win over critics, you will rarely succeed, because for whatever reason, they are threatened by you, and making them feel wrong for criticizing you will not help the situation.

I have watched critical people all my career, and for the most part, I have come to the following conclusion: Most critical people don't work hard enough to do what it takes to be at their very best. Instead, they do their best to attack and criticize others, in order to make themselves feel better. Let them do this. Then forget about it and move on.

Do not spend your time worrying about what others are saying. Spend your time focused on what you want to do with your life, your dreams, and your aspirations for the future.

If you want to achieve anything of significance in your life, you must realize that a good portion of the people you encounter are not going to want you to succeed. Instead, people are going to be jealous and critical of you. And the more you achieve, the more criticism you will attract. If you change yourself in response to this criticism, you will start moving backward instead of forward.

When I was in college, my girlfriend was a very gifted writer and verbal communicator. In fact, she was downright brilliant when it came to writing and condensing complex ideas into written prose. Her freshman year of college at the University of Chicago, she got all As in every writing-related class, which was simply something that very few people were able to do.

When she got into her last year of college, however, she had all sorts of friends who were getting jobs with banks like Goldman Sachs and so forth. These girls were dynamic, but had a whole different set of skills from my girlfriend. They had

probably struggled to get Bs in the writing classes that my girlfriend had done so well in. In contrast, they all were very good at math, and had seemingly spent their lives preparing to interview with investment banks. They were highly professional and came across as polished, but also calculating. My girlfriend had her own skills that made her exceptional, but she was much different from those other girls. When she started interviewing with the banks she did not get callback interviews. Her friends gave her advice like this:

- "You need to appear more calculating."
- "You're too nice and friendly."
- "You need to show them you can be 'bitchy' so they know you will not be intimidated and pushed around by the 'old boy's network' inside of the banks."
- "You need to give 'sharp' and quick answers to interview questions."

None of this advice related in the least to my girlfriend's personality. She was not calculating, and she loved to tell people how she arrived at various conclusions. She was intellectual and her friends were not. She liked to talk a lot and analyze and help people. In contrast, her friends, frankly, were relatively uninteresting.

She was not bitchy and was very open. I hated going shopping with her because she might sit there in the grocery store and get into a 20-minute discussion with the cashier about nothing. She was not an investment banker type. But she listened to her friends' advice (which actually came from a good place, unlike the sort of *evil advice* I mentioned above) and decided she needed to change her personality.

It was a disaster and ended up destroying our relationship. She lost her amazing personality and tried to overcompensate by acting in a way that was not at all like her. While her friends were naturally calculating, she tried to become this way, and it was obvious and made no sense. She also became mean. She stopped telling stories the way she used to and started trying to be like all her friends. This was completely unnecessary, and ultimately, she did not [get a job](#) with an investment bank. Years later, when I encountered her, she was still trying to act the way her close friends had acted, which was not really her personality at all. She was convinced that she did not get a high-powered job at the age of 23 because she did not act the way her friends had told her she should.

Although she never drank more than a glass of wine or beer when I knew her, I found out that she later became a serious alcoholic and had spent several years in and out of rehab facilities. None of this made any sense to me because it just did not seem like her. This woman had had so much potential.

I wonder how much of this had to do with her taking criticism the wrong way.

About a year ago, I heard she had gotten a night job as a "model on the Internet." I am not sure what this means, but it does not sound good. It devastates me thinking about it because this woman has become so different from the person I once knew, who was so talented. I personally believe that her listening to the wrong criticism, and not pursuing what she loved caused all this. If she had not gotten so absorbed in what made her different from others, I believe she would still be the happy-go-lucky person I once knew.

Do not allow others to determine your destiny. When you hear criticism of yourself, just walk away and continue on your path. You will forever be held back if you allow others' criticism of you to affect your happiness.

THE LESSON

When you are successful, many around you will envy your success rather than being happy for you. The ability to deal with criticism, therefore, is crucial to your success. Most people recoil in the face of criticism, or remain inert for fear of attracting criticism; you must learn to avoid such inaction and fear in order to achieve your full potential.