



Be Quiet, Be Heard:
The Paradox of Persuasion

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Chapter Four

Good News and Bad: *Courting Conflict and Criticism*

People don't like criticism. We don't care if it's so-called constructive criticism, if it's sugar coated, or if it's dipped in Belgian chocolate and delivered with a dozen roses.

Many of us do everything in our power to avoid exposing ourselves to criticism. We willfully steer clear of people who might offer negative feedback and of situations where such feedback might create a conflict. When we can't avoid criticism, we experience a visceral physical reaction toward any speaker who is enumerating our wrongs. We tighten up and pull away. We fold our arms defensively across our chest. Some of us may feel flushed in the face; others may have butterflies in the stomach. From the first critical word we hear, our minds get busy mounting an internal counter-offensive that we just can't wait to unleash.

Oh, yeah? we think. *You say I've got a problem. Let me tell you some-*

thing, buddy. You're the one who blah blah blah. And what about the time you yadda yadda ya? And that's not to mention....

Okay, maybe some among us who consider ourselves truly evolved will reply to criticism with a taut, "Thank you for sharing." But after our disingenuous conversation is over, we immediately think to ourselves: *Yeah, right. You haven't heard the last from me!*

As longtime researchers in the field of communication and conflict resolution, we acknowledge that all of these responses are perfectly natural, instinctive reactions to criticism. We default to a defensive mode because our bodies and minds perceive criticism as a threat to be defended against. Physiologically, we react to criticism the same way our ancestors reacted to, say, a saber-toothed tiger. Our flight-or-fight response takes over.

But in a complex, interactive civilization, going with one's primal instincts is not always—or indeed often—a winning strategy. Here's a paradox: The consequences of battling or deflecting criticism are far worse than experiencing the initial discomfort of learning to cope with it and, indeed, to welcome it.

In this chapter we're going to provide you with a model for changing the way you respond to criticism—physically, mentally, emotionally, and verbally. Basically, we're going to help you to be quiet and hear the words you need to hear. As you begin to use this model, you will improve the quality of your professional performance and affiliations and enhance the relationships in your private life.

First, though, let's have a look at what happens when criticism and conflict are willfully avoided.

Criticism Always Goes Somewhere

In many organizations, top decision-makers are out of the loop with regard to problems, concerns, or complaints. The reason: negative feedback that's been generated in the ranks has either *not* traveled up the chain of command, or has arrived at the eleventh hour and then been largely ignored. This common communication phenomenon plays an enormous

role in organizational dysfunction—because leaders can't make sound decisions when they're uninformed. Not surprisingly, this resistance to forwarding negative news is credited with playing a significant role in a number of infamous and tragic events—Bay of the Pigs, both Challenger and Columbia space shuttle catastrophes, and even 9/11. Radically different measures might well have been taken had a fair hearing been given to the dire warnings of people with firsthand knowledge of problems.

Consider how the systemic suppression of criticism contributed to NASA's Challenger disaster. According to investigations carried out in the aftermath of the incident, a tendency for the now notorious "O" rings to malfunction at low temperatures had been noted by engineers well before the explosion of January 28, 1986. Many credit the tragic decision to the circumstances surrounding the launch—notably the intense media attention attracted by the teacher-in-space program, pressure from Washington, and the repeated delays that had already occurred. But a thirteen-member presidential commission blamed NASA for faulty decision-making. Why did such a decision have to be made under pressure if the potential for failure was already known? The reason lies in a culture with the habit of ignoring negative news. After all, went this particular rationale, if you listened to engineers, who always want more data and consistently err on the side of caution, you'd never get anything done.

After the Challenger, steps were allegedly put into place to avoid similar dynamics and similar disasters. But old cultures die hard, and complacency is tenacious. Years later, not enough attention was paid when concerns were voiced about vulnerabilities of the shuttle Columbia due to damage to its heat-resistant tiles. Columbia's skin was almost certainly compromised, allowing superheated air to enter its left wing during descent.

This avoidance dynamic is hardly limited to the world of government organizations and large corporations. It duplicates itself in small businesses, in social groups, and in family systems. In families, a "don't criticize so-and-so" rule is often in place. Even if the rule is unspoken, everyone silently conspires to abide by it.

Family members don't dare tell Dad that they think he's too tight with money or Grandma that she has a tendency to meddle. Or, we should say, no one tells them to their face. What family members do instead is complain to one another, over and over. They start actively looking for evidence to confirm their criticism, and then eagerly share anecdotes that prove their points:

Dad won't pay for cable, so we just get three TV channels. He's a cheap-skate.

Grandma's always asking the kids when they're going to get married. She can't mind her own business.

Dad and Grandma don't get a chance to explain their perspective, and they certainly don't gain any incentive for changing their behavior. The cycle self-perpetuates and everything stays the same.

Creating Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

It's not hard to understand why most people are all too ready to buy into an edict that says, "Don't criticize people to their face." Would-be critics fear unhappy consequences, and their fears are well founded. If we don't choose flight, we often get a fight.

Here's an example: Pam walks into Laura's office cubicle and says, "Listen, Laura, I can't hear myself think when you're talking on the phone. Can't you lower your voice?"

Laura's response is to immediately criticize the criticizer. "Hey, when I'm talking on the phone it's because I'm getting some work done. Why don't you try it?"

Pam retaliates, and with each volley the ante tends to be raised. "Getting work done? Were you getting work done when you were talking to your mother this morning?"

"My mother is eighty-three years old and hard of hearing. Thanks for your compassion."

Now we have a full-blown conflict. Alas, it's not the kind of conflict that generates resolution but the kind in which no one's behavior alters,

except perhaps for the worse. Do you think anything about this exchange will inspire Laura to lower her voice or Pam to show more compassion?

Remember the “as-if” principle: When we expect someone to behave a certain way, they often fulfill our prophecy. Here’s another paradox: Our natural tendency in conflict is to draw out from one another the worst possible behaviors. These are the ones we tell ourselves we least wish to see, but they are also the ones that gratify us on some level by confirming that we were right all along.

Have you ever criticized someone for being short-tempered only to watch him fly off the handle? Have you ever criticized someone for being uncommunicative only to watch her shut down completely? Sure, you get the momentary satisfaction of having proved your point to yourself. But you haven’t proved a thing to them. The person you’ve criticized is now in the “I’ll show you” mode.

Thriving on Criticism

The end result of defending against criticism—without *listening* to it—is often a stalemate where no resolution is achieved. Aristotle might say you are the fool persuading only yourself. In such a situation, byproducts include tension (Pam and Laura *really* tighten up when they see each other now), factionalization (each tells her side of the story and seeks allies), and decreased cooperation (the parties can’t work together in any productive way).

But what if resolution could be achieved?

Breakthroughs occur when criticism is truly heard and the positive potential of conflict is fully appreciated. Instead of dreading criticism and conflict, we must recognize them for what they are—*opportunities for generating creative solutions to problems, for gaining new perspectives, and for enhancing personal and professional relationships.*

We said earlier that changing our attitude about criticism would mean acknowledging a paradox and acting counter-intuitively. We also said it would take time. Of course, we’ve got to start somewhere, so the question is: Where do we begin?

If you think about it, there can only be one answer to such a question. Each of us can only start with our self. None of us can wave a wand and get someone else to change. However, every one of us has the power to change our own behavior. In so doing, we generate a subtle but irrevocable shift in the communication system. Once the system shifts, other people in it alter their reactions as an adaptation to new circumstances. In this way, one “unnatural act” of responding to criticism *by inviting it in* breeds an organic evolution of positive events. The examples in Leader Insights 4-1 and 4-2 demonstrate the positive effects of inviting criticism.

A Model for Responding to Criticism

Our model for responding to criticism is one we’ve provided to hundreds of thousands of people across the globe. Our published follow-up studies and informal feedback have convinced us that a great many of these people have used the model consistently and have realized significant improvements in their personal and professional relationships.

The Responding to Criticism model has two main stages. The first is “Get More Information.” We know, we know—hearing something negative about yourself is bad enough. Why would you want *more* information on the topic? Because more information is needed in order to carry out the critical second stage: “Seek out Agreement.” Seeds of agreement, no matter how tiny or how dormant, lie within every disagreement. It takes close examination to identify them, and getting more information is the best way to begin.

Step 1: Active Listening

The Get More Information stage begins with the seemingly simple act of listening. Some people are good listeners. Under ordinary circumstances they listen actively, with genuine engagement and curiosity. Their interest is manifested in their body language and their spoken reactions. But

very few of us are capable of listening in such a manner when we're being criticized.

Remember, we instinctively interpret criticism as a threat. As a result, our bodily reaction is to back away from the critic. In order to further tune out the speaker, we may avoid eye contact, cross our arms, and assume a blank facial expression. Such a rigid, disengaged posture actually makes it more difficult to process information. Speakers and listeners become frustrated, and messages waft, unheeded, into the stratosphere.

Alternatively, we can assume a posture of curiosity. Counter-intuitive though it may be, behave as though the speaker is telling you something you find objectively fascinating. Lean in, keep your arms unfolded, nod when you understand, and maintain all-important eye contact. This posture serves two functions:

- It signals to critics that they're being heard, so they feel less defensive.
- It helps the listener to understand and process what's being said.

Remember, we're in the stage of getting more information so we can seek out agreement. We want to encourage the critic to deliver the message, and we want to understand it.

But what about our verbal reactions? In ordinary discourse we offer sounds or phrases of encouragement ("mmm hmmm, I see...") to indicate our understanding and to keep a speaker going. Not so when we're being criticized. When we're being criticized, we don't *want* to encourage the speaker. Besides, we're too busy crafting a rebuttal to devote much energy to those little verbal prods. Instead of clamming up or planning retorts, however, we advise paraphrasing the critic's messages.

The Promise—and Pitfalls—of Paraphrasing

Simply defined, paraphrasing means listening to a message and reflecting it back—restating the speaker's content, intent, and feelings. Paraphrasing improves listening and helps us get more information:

- It allows the listener to clarify confusing information.
- It allows critics to feel they're really being heard.
- It helps the listener to defuse negative emotions.
- It allows the listener to summarize the critic's needs.
- It enables the listener to buy time while figuring out what else to say.

But, wait! We know lots of people have probably heard of this technique. In our workshops many participants even say they've tried it, with mixed results. The skill of paraphrasing is easy to misunderstand and to execute poorly. Let's review and clarify this skill, even for those who think they've "got it."

Paraphrasing is a means for discovering and communicating the speaker's intent. Remember, intent is what the speaker is trying to accomplish with the message; this intent may be quite different than the actual impact of the message. Let's take this message from wife to husband as an example:

She: *"I never know when to start dinner because you never call to tell me when you'll be home. It's infuriating."*

Here, the intent of the wife is (a) to convey frustration and (b) to get her husband to change his behavior by calling ahead. An ineffective execution of reflecting back the critic's intention might go like this:

He: *"So what I hear you saying is...you're angry."*

She: *"I just said that. How do you expect me to plan my day around your schedule when I never know what your schedule is? Am I psychic?"*

He: *"So what I hear you saying is, you're not psychic."*

She: *"If I was psychic I'd know why you're such a jerk."*

He: *"So what I hear you saying is...I'm a jerk!"*

What's wrong with this picture? For one thing, the responder is using the same introductory phrase each time. This smacks of "technique speak," and comes off as insincere and trite, even if well intentioned.

Also, the listener isn't attempting to discover what the speaker wants, but merely parroting phrases almost word for word. This adds nothing to the dialogue and can actually escalate a situation. Having "jerk" said aloud two times is twice as provocative as having it said once.

A more effective version of this scenario could go as follows:

She: *"I never know when to start dinner because you never call to tell me when you'll be home. It's infuriating."*

He: *"Wow. So here you put in an incredible effort to make us dinner, and then you end up frustrated and upset."*

She: *"How do you expect me to plan my day around your schedule when I never know what your schedule is? Am I psychic?"*

He: *"A person would have to be a mind reader to figure that out."*

She: *"That's right."*

He: *"So, it would be much better for you if I'd call as soon as I know what time I'll be leaving work."*

She: *"Right."*

Another way to miss the boat when paraphrasing is to undershoot the emotional intensity of the speaker. Every communication has a certain amount of emotional energy attached to it. Effective paraphrasing matches that level. If we undershoot the emotion, our response can seem flippant and dismissive:

He: *"You completely trivialized my ideas in that meeting. You made me look like an idiot in front of everyone!"*

She: *"I see you're kind of annoyed with me."*

Now the speaker is left feeling not only misunderstood but also victimized by a power differential. The first party has obviously invested much more in this communication than the second party is willing to. A better response might have been, "So, you're really feeling like I completely dismissed you at the meeting and you want to be certain that I don't do it again."

Undershooting is one type of intensity mismatch; we've also observed people who are prone to overshooting the speaker's emotional

intensity. This raises the stakes needlessly:

He: *"I wish you'd drive more slowly."*

She: *"You think I'm a reckless maniac!"*

He: *"I didn't say that! But if the shoe fits..."*

In this scenario, the person being criticized obviously experienced the impact of the message in a very intense manner. But where was the act of listening to intent? What was being criticized was a behavior. But the listener applied an insulting label to himself, and drew out a far more negative communication than the speaker initially appeared to have in mind. The attempt to paraphrase went belly up. A response that truly reflected intent might have been, "I'm driving too fast for you and it's making you nervous."

We've also noticed that people who are just beginning to use the paraphrasing skill tend to have an upward inflection in their voice when they do it. When they say, "My speed is making you nervous," it comes out sounding like a question: *My speed is making you nervous?* Their tentative, questioning tone minimizes the power of paraphrasing. What's more, it can signal astonishment that the speaker could take such an outrageous position.

Finally, some people are over-ambitious with their paraphrasing. They jump ahead and anticipate the speaker, saying too much before the speaker has had time to get a complete message out ("Ooooh, ooh, stop, I already know what you mean."). They may also be tempted to offer solutions prematurely ("Ahh, got it. Say no more. I'll never do it again. Case closed!"). Both of these approaches probably owe their genesis to the listener's desire to "just get this over with." And that is exactly how they come off. Better to take paraphrasing one step at a time, letting the speaker take the lead. Even if you are correct in knowing where the speaker is headed, that person will feel better understood if he gets to say what he needs to in his own words.

It's relatively easy to avoid the common pitfalls of paraphrasing simply by being aware of them. To paraphrase effectively:

- Listen carefully (a posture of curiosity will help).
- Discern what the speaker intends to convey and reflect it back.
- Avoid reiterating the same introductory phrase (“What I hear you saying is...”).
- Avoid parroting the message word for word.
- Match emotional intensity.
- Make statements; don’t use a questioning tone.
- Don’t say too much.
- Don’t rush to offer solutions.

With practice, you can become very adept at discovering and reflecting intent. Be aware, though, that often this skill will have to go hand in hand with another: asking for details.

Step 2: Ask for Details

Often, someone presenting a criticism will do so in an extremely general way: “I’m tired of you ridiculing me.”

Because the criticism is so vague, the recipient truly doesn’t know what the speaker is referring to. Nevertheless, instead of asking for clarification, defensive mode kicks in and the listener lobs back a reflexive retort. “I don’t ridicule you.”

What might follow is a volley: “Yes, you do.” “No, I don’t.”

This might lead to an escalation and counter-accusation: “Yes, you do. You do it all the time.” “No, I don’t. You just take everything so personally. Why can’t you lighten up?”

If, however, the listener remembered that the paradox of responding to criticism means asking for more information, then the dialogue might have gone something like this:

He: *“I’m tired of you ridiculing me.”*

She: *“So it feels like I’ve been picking on you.”* [paraphrasing]

He: *“Yes, that’s right.”*

She: *“Can you help me by letting me know what I’ve been doing to*

give you that impression?” [asking for details]

What often follows is explicit clarifying information. The speaker may or may not agree with the details as stated by the critic; nevertheless, a lot more is known than was known before. A starting point for potential agreement is achieved.

Why don't we do this more often? Because, once again, we instinctively want to shut the speaker down when we are criticized. Though details help understanding, paradoxically, we feel we do not want them. Why should we? After all, details might interfere with our certainty that we are in the right.

The absence of details, though, is a serious flaw when it comes to arriving at a resolution. It's virtually impossible to agree to blanket criticisms or to negative labels. It's a rare individual (perhaps a masochistic or sarcastic one at that) who's simply going to roll over and say, "Hey, you're right. I'm an insensitive idiot!"

Details, on the other hand, are often extremely enlightening. Here's a continuation of the previous example:

"Last night at the dinner party, I was talking about how strongly I felt about protecting the environment. You said if I felt so sensitive to the environment I should get out and mow the lawn."

True? Not true? At least you *can* proceed from here because you've got something concrete to work with.

So, the second step in the Responding to Criticism model simply involves asking for details when a critic is speaking in general terms. Did we say simply? Let's amend that. As with assuming a posture of curiosity, you'll have to function counter-intuitively at first. When you ask for details, don't wince up and hold your breath. Open your body and open your mind to receive the information you've requested. It's all part of the discovery process.

One additional caveat: Be aware of your word choices and your tone of voice when asking for details. Is the relationship message *I really want to understand*, or *Prove it*? Responses like "Oh yeah, name me one time—

just one—when I ridiculed you” are not invitations to provide detail. They are exactly the opposite. They convey the relationship message: *You don't know what you're talking about. You're either wrong or stupid.*

Step 3: Guess

Sometimes speakers can respond to a request for details immediately. In other instances, they may be unable or unwilling to do so. Possibly they don't remember specifics because they've let their emotions build to a point where negative feelings are the sole focus. Possibly they feel embarrassed to enumerate specifics, thinking they may come off as petty. Possibly they are genuinely startled that you actually want to know more.

Whatever the reason, if a critic won't offer specifics, we urge listeners to once again take a counter-intuitive tack and guess. Help the critic to criticize more effectively.

“Did you feel neglected because I gave your birthday gift belatedly?”

“Are you feeling jealous because I paid Phyllis so many compliments when she lost weight?”

“Do you feel I play favorites because I let Jessica work from home twice a week?”

This is a step that most people resist when they first hear it. *Isn't that giving the critic enough rope to hang me with? What if I suggest something they haven't even thought of yet?*

Paradoxically, this step tends to generate specific information that's needed in order to proceed, without escalating the situation. Why? Because at the very significant relationship level, the message that guessing conveys is: *I'm so committed to making this work that I'm willing to make myself more vulnerable.*

Step 4: Agree with Facts

Step 4 begins the next stage of our model: Seek Out Agreement. In most

areas of life, it's safe to assume the people with whom we interact have some sort of agenda, just as we have our own. Sometimes individual goals and desires dovetail, but often—even in the most loving families, close-knit friendships, or synergistic organizations—people work at cross-purposes.

All of this is healthy. Imagine a family, a company, or a committee in which everyone agreed all the time. The result would be complacency, and ultimately, stagnation. No new information would ever be introduced into the system, no learning would take place, and nothing would evolve. If you're currently embroiled in a conflict you might think, hey, a little complacency and stagnation sounds a lot better than what I'm dealing with. But, in actuality, you'd shortly be bored out of your mind. Of course, the other extreme—perennial conflict without resolution—is equally undesirable. In this scenario, too, no learning or growth is achieved.

Agreement is the only way through and out of conflict. That desirable result begins when the conflicting parties agree on *something*. That's because even a tiny bit of agreement acts like a magnet: more and more concurrence will stick to it.

Step 4 of the Responding to Criticism model addresses this basic starting point: agree with facts. Facts are often the easiest thing to agree on.

When practicing this step, be explicit in your agreement. Use a neutral tone and objective language. Make it clear that, at this point, facts are all you're agreeing with:

Fact: "Your birthday gift was late."

Fact: "I did pay Phyllis a lot of compliments."

Fact: "Jessica is the only person allowed to work from home during the week."

There, that wasn't so hard, was it? It's the *interpretation* of facts, rather than facts themselves, that causes the most disagreement, which brings us to the next step in the process.

Step 5: Agree with the Critic's Perception

People perceive objects differently. The glass is half full; the glass is half empty. That Rorschach blot looks like a butterfly; it looks like two people kissing. People also perceive the behaviors of others differently. You laughed at my joke; you laughed at me. You didn't see me come in; you snubbed me.

Step 5 of the Responding to Criticism model urges the listener to agree with the critic's perception. *Acknowledge that the critic has a right to see things as he or she does.* Once we understand how critics interpreted the facts, we may come to feel that the way they behaved made sense based on what they believed to be true about the situation:

"I can see how my getting your present a week late would upset you, since I've never done that before and since I didn't mention that I even remembered your birthday."

"I can see why my spending so much time telling Phyllis how great she looked made you think I was flirting with her."

"I can see why my letting Jessica work from home makes it seem like I favor her over other employees."

At this juncture there are two choices for attempting to reach resolution. One is to accept the critic's perception and agree to change your behavior. In such cases a simple apology goes a long way. "I'm glad you told me. I will commit to this change. In a couple of weeks, please give me some feedback and let me know how I'm doing."

The second choice is to clarify your own behavior so that the critic understands. This is a perfectly viable option. You may have had very valid reasons for acting as you did.

"The birthday present I got you was back-ordered and I didn't want to spoil the surprise."

"Phyllis always puts herself down and I thought I could be a good

friend by building her confidence.”

“I agreed to Jessica’s telecommuting because she’s a single mother and we agreed to this contingency plan when she started working here.”

No Buts About It

If the option of clarifying your behavior is the one you want to exercise, we do offer one caveat: Stay away from the word “but,” as in: “I can understand how you feel, but...”

“But” is a loaded word because it signals that everything that came before it should be disregarded. If you’ve ever been the recipient of a message like “I’d like to keep going out with you, but...,” or “I wish we could keep you on here at Omnibank, but...,” you know exactly what we mean.

As an alternative you may want to consider phrases such as: “I can understand how you’d come to that conclusion. Here’s how I saw it.” Or: “I see how you came to your point of view and here’s what was going on for me.” Remember, this is a model rather than a formula. Improvise as needed and make the model work for you.

The Duration Effect

Another thing to bear in mind: Research tells us that people remember what they spend the most time talking about. Take advantage of this “duration effect.” As you draw to the close of a conversation in which you’ve been responding to criticism, linger on points of agreement.

Even if you saw the situation differently than your critic and have said so, end by summing up the points on which you’ve concurred—the facts, and your critic’s right to have perceived them as he did.

Speed Kills

Many of us have a tendency to speed through events we consider unpleasant, because that’s how our defenses work. But when responding to criticism, don’t be in a rush to conclude the conversation. In fact, be careful to

pace all of your responses at a consistent and reasonably slow rate.

The overriding tasks in responding to criticism are to get more information and to seek out agreement. You can't do either when you're in a rush. When it comes to courting criticism and resolving conflict, the tortoise trumps the hare.

Putting It Together

In order to see how the Responding to Criticism model works as a whole, here's a before and after scenario. This is a situation we ran across when we were hired to consult at a busy title insurance company. The precipitating issue: one employee is allowed to work shorter hours than the rest. In the "before" scenario, the office staff was resentful and had stopped functioning well as a team. A typical conversation between a critical employee and the owner, Steve, would have gone something like this:

Fran: *"Steve, I've got to tell you that something's really bothering me. And it's not just me. Everybody feels this way."*

Steve: (sighing) *"All right, what now?"*

Fran: *"You're always giving special perks to Amy and we don't think it's fair."*

Steve: *"Now, wait a minute. Amy has been here a long time. And anyway, it's none of your business. I wish you'd spend more time doing your job than worrying about other people."*

Fran: *"It is my business. It doesn't seem fair that we're all working here and supposedly part of a team. But one person on the team is your golden girl."*

Steve: *"Part of being a team is not running around behind people's backs and stabbing them at the first opportunity. If you did half the work Amy did, maybe you'd have more privileges here."*

In the "after" scenario, Steve gets more information by listening actively and asking for details—as well as guessing when they're not forthcoming. He then seeks agreement and explains his position while

lingering on points of agreement.

Fran: *"Steve, I've got to tell you that something's really bothering me. And it's not just me. Everybody feels this way."*

Steve: *"What is it, Fran?"*

Fran: *"You're always giving special perks to Amy and we don't think it's fair."*

Steve: *"So, it seems like I'm playing favorites and that's upsetting you."*

Fran: *"Yes, it seems like she's the golden girl around here."*

Steve: *"Fran, can you help me out and let me know exactly where you feel that Amy is getting more privileges than you and the rest of the staff?"*

Fran: *"She comes and goes as she pleases. Two days a week she goes waltzing out while we're all up to our eyeballs here. She gets everything that she wants. In your eyes, Amy can do no wrong."*

Steve: *"I know one benefit Amy gets is going home at three o'clock twice a week."*

Fran: *"Yes. And she never has to work evenings."*

Steve: *"You're absolutely right. Amy does leave at three o'clock twice a week and never works evenings. I can see how that might seem unfair. What you may not know is that I hired Amy a number of years ago because she had extensive experience. She indicated that because she was a single mom, the most important thing to her was shorter, more flexible hours. That was our agreement."*

Fran: *"You're right. I wasn't aware of all that."*

Steve: *"I'm glad you brought it up. And if there's anything else I'm doing that seems unfair, please let me know. Because it's certainly not my intention."*

Will things always unfold this smoothly? Obviously, some personalities and situations offer up greater challenges than others. But the more this model is practiced, the more effective it will prove to be. Over time,

defensive instincts yield to new habits. As a result, those who use the model tend to view critics and conflicts as less daunting. That self-assurance helps them use the models in ever more skillful ways. So a positive cycle is set in motion. The example in Leader Insight 4-3 demonstrates the powerful effects of reacting to conflict situations with intentional rather than automatic responses.

As with all of our models, this one doesn't stand alone. Just as each of us is sometimes criticized, each of us also has some legitimate complaints or concerns about the behavior of others. Our next chapter shows how influential communicators can raise delicate issues while preserving—and strengthening—their relationships.