



Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

Episode 19: Tough Conversations: How to Give and Receive Criticism Constructively

By [Megan Monson](#), [Nicole Fulfree](#), [Rachel Moseson Dikovics](#), Audrey G. Ogurchak

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- Amanda Cipriano:** Welcome to the Lowenstein Sandler Podcast Series: The Women's Initiative Network, Real Talk. I'm Amanda Cipriano, an associate attorney and member of the Women's Initiative Network at Lowenstein Sandler. Before we begin, please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast series at lowenstein.com/podcasts, or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, Google Podcasts, and SoundCloud. Now let's take a listen.
- Megan Monson:** Welcome to the Women's Initiative Network Real Talk. I'm one of your hosts, Megan Monson, Partner in Lowenstein Sandler's Employee Benefits and Executive Compensation Practice Group. And I'm joined today by three of my colleagues who'll I'll turn it over to introduce themselves.
- Rachel Dikovics:** I'm Rachel Dikovics, an associate in Lowenstein's White Collar Criminal Defense Practice Group.
- Nicole Fulfree:** I'm Nicole Fulfree, counsel in Lowenstein's Bankruptcy and Restructuring department.
- Audrey Ogurchak:** I'm Audrey Ogurchak, an associate in Lowenstein's Patent Prosecution Group, and I'm joining from our office in Palo Alto, California.
- Megan Monson:** Thanks so much everyone for joining us today. So the topic we're going to focus on today is difficult conversations and criticism. Do you struggle with receiving criticism? Is the criticism you give to others effective and meaningful? Giving and receiving criticism are inevitable parts of both our legal and professional lives. And for some of us, receiving criticism can be very difficult and creates instant defensiveness and even a physiological reaction. So in today's episode, we want to talk about how to handle difficult conversations both professionally and personally, how to effectively give and take criticism, why defensiveness may be felt so strongly, and particularly among women in the legal community. Hint, it's linked to perfectionism and self-identity, which many of us can resonate with. And also to talk about how to embrace constructive criticism as a gift and not necessarily a threat. So let's jump right in. How do you typically respond when you are receiving criticism? And do you feel differently if you've received criticism at an expected time versus when it prompted unexpectedly?

Audrey Ogurchak: So I'm happy to kick us off here. In the past, I think I'm better at this than I used to be. But in the past I would feel kind of a sense of dread when I was receiving criticism. My gut reaction would be maybe a feeling or thoughts that I have screwed something up, or worse, disappointed somebody, which as a perpetual people pleaser is the worst thing that I could ever do. And I wouldn't necessarily get defensive about what the person was saying in the sense that I would argue with them and try to tell them why they were wrong about the criticism. But I would just listen to what they were saying, be very apologetic about my actions, and kind of think of anything that I could say to really get myself out of this conversation as quickly as possible because I was that uncomfortable.

And as I became more senior in my role and kind of developed relationships with people that are the most frequently giving me criticism, that sense of dread doesn't come as frequently. And just based on the nature of my working relationship with the person, I'm able to have more of a collaborative conversation about the criticism.

Nicole Fulfree: So for me, I think that how I respond when I receive criticism, it really depends on who the criticizer is. And so I think depending on who's the speaker and whether the criticism is personal or professional, kind of inform the way that I react. And so I agree with Audrey. I think this is something that's also changed from at this point in my life, especially after we had this conversation at one of our WIN lunches and really focused on the issue of defensiveness. So I've been trying to be really, really conscious of it every day. But I think earlier in my career I was way more defensive about criticism about my work.

I think my typical method of defensiveness is, at least professionally, was to, looking back and reflecting at how I would react, I would immediately disagree with the person and try to change their minds. And to tell if they said, "You should have done your memo this way," I would say, "Oh, well, I did it this way because of this," and kind of try to tell them what I was thinking and try to explain to them that I didn't do it this way because I was careless. I really thought about it and I did it this way. I think at this point in my career, I'm a lot more open to criticism. I think maybe because I'm not trying to prove myself as much anymore, but we'll get into the reasons behind defensiveness a little bit later.

But I think at this point I'm a lot more open to it depending on who the speaker is, how much I respect their professional opinion. And if it is someone I respect, I am a lot more open to it. I still feel the tendency to want to explain myself, but I try to zip my lips and take in the feedback openly.

Rachel Dikovics: I feel so similarly. For me, it's really a question of who is providing the criticism and what the context is. So when I receive criticism from somebody whose views and whose work product I really respect, I take it very seriously and I still have a tendency to sort of freeze up and feel as though I've disappointed the person in some way. So I think there are some times where I still want to try to justify what I did or what's being criticized and explain why I did it that way. But at the same time, I've also tried in the past couple years to get better at being open to receiving constructive criticism, especially from

people I respect. Because in reality, if you want to improve your work, it's important to take things like that and try to internalize them when they do ring true.

Megan Monson: And I completely resonate with everything everybody else has said. I think for me, sometimes my instant reaction is to feel that it's an attack when that's not always necessarily the case, but that you're thinking of it that it's, whether it's in your personal life or your professional career, that somebody's saying that you did a bad job at something, and that's kind of a personal attack on you. So I think it's important to put yourselves in the shoes of who's providing the criticism and why they're doing it. And for me, trying to reframe that kind of mindset helps me to be a little bit less prone to jump to the defense when getting criticism.

So for the rest of the group, why do you think that defensiveness is a common reaction to criticism? And do you agree that defensiveness has felt more strongly amongst women in the legal community?

Rachel Dikovics: I think it probably is. I've found that sometimes our male colleagues seem to be sort of impervious to criticism and not internalize it to the extent that women do. I think women receiving criticism tend to immediately internalize it and then harp on it forever. I think for me, feeling defensive about criticism is based in, little armchair psychology here, but I think it's based in a fear that if you have done something wrong, that person is not going to want to keep coming back to you and wanting to justify what you did to show them that you're not an idiot. You were just thinking about it differently. And I think that it's important to try to let that fear go, especially if you're getting criticism from someone you work with frequently who's not going to not come back to you because they don't like the way you did a particular thing.

And it can certainly really help you develop your skills further and also figure out how you should be providing criticism to other people. So if there are things that make you really defensive when you're receiving criticism, if you need to constructively criticize someone else, then it can be helpful to think about taking something positive out of the criticism apart from whatever you're learning about your work product or whatever it is, but to try to internalize what made you really uncomfortable and try not to do that to other people who you need to give feedback to.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah. I think the answer to this question kind of makes me think back about some of the things that we've discussed previously, like imposter syndrome and about how women are socialized in a way that makes them doubt themselves professionally a lot. Not everyone, obviously, I can't speak for everyone, but for myself and a lot of the women that we speak with at our WIN discussions, I think it's very common in the legal industry to feel this way. So if you're always waiting for yourself to be found out as an imposter, and that's your view of the world, it can make that criticism seem like a much bigger deal than it is in reality, and that it's a reflection of your whole self-identity rather than it just being what it typically is, which is just criticism from a more experienced person that is intended to help you get better. And so I think that view of the world, which is pretty common among women in the legal industry, kind of makes women more prone to defensiveness.

Audrey Ogurchak: I completely agree with everything that Rachel and Nicole are saying. And I think that this also kind of comes up in another way with women, especially in the legal world. And there's this, I mean, from my observations in my experience, women often take on a lot more work, whether that's billable or non-billable than some of their male counterparts. They may take on more billable work because they feel that they really need to prove themselves and go above and beyond to show that they're worth keeping around, which I don't think that feeling is as strong as in some men. And they also might take on or just be tasked with, or as a word that I've heard Nicole use in the past is you voluntold to do something like scheduling meetings or coordinating lunches or events or something like that for the team, or just participating in employee resource groups to help foster a better sense of community within an organization. That's something that women are more frequently tasked with than men.

And with all of this, I think it's pretty common that women can be overloaded with these expectations at work in addition to expectations at home, which is a whole other conversation. And so if something gets neglected, say if a woman makes a mistake or drops the ball or the work product isn't up to par because of all of these expectations and this high workload, that if they get criticism because of that mistake, I think that there's a tendency to be more defensive and say, "Well, sure, I made this mistake, but look at X, Y, and Z that I have on my plate. And I'm balancing with that, no one else has to deal with."

So that I think can just along with all of the other issues that women are kind of faced with or experiencing in the legal world, can contribute to the defensiveness of receiving criticism. And not to say that that's necessarily the right response to receiving that criticism. I know I've been in that situation where I've dropped the ball on something and someone's called me out on it. And my gut instinct to say, "Well, sure, I dropped the ball, but I'm dealing with all of this other stuff that you asked me to do." That doesn't solve the issue that I dropped the ball. But because of all this stuff that I've had to do, I've felt more defensive in those situations.

Megan Monson: So I think those are all really great points that everyone has touched on in terms of how to respond and in scenarios where you've been encountering criticism. So Glenn and Doyle, who we've, I think mentioned in prior episodes of our podcast, has their podcast, We Can Do Hard Things. And one of the episodes focuses on criticism and raises the question, do we even need criticism? Why should some people be the judge of others? And while it seems like it's needed in the business world for a number of reasons, what about in the personal context? Do you all think that there is a need for criticism?

Audrey Ogurchak: I think that there is a need for criticism. Criticism isn't just about being judged and an attack on who we are, we're doing something wrong. It's really feedback on what we're doing and sometimes redirection into where we should be going or things that we should be doing to get to where we want to go. And the only way to grow in, whether it's your personal life or in your career, is to have this feedback and kind of be redirected, whether that's feedback or criticism that you give to yourself or that you receive from others. It's kind of necessary just in terms of growth. In the personal world, I think

that there is a need for criticism, but not so much as to put someone else down, but to kind of advocate for yourself to let them know how their actions or behaviors might have affected you.

When I was much younger, just being a people pleaser, I never wanted to upset anybody. So if someone did something to me that hurt me or upset me, I didn't want to confront them because I, one, didn't want to have a difficult conversation with them about how they hurt me or affected me. And I didn't want to make them feel bad for what they did to me. And so instead, I would carry that kind of frustration or thoughts and resentment almost with me, depending on what it was. It's empowering for me to be able to talk about that and share my experience with them and continue to grow our relationships. But that only is, I think, effective if I can approach that as not judgment, but more as like, "Hey, I want to have this conversation with you to improve our relationship." It's easier said than done in a lot of instances.

Rachel Dikovics:

Yeah, I think the answer is basically the same in both the professional and personal context, because, like Audrey said, it really boils down to not necessarily needing to correct something that someone else has done, but to address how their actions or their work or whatever it is have affected you. I think in the professional context, no one comes into most jobs knowing how to do everything, especially jobs like ours. Most people come in to a law firm, if they're coming in as a junior, they've never worked in a law firm before, so they don't know everything that they're going to need to know. And there's a lot of learning on the job. So if you're receiving criticism as a really junior person, a lot of that I think can be chalked up to constantly having new experiences and learning how to do new things.

When you're receiving criticism as more of a mid-level or senior person, I think it comes down to, like somebody said before, I think Audrey said, putting yourself in the other person's shoes and understanding why they're providing the criticism that they're providing. For example, if you totally drop the ball on something and the partner who you're reporting to was planning to just send out your work product to the client and suddenly has no work product to send out to the client because you missed the deadline or you didn't follow instructions, I mean, it's understandable why you would get criticism about that because you've created an issue basically.

I think in your personal life is different to the extent that you need to be mindful of whether it is your place to essentially judge another person. So if you are criticizing something that your partner has done, I think it's important to do so from a lens of how it made you feel or what happened to you as a result so that it's more about you and less about the other person. I think that can be a good way to broach conversations like that.

But I think for many of us people pleasers, it is really difficult to have conversations like that. And I think probably, at least from my perspective, the people that is most difficult in the world to criticize are your friends. And sometimes you know there are things that your friends need to hear. But at least for me, I think it's incredibly difficult to give your friends feedback because you can feel like you're going to hurt that person's feelings. It's not your place to criticize them, even if something they did has really affected

you. And especially if you feel like they're going to have a bad reaction to it, then I think we're often more likely to just say nothing.

Megan Monson: Thanks for joining us for part one of our episode about giving and receiving criticism. We hope you enjoyed the first part of our discussion and that you'll join us again next time.

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