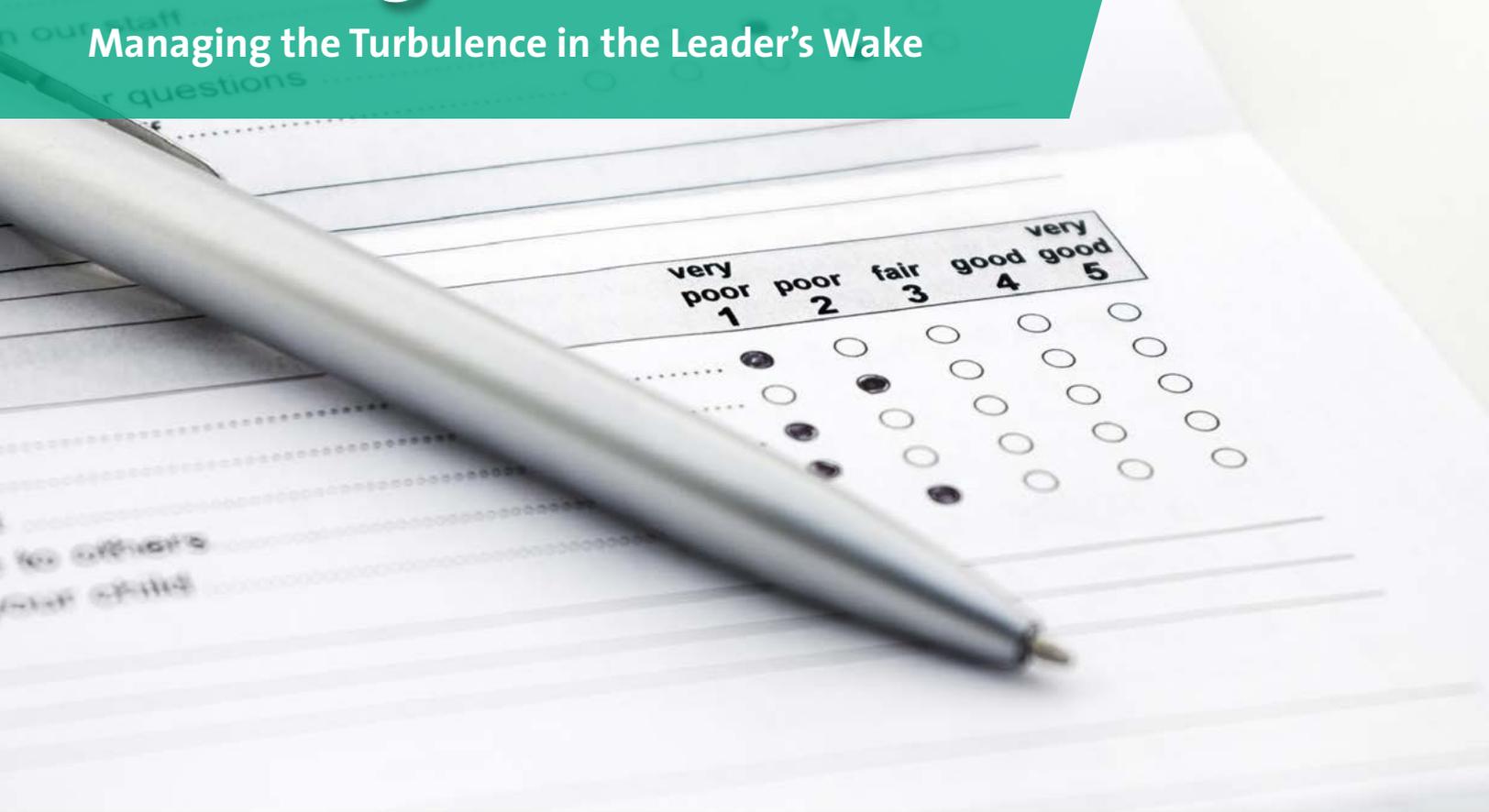


# Dealing With Criticism

Managing the Turbulence in the Leader's Wake



Every leader must deal with criticism. It can be hurtful, distracting, annoying or instructive. Like most skills in life, dealing effectively with criticism comes more naturally to some, but all of us can improve our abilities to anticipate, understand, deflect and learn from the barbs that come our way.

by Kendall L. Stewart M.D.

# Introduction

**Leaders take heat for two reasons: doing the wrong things and doing the right things. The latter conclusion goes against the grain. We all want to get along. We want others like us. Criticism makes us feel bad. We instinctively feel that criticism means we have done something wrong. That is not necessarily true. While criticism may signal that a leader has stumbled badly, it may also indicate that the leader is performing splendidly.**

**If the criticism of leaders is inevitable—and it is—then there must be some effective ways to deal with it, to minimize it, to learn from it and to blunt the pain it can cause. That is the focus of this essay. The insights and strategies that follow can transform criticism from a hurtful assault into an opportunity to learn, from a noxious distraction to a valuable performance gauge and from a time of bitter humiliation to a moment of comic relief.**

## Expect it

Most new supervisors think leadership is easy. They assume it is just a matter of avoiding the stupid mistakes they have watched other leaders make. They expect to work less, make more and bask in near-universal acclaim. They will bark orders. Their soldiers will execute them flawlessly, promptly and happily. Criticism, if there is any at all, will be quickly silenced by the adoring masses that will not stand for their beloved leader's being abused. Highly motivated and persistent, subordinates will demonstrate initiative and follow through. They will not drag their feet, whine, criticize, undermine or complain.

**Our fantasies about the ideal leader are the damp potholders with which we grasp the searing handles of real life. The heat bleeds through pretty fast.**

When you accept a new leadership position, criticism will not be long in coming. To make matters worse, your critics will rarely confront you directly. They will go behind your back. Eager couriers will make certain that you hear it right away, though. Be careful about how you react to the news. Everyone will be watching. If you appear to move in for the kill, if you are wounded, the dogs will expect it and appear indifferent or intrigued in a pleased sort of way, your critics' temporary befuddlement will provide you with an opportunity to

reflect, to reconsider and to conduct a dignified retreat if necessary. Others' perceptions of your abilities as a leader will rest primarily on how you react when under fire.

## Invite it

Most leaders seek to avoid the criticism that might have been invaluable if it had been integrated into the deliberative process. Constructive criticism always adds value to the thoughtful decision-making process. It exposes weak points in the case for change and alerts the frontline troops to the pockets of resistance they may expect. Criticism may represent an attempt by stakeholders previously left out of the process to get involved. Such criticism signals an opportunity to backtrack and recruit additional champions to the cause. Leaders who avoid the purifying fire of criticism forge only brittle armor and advance to the next battle with their mettle still untested.

There are a number of ways to transform criticism from a deadly barrier into an enabling asset. Make it clear that you expect it and that you value it. Welcome the service that responsible critics provide. Include criticism as a required step in every developmental plan. Criticize your own ideas openly. While it is a good thing to criticize ideas, it is not helpful to criticize the people behind those ideas. We all tend to take criticism as a personal insult, even when our critics insist that no personal affront is intended. When we feel insulted, a personal counterattack is a temptation hard to resist.

The unfortunate reality of everyday life is that critics employ personal attacks because these are effective

weapons. This is not honorable but it happens. Mature leaders grow skins tough enough to absorb these assaults while searching for the kernel of valid criticism such attacks usually contain. Only a select group of leaders regularly achieve this level of emotional detachment, and no leader can remain this detached all the time.

## Prepare for it

In spite of having been repeatedly stung in the past, criticism often takes the forgetful leader by surprise. This failure to learn from past experience is a persistent characteristic of human nature. We tend to put unpleasant possibilities out of our minds. We all want things to go our way and opposition is not something we naturally long for. Responding to objections, considering all sides, making a compelling case, building alliances and finding acceptable compromises are arduous undertakings. If they think they can get away with it, indolent leaders will choose to only consult with pliant sycophants and then make premature announcements, hoping to sneak a self-serving decision by their critics before they figure out what is happening. This may work for a time, but unacknowledged criticism thickens into suspicion, and suspicion hardens into a tacky bog that will eventually exhaust flailing leaders.

During your planning for a new project, identify potential barriers and decide how you will overcome them. Invite an honorable critic to probe your case for the weakness you may have overlooked. Anticipate attacks from the organizational guerrillas who assault new ideas for sport or out of some deep sense of resentful alienation. Brace yourself for the ad hominem assaults your adversaries will launch just because you are leading the charge, and steel yourself to respond with grace and quiet persistence when irritating barbs find their mark in some chink in your armor. Fail to anticipate and prepare for criticism and you will watch some of your most ambitious projects collapse after a single well-placed blow to a weak supporting argument

## Understand it

Because criticism is inevitable and because it may either devastate or motivate, enterprising leaders will want to understand it. The criticism of others is the quickest route to the comforting fantasy that the critic is superior to others, their ideas and their pathetic efforts to succeed. Criticism is the great equalizer. Wrapped in the comforting self-righteousness of criticism, the critic is, for a blissful moment, more honorable than the sleazy politician, more insightful than the stupid organizational leader and more skilled than the inept athlete. Criticism abounds because it is cheap and easy and it makes the critic feel better for the moment. Most

critics rail without ever being held accountable—they are not the ones taking the risks. Little thought need be given to accuracy; the most outrageous distortions are permitted. The basis of most humor, sarcastic criticism, is the thriving sport of spectators the world over. To give couch tubers their due, caustic wit often serves up a refreshing helping of comic relief when tiresome leaders take themselves too seriously.

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Before becoming too indignant about others' proclivities, examine your own tendency to criticize. Observe your friends and colleagues. You will see that the least secure are the quickest to point out others' weaknesses. Incompetent people rush to find flaws in others. Negative people view every incident in its worst possible light. Miserable people always suspect the darkest intentions and are convinced that everyone harbors some ulterior motive. Take a step back from the swirling conversational currents of your everyday life, and you will see that we all sometimes roll in a cultural wallow in which snide comments swamp encouragement and dismissive banter drowns out constructive feedback.

## Accept it

Leaders may resent criticism, find it annoying, distracting or even hurtful and demoralizing, but they cannot make it go away. It is best to accept criticism as an unavoidable reality, an essential thread in the organizational tapestry every leader hopes to weave. It is better to manage it than to strain to rid one's life of it. When viewed as a given, sophisticated leaders acknowledge criticism, deal with it and then drive on. They recognize that criticism need not dampen their enthusiasm, cloud their vision or imperil their projects.

Admit that criticism is out there. Acknowledge the criticism you have heard, implying that it is understandable given the limited information available. Seize this opportunity to share new information, to explain in greater detail or to make a compelling case again. If the criticism is legitimate, acknowledge that and alter your approach accordingly. Do not attack your critics personally. Keep to the high ground and permit the intemperance of their attacks to damage their credibility over time. Bear in mind that your harshest

critics today may be your strongest supporters tomorrow. Convey your wish that everyone would support you in the matter at hand, but admit that this would be unrealistic. Renew your pledge to disagree agreeably. A 100 percent approval rating is neither likely nor critical to your success.

## Learn from it

Criticism, no matter how hateful, is a gift. There is a lesson in it. Those respectful critics who speak to us privately and share their perspectives in a manner that confirms their commitment to our success are easy to heed. There is a dearth of these persons. On the other hand, poisonous reptiles are easily bred. They do not have our best interests at heart. They wound for the reassurance that they still have that power over others. But such attacks offer helpful instruction too, even if the only lesson to be learned is that the leader should avoid the sloughs where these vipers breed.

Here are some of the invaluable lessons criticism can teach. Make a compelling case. Involve stakeholders early and often. Be forthright. Lead with a glowing sales pitch that ignores the downside, and your audience will take you apart, sometimes to your face, more often behind your back. A frontal assault on the heavily fortified self-interests of those you are trying to persuade is rarely the best approach. Arguing for what you want is more tedious than selling vacuum cleaners door-to-door. Instead, offer an attractive alternative for removing the grit beneath your listeners' feet.

## Respect it

After leaders have hardened their hearts to criticism, as indeed they must, it is common to lose all respect for this unpleasantness. This is a serious mistake. Even when it is malicious and disruptive, criticism is a valuable indicator of what can be expected to provoke the resistance of certain members of the group. No leader can withstand the withering fire of criticism indefinitely, and assessing the intensity of a critical outburst can help the leader decide whether this particular hill is one worth taking. Less hateful criticism may indicate a lack of clear communication, a failure to consult adequately or to persuade effectively. Those challenges intended to probe a weakness or to force consideration of unseen dangers are treasured gifts even when borne by unwise men.

When one of your critics holds forth, put yourself in his or her shoes. Viewed from their perspective, your actions may not appear so honorable or selfless. Even if the cutting commentary proves groundless or mean-spirited, that is how someone feels and feelings are best acknowledged

and legitimized, not demeaned. Almost all criticism contains at least a nub of truth. Reflect on all criticism long enough to identify the core issues. Many persons cannot confront others without overdoing it. Respect the point they are trying to make even when they make it badly.

## Avoid it

Some leaders invite unnecessary criticism they might have avoided altogether. They misbehave and then wonder why their behavior attracts so much attention. Other leaders repeatedly attack and undermine their colleagues; they are puzzled when these colleagues return the favor with a vengeance. Arrogant leaders announce decisions before consulting with those affected and without making themselves available for query or clarification. Still others withdraw to the executive suite and busy themselves issuing abrasive edicts or sending messages by lieutenants only peripherally involved. The sad truth is that we leaders fully deserve much of the criticism we receive.

Make a list of those leadership actions that have infuriated you in the past. Post that list and look at it daily. At least you can try to avoid those mistakes. Do not announce decisions when you are angry, in an attempt to extract revenge or before you have carefully assessed the risks. Spend enough time to explore all of the possible options. Consult widely. Allow some time for reflection before rushing a premature decision out the door. Do not dawdle forever, though. Successful leaders favor decisive action as a first principle

## Expose it

Those honorable critics whom every leader hopes to find put their concerns right on the table. They don't say anything to the leader's face that they wouldn't say behind that leader's back. These treasured colleagues are informed, open-minded, thoughtful, respectful and measured in their comments. Unfortunately, most critics don't operate this way. Most critics are cowards. They are poorly informed and, having made up their minds, they have no interest in considering the facts. They smile and nod to the leader's face and vent their spleens in organizational locker rooms where their distortions are less likely to be challenged. Most such bombast should be ignored, but occasionally organizational terrorists must be flushed out and held accountable.

Use this technique sparingly. Most irresponsible critics have long since lost all credibility with their colleagues. Bystanders amuse themselves by watching agitators make fools of themselves, but they rarely take their comments seriously. An overreaction to their provocations will invite dedicated troublemakers to needle you

repeatedly. Remember what Woodrow Wilson said.  
“Never murder a man who is committing suicide.”

Still, some attacks must not go unanswered. Expose hateful assaults by persuading some observer to chronicle the attacker’s emotional diatribes. It is particularly helpful to describe the attacker’s emotional state during his or her outbursts. To have one’s emotional immaturity documented for posterity is acutely embarrassing; most overgrown brats are oblivious to how ridiculous they appear to others until they see their description in print. Respond to deliberate misinformation by quietly providing the facts and by emphasizing in an understated way that the responsible person would have looked into the facts of the matter first. When you decide to expose a fool, resist the temptation to attack him directly. Stand aside while he does himself in.

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## Deflect it

The criticism of leaders varies widely in tone, in intention and in merit. Some persons criticize leaders in humor or because complaining is their way of making casual conversation. Much criticism derives from ignorance or petty jealousy. While it is true that some criticism is malicious or destructive and must be confronted, most carping is harmless. These annoying barbs call for the skillful deflective use of the shield while the knight stays focused on the effective use of the sword. Effective leaders prefer to attack. They defend only when it is necessary to protect the flag.

Master several of the techniques for deflecting those minor criticisms that bedevil every leader. Refocus the group on more important issues. This redirection embarrasses those critics that have taken up trivial causes. Shrug their laments off, observing regretfully that people with such limited or cynical perspectives can hardly be expected to see the big picture or figure out what is really important. Point out your critics’ ignorance and dismiss their complaints as unworthy of the informed player’s serious attention. Forge and wear a well-cut suit of mail. Above all, employ these deflective techniques with good humor. Forego the defensive arrogance that betrays the novice practitioner of the survival arts. Compulsive critics are as isolated as fighting cocks in most organizations. Permit their spectators to see them for what they are.

## Remember it

There is no more accurate gauge of character or predictor of future behavior than the way one criticizes others. That is why every leader must pay close attention to his or her critics. Successful leaders know exactly whom they can depend on, to what extent and under what circumstances. They assess everyone’s strengths and weakness—including their own—rigorously and objectively. They do not permit their feelings to contaminate these critical judgments. In an emotional pinch, we all react in more or less the same ways we have reacted before.

**During the fracture of the surface crust through which most fiery criticism erupts, the observant leader can see the molten core of the critic’s soul. An awareness of what lies beneath is essential to the leader’s long-term survival.**

Forgive your critics’ hateful attacks, but never forget them. Given the opportunity, they will treat you that way again. This is not to say that you should view these persons as mortal enemies. You should build and nourish the best possible relationships with everyone. However, making substantial emotional investments in others without considering their prior behavior is foolish.

When a concerned and considerate critic speaks to you in private, sharing the kind of thought-provoking perspective that is easy to consider and reflect on, that person is a gift from God. Do not take such a relationship for granted. Do not fail to let this wise counselor know how much you appreciate this overture. The most effective way to demonstrate your gratitude is by seeking counsel again and taking that counsel to heart.

## Document it

Those who lash out with churlish behavior and biting accusations hope that their victims and impressionable bystanders will cower before their bullying effrontery. The lack of meaningful consequences invites additional outbursts. The use of documentation as a staggering counterpunch is a leadership opportunity often missed, and frequently thrown halfheartedly even when the opening is recognized. There is a simple way to hold bad actors accountable. Write down the things they say and do. Keep editorial speculations out of the document, but accurately detail their embarrassing exhibitionism. Describe exactly what

happened including their language, demeanor, emotional arousal and behavior during the offensive tantrum. Quote their statements directly when you can. If you are lucky enough to have a video camera at hand and the situation permits, capture the incident on tape. A fool in full blossom is blindly engrossed with his own effusion. The lasting image of such an ugly flower is a potent retardant to further sprouting.

## Model it

Irritated by the criticism they receive from others, leaders often overlook the obvious—they regularly behave as poor role models themselves. Some leaders sneak behind their colleagues' backs, and ambush them during group meetings. They accept and pass on tawdry gossip with glee. These flawed leaders base their opinions about emerging issues primarily on whether they like or dislike the person making the case. They find it difficult to focus solely on the merits or demerits of the proposal. Behaving badly is the most effective way to invite aspiring critics to take their best shots.

Conduct an inventory of your critical attitudes and behaviors, then modify those patterns that you resent in others. Stop complaining to your cronies behind your colleague's back. Take a public position and then stick to it in private. Quit going to your boss with complaints about your peers before you have voiced your concerns directly to them. If you realize that you often get your feelings hurt or become angry, ask yourself whether your thin skin or intolerance of a conflicting view might be part of the problem. Focus on issues instead of personalities. Concentrate on your work. When you are constructively engaged in productive activity, you will have less time and energy to waste on being critical of others.

## Weather it

There are three situations in which just surviving the storm of criticism is the only realistic option: when the leader messes up, when a consensus cannot be reached and when a decision must be made that cannot be fully explained. Mistakes are inevitable and they will always draw some fire. When leaders attempt to cover up the mistake, blame the mistake on others or justify their actions with flimsy excuses or justifications, outraged censors will unsheathe their sharpest knives. The unacknowledged mistake is like a festering boil. The pain will only continue and worsen until the defensive pus is drained. Just admit that you made a mistake. Admit it early—before you are forced to. Admit it often. Admit it with good humor. Promise that you will learn from it and that you will do better in the future. Take full public responsibility for what happened, even when the blunder was not entirely your fault. General reassurances are not sufficient. Be specific

about what you have learned and exactly what you plan to do differently in the future. Finally, ask your colleagues to hold you accountable by calling any significant lapses to your attention. Everyone makes mistakes, but few leaders manage their mistakes with such sincerity and aplomb. Taking such an approach will quickly set you apart from most of your peers. When you must make an unpopular decision that you cannot explain publicly, make your case in advance to those respected opinion leaders who will provide quiet support while maintaining confidentiality. When you know that key political kingpins will not support your decision, at least give them the courtesy of an advance warning. Acknowledge that you cannot reasonably expect their active support. Ask whether they are willing to hold their fire on this particular issue. When you announce the decision publicly, explain why you cannot explain more fully, admit that reasonable people will disagree with this decision and make sure that your position is adequately fortified—that those persons backing you up are intent on standing firm despite political repercussions. Sometimes opinions will remain equally divided and you will have to make the call while knowing full well that few, if any, of your colleagues will be entirely pleased with the outcome. Acknowledge that, explain how your final decision is consistent and supportive of the organization's best interests in the long term. Ask for patience and understanding. Point out that this is a controversial issue about which reasonable people can be expected to disagree. After you have announced your decision, resist the inclination to reconsider it endlessly. Emphasize that it is time now to move on.

## Ignore it

Some kinds of criticism merit no obvious response at all. Successful leaders seek to appear impervious to personal attacks whether they are mean-spirited, unintentional or launched in jest. Sometimes this is easy and sometimes it is not. Malicious critics hope that their verbal assaults will destroy their opponents. Actually, the more overwrought the attack, the less discomfort it causes. Only pathetic persons attack with such venom. The outrageousness of their allegations render their raids more farcical than hurtful. These are easy to ignore. Attacks aimed at personal characteristics about which the leader is already sensitive or insecure are naturally much harder to shrug off.

Go on the offensive. Use self-deprecating humor to its full potential. Poke fun openly at your real and perceived foibles. Assume attentive but unconcerned posture, and convince others that you relish this sort of thing. Learn to smile and shake your head lamentably when a cloying gossip slinks in with a tale of a recent petty gibe.

**Take firm control of your emotional arousal so that your public appearances do not reveal hurt, anger or resentment. The more successful you become as an actor, the less you will need to act. Your detachment will eventually be real.**

## **Monitor it**

Criticism is an organizational vital sign. Where there is no criticism, there is no life. This does not mean that all criticism is good, but it does mean that the absence of criticism is bad. If leaders are not being criticized, they are not challenging the status quo adequately. When in the deadly comfort zone, companies drift past opportunities to stretch and improve. They ignore the slow leaks that, left unattended, will become irreparable over time. Minor grumbling about piddling matters means that nothing much is really going on. A major firestorm usually means there is a serious problem afoot. Fighting this kind of fire is the activity that leaders love most. The best kind of criticism is the steady rumbling that leaders are pushing too hard, doing too much too soon, taking on too many projects and refusing to take a breather. Such criticism is the sign of a truly vital organization.

Establish effective channels for learning what people in the organization are saying about the administration in general and your leadership in particular. It will not prove difficult to obtain feedback. People regularly seek to ingratiate themselves with leaders by dragging in conversational road kill. Identifying

objective organizational analysts that want to help—not just watch you twitch in response to the latest provocation—will prove to be a greater challenge. The untitled diplomats that continuously oil the gears of the business machine are the unsung heroes of every successful organization. Make sure to let them know how much you appreciate their service.

## **Conclusion**

Every leader must deal with criticism. It can be hurtful, distracting, annoying or instructive. Like most skills in life, dealing effectively with criticism comes more naturally to some, but all of us can improve our abilities to anticipate, understand, deflect and learn from the barbs that come our way. Criticism is the turbulence that follows in every leader's wake. It is the evidence that, for good or ill, at least the leader is doing something, going somewhere and making a difference.

The kaleidoscopic nature of criticism means that no leader will ever entirely “get it.” Sometimes criticism means something good is happening. Sometimes criticism means that something is going wrong. Sometimes it means both. Sometimes it means nothing.

Successful leaders rarely welcome criticism, but they never shrink from it. They view it as one of the vital signs of organizational life, a key indicator of how they are doing their jobs, what barriers must be faced and overcome and how the company's most precious asset, its intellectual and emotional capital, can be most effectively leveraged. Criticism may produce a painful paralysis or stimulate energizing engagement. The choice is yours.

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