

THINK BEFORE YOU CRITICIZE



Often It Will Soften Your Criticism—Still More Often It Will Cause You to Refrain from Criticizing at All.

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LIt is natural to desire to find fault. Every human being has something of the critic in him. The parent who scolds the petulant child is a critic, often an unjust one.

The judge who lectures the unfortunate before him for sentence often is unnecessarily harsh, both in what he says, and in the sentence he imposes.

School teachers are often unduly critical. So are the gentlemen who review books and plays. It is so easy to find fault that, following the line of least resistance, almost every one drops naturally into the habit.

And how few there are who think before they criticize.

A few years ago a school teacher called before him a backward, stupid child, and before all the other pupils in the room rebuked him for his stupidity.

The child stood with open mouth and listened dully to the scolding. He did not understand much of it; all the sarcasm escaped him. But when a little later he went among his playmates at recess and they made fun of him he began to understand. He went home crying to his mother, and for days was hysterical, stricken with terror every time the teacher looked at him.

The brutality of dealing with a child in such a fashion has been better understood of late, since it has become known that stupidity in children is due to ill health, rather than to

sullenness. In the case of this particular child, an operation for a growth in his nose, advised and performed by the family doctor, cured his "stupidity," and his future now promises rather better than that of the really stupid teacher who criticized him.

It ought to be the duty of every teacher who has children in his charge really to understand the children. Enough has been said and written of late about the effect of health on the mind. There is no excuse for the teacher who is not familiar with it, or who harshly and wantonly rebukes children who are backward through no fault of their own.

In "Huckleberry Finn," one of the most human books ever written, is the pathetic story of how "Jim," the colored man, called to him his child who had just recovered from scarlet fever.

The child did not come, in fact paid no attention to the command. Twice again the father called, then in a rage he seized and beat the helpless urchin till his anger was appeased. His description of his remorse when he discovered that the child had been stricken deaf by the disease ought to be read by all who have to deal with children.

Teachers and parents should read and commit it to memory. By doing so they would spare children untold physical suffering, and they would end their days with far cleaner consciences.

Constructive criticism—the criticism that helps because you know the man who makes it fully understands what he is talking about—is good for everyone. But this is entirely different from the criticism which condemns without either giving or having special reason.

How many times have we heard some one

say: "I don't know anything about Art, but I know what I like, and I don't like that painting." This is just as if a justice should say: "I don't know anything about the case, but I don't like the plaintiff's side of it." One finds this peculiar form of criticism in all walks of life. Usually it means that the critic is too lazy to think out why he really objects to a picture, a piece of music or a course of conduct.

If he would take the trouble to make up his mind just why he condemns anything, these reasons might add something to the store of human knowledge, put perhaps some one upon the right path of endeavor. At least he would spare himself the humiliation of the charge of mental inertia.

All progress comes through criticism. But it is a criticism which knows its subject and sees clearly just why it does or does not like a thing.

We go to a doctor to criticize our health; we go to a lawyer to criticize our rights; we go to an engineer to criticize the formation of our land upon which we wish to build a railroad, say. But we do not go to the man who says "I don't know anything about doctoring, law or engineering, but at any rate I don't like your case."

Not long ago a manufacturer who employs a large number of women and girls, nearly all of them foreigners, and unfamiliar with the language of this country found that he had a strike on his hands.

He used all possible arguments, but in vain. The women wanted more money, and they held together until they could get it.

This man, baffled and in despair, began to write to the newspapers.

He said that he was being treated unfairly;

that his employees, because they were women were appealing for popular sympathy, and that he was unable to get his side of the case before the public at all.

When at last he was forced to come to the terms their leaders dictated he protested still more, and poured letter after letter of complaint into the newspaper offices.

At last one of the editors, out of patience, wrote to him something like this:

"You expect a handful of half-educated foreign born women to present arguments for their side of the case as logical and convincing as those your lawyers offer."

"They have only one argument to make; that is a strike. They make it as logically and as convincingly as they know how by holding together against you."

"You think that they ought to be judged by the same standards as you would be judged by."

"Put yourself, if you can, in their place. Imagine that you are a stranger in a new land, that you have had no education; that your only inheritance comes through a line of peasants who have been held down as slaves are held down all their lives. Imagine that you had an altercation with an employer, and actually gained the upper hand. Do you imagine for a minute that you would be as fair as these women are? No. You would insist on terms beside which those exacted by your employees seem foolishly modest. Quit writing letters and think, and perhaps in the future you will be able to deal so fairly with your employees that they will never again need to resort to the only argument that they know anything about."

There is a well known story of the clerk of the great banker who was entrusted with an important deal and bungled it. His employer called him into his office and lectured him severely.

"If I had been in your place," he said pompously, "I would never have made such a hash out of that matter. I would have done this;" and he entered into a long explanation

of the way the deal should have been carried through.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the clerk respectfully, "but if I could think of that line of conduct, I should not be working for you for fifteen dollars a week."

It is easy for the general of an army to find fault with the newly enlisted private; it is easy for the captain of industry to object to the manner in which his office boy receives the visitors that come to his door. But in most cases it is neither necessary nor just for such criticism to be uttered.

It is not to be expected that the beginner in any business will be familiar with its details, yet too often that is exactly what is expected of him, and exactly the reason for the frequent rebukes that are administered to him.

The average business man would not think of scolding a foreigner for not understanding the English language, yet he will fly into a passion because a newly hired clerk does not know the current price of some article of merchandise.

The average man—before he has had experience—expects fairness. He thinks that he is entitled to be criticized for his faults, but to be given immunity from criticism because of mistakes that arise through ignorance of the rules of his new game.

That is the kind of treatment he usually doesn't get.

Men criticize first and think afterward. Sometimes, if they are gentlemen, they are sorry afterward and apologize. Often they let it go, and leave the wound they have made hurting, and the victim's faith in human nature a little lessened.

It will become weaker and weaker as the years go on, and soon he will cease to expect fairness at all. Then perhaps he will be a better business man, but he will have lost something that no business success can atone for, his original honest and straightforward faith in his fellow men.

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