

Responding to Criticism and Manipulation¹

Often other people don't give effective feedback. For example, you've worked late for three nights in a row to complete a report for your boss, who walks in and says:

"Is this the best you can do? I asked for an in-depth analysis but you always give me something superficial. There's no way I can use this!"

When someone is aggressive, critical, and/or manipulative, most people feel their only options are to (1) take it, (2) explain/defend themselves, or (3) fight back.

There is another option. You can buy yourself a little time to cool off, exert some control over the conversation, help the other person give better feedback, and still show some respect. You can agree to a partial truth, agree to a probability, and/or agree in principle, followed in each case by either:

- a probe (open-ended so they talk more),
- reflection (mirroring the apparent feelings), or
- paraphrase (mirroring the words used).

For example:

Agree to Partial Truth: Find one part you can agree with, and acknowledge that part.

"Is this the best you can do? I asked for an in-depth analysis but you always give me something superficial. There's no way I can use this!"

"Clearly this is less detailed than you expected. What were some specific places where you expected more depth?" (agree to partial truth and probe for information) OR

Agree to Probability: Decide to what degree you agree, and acknowledge.

"Is this the best you can do? I asked for an in-depth analysis but you always give me something superficial. There's no way I can use this!"

"Maybe this is somewhat superficial. You're probably disappointed I didn't read your expectations better." (agree to probability and reflect feelings) OR

Agree in Principle: Agree to an underlying principle you share, without agreeing to all of the other person's assumptions.

"Is this the best you can do? I asked for an in-depth analysis but you always give me something superficial. There's no way I can use this!"

"Well, certainly you need enough analysis so the report can be used. It sounds like you have some ideas on how I could go into more depth." (agree to principle and paraphrase the words used)

¹ See Manuel Smith's *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*