

THE IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS OF INTERPERSONAL CRITICISM FOR POLICE EXECUTIVES

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A series of focus groups comprised of 616 police executives considered the issues and implications of vocationally-based, interpersonal criticism. Policing is an occupation that is inherently exposed to criticism and conflict. Those charged with leading and managing police organizations often report significant exposure to criticism-prone circumstances. The participants collectively reported that criticism is indeed an adverse factor that can influence their physical health, psychological well-being, and vocation. Considerations regarding the impact of interpersonal criticism and suggestions from the participants for better handling criticism are discussed.

Interpersonal stress has been cited as a significant stressor in policing (Garner, 2008; Phelps, 1975; Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003; Violanti, 1997). The nature of police work lends itself to an environment that can be steeped in complaints and criticism. Unfortunately, relatively little empirical research has been done on the nature of interpersonal criticism, in any context. Criticism is universally considered by individuals to be negative (Baron, 1988a, 1988b; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979) and is a term that tends to evoke a sense of apprehension (Garner, 2006). In fact, the use of the term “destructive criticism” appears to be superfluous as that negative characteristic is considered to be endemic. Typical encyclopedic definitions of the term almost exclusively focus on the connotative negatives (e.g., “to point out ones faults” or “to offer an opinion or judgment of what is wrong or bad about somebody or something”). Nomura and Barnlund (1983) define interpersonal criticism as “the expression of dissatisfaction concerning the personal qualities or behavior of another person that is offered in face-to-face dyadic encounters” (p. 2-3). (These authors also comment on the sparse research available related to the topic of interpersonal criticism.) Baron (1990) defined criticism “as negative feedback given by one person to another to inform the recipient that he or she was not performing in an adequate or appropriate manner” (p. 241).

According to Baron (1988a) the impact of criticism on interpersonal relationships can be significant. “Those who received destructive criticism reported greater anger and tension and indicated that they would be more likely to handle future disagreements with the source through resistance or avoidance and less likely to handle disagreements through collaboration or compromise” (p. 199). Additionally, destructive criticism can be an important cause of conflict in organizations. In a study rating the importance of 14 potential

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causes of conflict in their organization, “poor use of criticism” was perceived as the single most important cause of conflict (Baron, 1988a).

Criticism is an “emotionally charged social interaction” and recipients are inclined to attribute the cause of the criticism event to the personal traits of the critic (Leung, Su, & Morris, 2001). Cognitive processes play an important role in determining how individuals respond to criticism. Recipients of criticism will often make negative internal attributions about the character of the critic, despite clear evidence that situational factors are involved (Morris, Larrick, & Su, 1999; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Those who offer criticism are often viewed as biased and insensitive, even when consciously trying to refrain from generating defensiveness in the recipient (Arygis, 1985, 1991). Individuals confronted with criticism often face a dilemma as to whether to attribute the cause of the criticism to their own performance inadequacy, which may assist improvement and learning, or to attribute it to the critic’s personality flaws, which may help the recipient’s ego.

Larson (1986, 1989) found that in addition to the difficulties encountered when receiving criticism, giving criticism was considered to be equally unpleasant.

Those who offer criticism to others have noted that “their own use of criticism reduced the motivations of those they criticized and adversely affected their working relationships...” (Baron, 1990, p. 241). Managers report that offering negative feedback or criticism is one of the most difficult and unpleasant tasks they must perform (Garber, 2004; Garner, 2008; Larson, 1986, 1989; Veiga, 1988) and many avoid doing so (Baron, 1990). “Managers often refrain from criticizing subordinates until the frequency or severity of performance problems—and the managers annoyance with them—rises to extremely high levels (Larson, p. 1989)” (Baron, 1990, p. 235). Because there is a hesitance to offer criticism until reaching a threshold level, when finally delivered, it is often delivered in a biting, harsh, demeaning, or sarcastic manner (Barron 1988a; Heldmann, 1988).

Police executives are often at the forefront of public scrutiny and are frequently the “face” that is associated with controversy and conflict regardless of its origin. As a result, police executives are in a position to both receive criticism from various sources (e.g., the public, governmental officials, the media, and members of their own agency), as well as deliver criticism in the form of performance appraisals, discipline issues, investigative reports, and other evaluative measures. The current study examines the potential impact of this criticism-steeped environment. A series of focus groups of police executives are asked to consider several questions that examine the impact of interpersonal criticism on their profession. The qualitative focus-group approach provides valuable insight and guidance into the implications of interpersonal criticism in the lives of such executives.

METHODS

Participants

As part of a training program involving municipal police chiefs and police executives, 616 participants were involved in class exercises that asked them to consider a

number of issues salient to the topic of interpersonal stress and its impact on their performance and profession. (This is the cumulative total number of participants involved in this research. Participation occurred in 1 of 9 different training events or venues.)

Materials

Based on previous research and guidance from an anonymous pretest procedure sent to a sampling of police executives, the focus groups were asked to concentrate on the impact and implications of criticism on issues of vocational stress, burnout, and health (Garner, 2005; 2008), as identified in the questions below:

1. How would you define criticism?
2. Complete the following: When unfairly criticized, the emotion I usually feel is:_____.
3. Interpersonal Criticism has been defined as “negative feedback given by one person to another to inform the recipient that he or she was not performing in an adequate or appropriate manner” (Baron, 1990). Would you agree?
4. Is interpersonal criticism a problem for most police executives?
5. If so, how prevalent is it?
6. What is the impact of criticism both personally and professionally?
7. What are some best practices in handling criticism?
8. What would a program designed to help police executives better handle interpersonal criticism need to contain?

Design and Procedure

As part of a required recurrent training program for municipal police executives, 616 participants were involved in a training discussion on the topic of criticism and interpersonal conflict. This was only one small element of a much longer 40-hour training program that occurred repeatedly in 9 different venues throughout the region. Thus, this procedure was replicated 9 times with participant input aggregated to include a composite involving all sessions. In each independent training event, prior to the presentation on the instructional elements of this topic, participants were divided into various random groups (predetermined by the training coordinators) and given a list of issues to consider and discuss. Within each group a scribe and reporter were selected to record the comments and ideas of the group and to later report their results to the complete class once all groups were reassembled. Participants were informed of a few general ground rules to assure an orderly process and to ensure a more effective collection of the information. All participants were informed that no individual or personally identifying information would be collected. Each was asked to be forthcoming with their discussions, as the contributions of this group would be used in the development of further research and a possible intervention or education program. To further ensure a more robust dialogue, participants were invited to offer anecdotal information as well as information based on direct, personal knowledge. Additionally, participants were asked to consider how “most other police executives” might respond to these items. This provides greater psychological freedom to respondents, reducing the personal or individual focus of their comments. Each of the identified general

discussion questions was considered in sequence; though contributions were offered on a variety of issues throughout the session.

Once the individual groups had developed their responses, all groups were reassembled into the complete class and the various group reporters provided their group's responses to the entire class. Whiteboards and flip charts were used to capture salient information. Additionally, two research assistants were tasked with taking copious notes. Every effort was made to accurately depict the discussion and all materials and notes were cross-referenced to ensure reliability. The result was an amalgam of information with no identifying information from any agency, entity, or person.

RESULTS

As this is a focus group approach, a qualitative, rather than a quantitative analysis was employed. Therefore, no reductionist or inferential statistical analyses were involved. Qualitative data analysis can take a wide variety of forms; however, it tends to differ from quantitative research in its focus on holistic and contextual language and meaning (Fischer, 2005). The focus groups generated substantial discussion on each of the identified questions. The responses were informative and instructive. There was no detection of any systematic difference among the various administrations of this process. In fact, the similarity of responses across all events was noteworthy. As a result, the comments were able to be generally categorized and reflected in a few summary quotes for each of the question items discussed below.

Question 1: How would you define criticism?

This general question was intentionally asked first in the sequence. Although a research-based definition of criticism is offered in a later question (on which the participants can comment), the idea was to have a more general response here without the influence of a potentially biasing formal definition. The responses were as expected with a focus on the negative and personal impact. Some of the representative comments are captured in the quotes below:

- "It is an attack on ones character."
- "Criticism is a negative evaluation."
- "It is a negative comment."
- "Criticism is the negative side to feedback."
- "Criticism is a term that is always negative."
- "There is no such thing as positive criticism."
- "Criticism is always an evaluation, often without all the facts."
- "Criticism is usually a negative assault on someone."
- "Criticism can be described as a personal attack; feedback is used when it is positive."

Question 2: Complete the following: When unfairly criticized, the emotion I usually feel is: _____.

The overwhelming response to this question was “anger;” although there were variations, including “aggravation,” “frustration,” “irritation,” and “pain.” Participants also revealed that after the initial anger there were often other feelings such as distress, disappointment, regret, dissatisfaction, and discontent.

Question 3: Interpersonal Criticism has been defined as “negative feedback given by one person to another to inform the recipient that he or she was not performing in an adequate or appropriate manner” (Baron, 1990). Would you agree?

As with other research, there was general agreement that this definition was accurate; however, there was a sense that it lacked the emotional content that can accompany the actual event of dealing with criticism. Some of the representative comments are identified below:

- “It reads like a formal statement rather than one that captures the intensity of the experience.”
- “The definition is accurate, but the experience is more emotionally involving.”
- “Typically, the way criticism develops is more negative than offered by this definition.”

Question 4: Is interpersonal criticism a problem for most police executives?

There was swift and overwhelming confirmation regarding this item. Interpersonal criticism was identified as a significant problem. The discussion revealed that the participants believe that criticism was an issue for many, not just their group. The important point for this research was the participants did not see themselves as being immune from the deleterious effects of criticism. Typical responses were:

- “Absolutely.”
- “Without a doubt.”
- “The inability to effectively deal with criticism is a much bigger issue than most would suggest.”
- “Criticism can be a real threat to ones longevity in a leadership position.”

Question 5: If so, how prevalent is it?

With regard to the prevalence of criticism, there was wide variation. Some indicated that criticism was habitual; others indicated that it was less frequent. Most suggested that they experienced significant occupationally-based criticism at least once each month. However, there seemed to be agreement that regardless of frequency, the impact of interpersonal criticism was considerable. It was not the frequency, but the intensity of the emotional impact that captured the most discussion.

Some of the more recurrent comments are portrayed in the quotes listed below:

- “It happens all of the time.”
- “As a society, we are becoming less civil and its frequency is on the rise.”
- “It may not always be catastrophic, but it is always there.”

- “Criticism can be like dynamite, it doesn’t take much to have a powerful impact.”
- “It’s not the number; it’s the impact”
- “Even infrequent criticism can be devastating.”

Question 6: What is the impact of criticism both personally and professionally?

As with research involving other professional groups, the primary discussion centered on the issues of stress and occupational burnout. Participants expressed numerous psychological and physical consequences of poorly handled criticism. Professionally, the participants identified issues involving disengagement and vocational burnout. Some of the more recurrent themes are identified in the quotes below:

- “Criticism can literally make you sick.”
- “Headaches, stomach in a knot, high blood pressure, feeling like you’ve been emotionally drained.”
- “Criticism should come with a bottle of antacids.”
- “Criticism can leave you emotionally exhausted.”
- “Unfair criticism accounts for a lot of sick days.”
- “It’s not just us that suffer; our whole family stresses when we are under the emotional weight of criticism.”
- “When receiving criticism, your whole system is out of balance.”
- “Criticism received on the job doesn’t stay on the job; it affects everything, including families.”
- “People do unfortunate things when faced with criticism.”
- “Folks are fired and demoted everyday because they can’t properly handle criticism.”
- “Criticism can be a significant contributor to burnout.”
- “Criticism can be a driving catalyst for why people quit. It gets to be more stressful than it is worth.”

Question 7: What are some best practices in handling criticism?

The participants offered several suggestions for handling criticism. There were a variety of suggestions offered by the various groups; some of the most recurrent themes are identified below:

- “Count to ten...slowly.”
- “Try to not take it personal; focus on the issue not the words.”
- “I think I read that you ought to ask questions before you say anything you might regret.”
- “Try to address the situation with a detached emotional process that focuses on the information, not the critic.”
- “Try to see the potential benefit—even if it is just developing a thicker skin or increased patience.”
- “Hold your tongue.”
- “Try to understand where the other person is coming from. They may just be venting.”

- “Don’t obsess over criticism. If you do, it keeps hurting you over and over. If there is something to address, do it then move on.”
- “When offering criticism or feedback, make sure you really know the facts and know the real reason you are offering the criticism.”
- “Ask as many questions as possible.”
- “Think about how the other person might respond to criticism before you say anything.”
- “Realize that criticism is very emotional—and that can cause you problems if you don’t keep your emotions in check.”
- “Stick to the facts, don’t operate off your initial feelings or incomplete understanding.”
- “Be sure you get the whole story and the complete picture before you say or do anything.”
- “When giving criticism, remain professional and respectful—even if you feel the other person doesn’t deserve it.”

Question 8: What would a program designed to help police executives better handle interpersonal criticism need to contain?

Practical considerations in dealing with this emotion-intense, communication issue were addressed. Some of the comments are listed below:

- “This discussion would make a good lesson plan.”
- “It needs to be realistic.”
- We think it needs to help people understand what criticism is and how it affects us.”
- “We would like to see a step-by-step process in how to better deliver and receive criticism. It needs to cover what we can really do to improve.”
- “Everything written on the whiteboard and flip charts needs to be included. And I’ll be the first to attend and send my command staff as well.”
- “It needs to be doable and practical---it can’t be some textbook response that really won’t work in the real world.”
- “It needs to address all of the issues that are related to the psychology and sociology of criticism.”

Focus Group: Conclusion Statements

At the conclusion of each session where all group reporters provided their individual group’s comments to the collective class, a series of summary statements were identified that captured the sentiment of the larger group as a whole. All statements were based on the information that had been captured and were voted on by the participants. Various summary statements were offered to the group; however, only those items that received majority support from all administrations of this procedure were included and identified below:

- Interpersonal criticism is a challenging communication event that impacts police executives as it does many others.
- Interpersonal criticism can have a detrimental effect on the psychology, welfare, vocation, and health of police executives.

- Interpersonal criticism can negatively affect interpersonal relationships between the police executive and their staff, the organization, the community, and their family.
- Interpersonal criticism is often more hurtful and impactful than many acknowledge.
- A training program that offers specific, practical advice for police executives on how to better handle interpersonal criticism would be valuable.

DISCUSSION

The overall group discussions were lively and the participants were engaged. The police executives were free to offer not only their own considerations, but also to offer input on how “most others might respond.” This process allows participants to more freely express views that they believe others may hold or views that they themselves may have, but would feel uncomfortable expressing them as a personal position.

The result of this study provides support for research findings involving other professions. The participants overwhelmingly reported that criticism is viewed as a negatively focused interaction that can have an adverse impact both personally and professionally. Criticism was often seen as a personal attack rather than constructive advice. Receipt of criticism was reported to be accompanied by feelings of anger and frustration, particularly if the criticism was unfair (also see Baron, 1990; Wilson et al., 2003). Interestingly, other research suggests that although we most often identify our emotional reaction to criticism as anger, this is often an imprecise label. Frequently what some may label as anger is actually composed of other feelings and emotions such as embarrassment, shame, pride, and so forth (see Ingram & Johnson, 2009; LaHaye & Phillips, 1982, Patterson, Grenny, McMillian, & Switzler, 2002, 2005).

Criticism was reported to often be impactful for police executives, and it has a significant emotional intensity. The resultant effect can involve psychological and physical consequences. Gastrointestinal distress, hypertension, and emotional fatigue were cited. The participants indicated that one's inability to properly handle criticism in general, not the specific topic of any particular criticism, was the real issue that needed to be addressed. This involves not only better handling criticism that is received from others, but equally important, providing criticism that does not unnecessarily offend and engage the defenses of the recipient. Again, this seems to suggest the need for a well-designed training and education program focused on handling criticism more effectively, regardless of the severity of the topic.

Participants provided both practical and anecdotal guidance that should be considered when working with criticism-prone circumstances. The participants collectively agreed that interpersonal criticism was a seldom-addressed problem that can have wide-ranging detrimental effects and a program designed to assist police executives in better handling criticism-prone situations was viewed as needed, necessary, and beneficial. Future research should further explicate these findings and consider the development of an

evidenced-based, instructional program designed to ameliorate some of the adverse consequences and deleterious effects of interpersonal criticism.

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