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BOOK EXCERPTS

Teddy Roosevelt's Tips on Criticism

A new book offers his ideas on dealing with personal attacks, responding appropriately -- and keeping your sense of humor

In Theodore Roosevelt on Leadership (April, 2001, Prima Publishing), author James M. Strock examines the leadership qualities that characterized Roosevelt throughout his life and how those same qualities can guide business leaders today. In this adapted excerpt, Roosevelt gives pointers on how to handle unfair criticism:

No matter how personal the attack, your response should be aimed entirely toward advancing the goals of those you serve. TR recommended that a leader continue to "fight his way forward" in the face of "unfair and ungenerous criticism," "paying only so much regard . . . as is necessary to enable him to win in spite of them." A leader, especially of a large enterprise, should not confuse his symbolic role with himself as a person. The fact that the criticism is personal does not necessarily indicate that the response should be along the same lines. Roosevelt was keenly aware that while people generally may not immediately draw conclusions from unfair criticisms, they tend to recoil if leaders appear to be attacking one another for reasons unrelated to serving others.

Identify your audience. As in any communication, a primary task is to identify the audience. This may range from the general public to opinion leaders, from competitors to the employees of one's own organization.

In the case of high-level leadership, in private and public life, one must factor in future audiences. For major decisions with long-term impact, that might include preparation for questioning or criticism from competitors, critics, regulatory agencies, journalists, and others who might influence the verdict of history.

Determine the appropriate response. Once the goals have been clarified and the audience identified, a leader should determine what response is appropriate. Roosevelt's inclination was to be direct in all things. If an inaccurate or unfair criticism might gain credence because of the reputation or position of the critic, TR would act decisively. When a New York politician publicly charged that the construction of the Panama Canal was incompetently handled, President Roosevelt immediately responded in a public letter, "This is simple nonsense." Early in his presidency, when TR was remodeling the White House, numerous articles tweaked him for alleged extravagance. Though the criticism was largely misplaced, Roosevelt understood that it might appear credible -- and was especially dangerous in the early months of his administration, when public opinion was forming. The suggestion of profligacy was potent, because it was comprehensible to the mass of people from their own life experience. Left unanswered, it might open the door to unfounded accusations against much more significant spending matters (such as naval expansion) that most people otherwise would consider beyond their ken. Accordingly, President Roosevelt drafted and signed letters to key opinion leaders making his case for White House renovation with a blizzard of facts and figures.

When critics were predictably negative in their comments, TR often dismissed them out of hand. He sometimes employed humor. In one speech he gently brushed aside former Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan and automobile magnate Henry Ford, prominent opponents of Roosevelt's "preparedness" campaign urging American entrance into the First World War: "I don't have to deal with Mr. Bryan and Mr. Ford. I regard them both as nice, amiable men, and I like them in private life; but I decline to take part in any such wild mental joy rides as would be necessary if I had to discuss seriously their attitude." In another context, referring to a political opponent, Roosevelt said with a smile: "Don't speak of him as my enemy. I like him. He is interesting. It is pleasant to see how many ways he has of not doing the thing he has exactly promised to do."

Some criticisms are best ignored altogether. Not only will some critics ignore facts, making a direct response pointless, but their constant carping, left uninterrupted, may enable others to see them as they are. As TR said, "There are many occasions when the highest praise one can receive is the attack of some given scoundrel."

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