

Critique Me, Please

by John Maeda

May 21, 2009

In the sciences, questions usually have a concrete answer like “five” or “mass times the speed of light squared.” In contrast, in the arts and design there are no “constants” or “equations” or “laws” which judge “right” and “wrong.” Instead, we use the time-honored tradition of critique, or “crit,” as a means to seeking improvement on a work along a multitude of subjective axes.

Many of the axes on which artwork is judged are increasingly useful to think about in business:

- **Humanity** — Does it pose an interesting question about the way we live?
- **Improvement** — Will the work lead to advancement in a certain field?

- **Formalism** — Is the presentation demonstrating expertise in skill?
- **Completeness** — Are we at the end of a cycle in a creative act or still somewhere in the middle?

And many more axes can be introduced, or even invented, along which evaluative measures can be mounted. Sounds inexact? Yes, and no. What happens in a critique is the simple but powerful act of testing a hypothesis from every angle of attack or praise. But both of these are dangerous words.

The word “attack” needs to be used carefully; there is always the legend of art school critiques in which the stereotypical art teacher pulls an artwork off the wall and steps on it for effect. Such critique falls into the category of “mean critique” — which makes good material for dramatized movies, but does little to help the development of an artist. Equally, the word “praise” needs to be used carefully because an overly supportive hand-clapping session can result in creative stasis. It’s always nice to hear “I love it”, but every artist knows that their work could always be better, and so “I love it” can be as bad as saying, “This is garbage.” Specificity is important in any good critique.

Critique allows the pros and cons to come out in clear sight for the artist to listen, defend, and learn from a live audience of experts and peers. It provides a method to judge the answers to squishy questions with no concrete answers. With all of the ambiguity involved in innovation, it’s not difficult to see how an honest

critique could be a useful practice in business, too. In other words, being open to critique — “crittable” — makes you into a hungry listener who is sensitive to real-time input from the world that surrounds you.

There is lots of ongoing debate about the best way to give feedback to employees — whether to focus on their strengths or their weaknesses, or how to give an effective annual review. It is the job the boss to “crit” the work of her reports, but what about the opposite? In the traditional model of authoritative leadership, it is expected that the leader is right. Critique of the boss happens behind closed doors, or behind backs, but rarely openly. But as a student of creative leadership I find that being crittable is an important means of ensuring that your actions are generally relevant.

Being crittable means that you are open to the concept that you might be wrong, and thus the only way to test your hypothesis is to open the door to critique. It also means that you are open to asking bigger questions about your work and its validity within your organization. Said differently, being crittable makes you accountable. At RISD we have adopted the studio practice of critique into how we run our organization. My staff meetings often take the form of a crit, regularly involving detailed critique of my recent performances in public, handling of recent situations, or communications that I plan to release.

It isn't perfect of course. But that's why we talk about it here and in my various lectures elsewhere. So that the concept can be critiqued. So crit me, please?

JM

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