

editor's page

Thou Doth Protest . . .

When someone criticizes the Extension Service, how do you respond? Or when someone makes suggestions to you on how to improve your work, what do you say?

The way we deal with criticism (or provide criticism) is an indication of our professional demeanor as an Extension staff member. As a change agent, we're in the position of making suggestions and recommendations to our clientele. We tell them how to redecorate their living room, alter long-standing farm practices, improve their 4-H record book, change their ways of handling a community meeting, etc. We're, in fact, telling them that there's a better way to do things; that is, the way they're presently handling a situation isn't the best way. We don't mean it, but our recommendations or suggestions can be interpreted as criticism.

In the fascinating book called *The Universal Traveler*, the authors suggest a way to criticize painlessly. They propose a "foolproof" method of providing criticism without alienating the other person. They say the trick is to place suggestions between positive reinforcements by: (1) beginning with two positives, (2) inserting your criticism, (3) adding one more positive, and (4) finishing with a ray of hope. All of us in Extension should learn to use this simple process . . . whether we're judging 4-H projects, helping homemakers or farmers change practices they hold dearly, or making suggestions to our secretary or other colleagues.

Now let's turn the situation around. Suppose someone suggests that you could or should handle your Extension work a different way. Do you actively defend your way as being right? Or do you respond that the person making the suggestions doesn't understand the situation and the Extension Service? Or do you accept the suggestions, consider them, explore the implications, and then make a judgment? Sometimes I find myself defending what I've done—after all it was my idea and I did it the best I knew how. Who is he to tell me—the professional educator—how to do *my* job?

Our mentor probably hasn't learned the process of giving criticism painlessly, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have our best interests at heart. In fact, I'm convinced that most people who offer criticism to us do so out of love or respect of the Extension Service. It behoves us to listen for what they mean and ask for further interpretation rather than jumping to the conclusion that they're putting us down.

Thank you, Donald Blackburn, Huey Long, and Freddie Richards for your service as Research in Brief editors. Welcome aboard to four new RB editors—Laverne Forest, Willie Pierce, R. L. Reeder, and Phyllis Worden.

JP