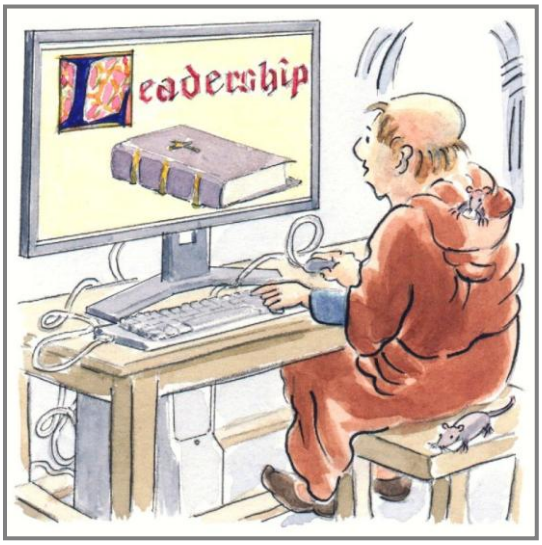
john truscott
church consultant and trainer



How to give and receive criticism

TN30 Training Notes series: Leadership

These notes were first published on the website in March 2006 and last updated in July 2026. They are copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

Churches are not good at giving constructive criticism. Sometimes we put the boot in, usually behind the person's back. Anyone who does anything 'up-front', from speaking to flower arranging, is in special danger. At other times we shy away from saying anything on the basis that you cannot criticise a volunteer.

Neither of these approaches is healthy, yet this is not something that is easy to get sorted, especially if the church has adopted unhelpful practices in this area for many years. The aim of these notes is, first, to get the subject out into the open and, secondly, to attempt some ideas for possible ways ahead.

Four scenarios

1 You are the Minister of a church with a history of fine preaching. In today's sermon you were specially trying to get through to the older teens in the congregation. But as you stand by the door afterwards to say good-bye to everyone, two senior office-holders in the church stop to tell you how appalled they were at your flippant style when handling the holy Scriptures. They move away before you can give any kind of answer.

2 You help out in the church office and type the church newsletter each week. You were under pressure last Friday because your mother is seriously ill in hospital and you wanted to get there before she had her operation. This week the Church Administrator, who has overall responsibility for communication, has left a marked copy of the newsletter on your desk clearly showing four mistakes and marking a folding that is not quite accurate. You explode and tell her she can do it herself in future.

3 There is a new team responsible for the monthly All-Age Service, and this morning's one turned out to be a nightmare. The radio mic batteries packed up, everyone forgot their lines in the drama, the PowerPoint failed to work, and they had picked songs that no one knew. Over lunch it's the team that gets roasted in your family, not the joint. "Why doesn't someone tell them to get their act together?" you all ask.

4 You run the Welcome Team. One of the men on the rota for today arrived in a real temper; you later saw his wife quietly weeping in a back pew. He scowled at everyone, was particularly rude to a visitor who asked whether there was a crèche, and refused to stay behind to clear up afterwards. But, like you and the rest of the team, he is a volunteer so you felt you should forget it and hope he is better next time.

These are not uncommon scenes in churches. Are we prepared to admit that most of us find it hard to give and take criticism well?

Questions for groups

- In each of these four cases, was some kind of criticism justified or not?
- If so, how might it have been done better?
- Is it wrong to criticise volunteers? In what circumstances might it be right?
- In the first three cases how would you have felt if you were (a) the criticiser, (b) the one being criticised?
- Consider an example of when you have been critical of someone or something in your church (whether you said this publicly, quietly told a few others or kept it to yourself). How might you have done this better?

Possible ways forward

Some people are critical if others do not match their own standards, or simply because they seem to enjoy having a go at anyone else. Some churches appear to foster a culture of criticism with little encouragement. In many more there will be patronising comments ("lovely sermon today, Vicar") but then harsh criticism behind people's backs, seen often when people are silent in meetings but particularly talkative in the car park afterwards. Because of this, some are frightened to criticise anyone at all. After all, Scripture itself reminds us not to judge so that we are not judged ourselves.

None of these examples is healthy, whether harsh criticism, patronising comment, behind-their-back-gossip, or silence when there clearly has been damage done. What can you do? Here are twelve suggestions, some specifically for those in leadership positions. Please email me with further ideas as I update these notes on a regular basis. I've already added extra points as a result of helpful (and critical!) feedback.

1 **Admit the problem**

Get this issue out into the open. It is no good pretending it does not exist if it does. It affects everyone.

2 **Be vulnerable**

See the value of being prepared to be vulnerable but recognise that there are times when no one is strong enough to take vindictive criticism. As a start, leaders should set an example by being prepared to take honest comments from those closest to them: family and friends, and those in the congregation they trust. Everyone needs feedback on what they do, and then to make improvement as a result of this.

3 **Check motives**

If you yourself feel you should speak some truth in love, check your motives. Are you wanting to see the person improve and grow or are you wanting to score a point or get your own back? Then check you understand the situation they were in at the time (see case study 2 above).

4 **Encourage first ....**

Be ready to give praise where praise is due. If you find someone's preaching to be generally unhelpful and then one sermon speaks to you, go and tell them about the 'good' one and explain why it spoke to you. This may encourage them to follow that pattern again.

5 .... **but do not pander to pride**

To say something like "God spoke to me through your talk, flower arrangement (or whatever)" is a better approach than the way to pride of "You really are a marvellous preacher". The first gives the praise to God, but encourages the speaker. This approach may help avoid the patronising comment.

6 **Pray**

To say "I am praying for you" when linked with criticism can appear double edged. But how dare we criticise without praying! St Paul's prayers in passages such as Ephesians 3, Colossians 1, and 2 Thessalonians 1 are challenging.

7 **Select the right medium/time**

Seek the right means and time. Is an email really the right way; might a face-to-face chat be better? Can just after the service ever be right or should you ponder the point for a day or two to see if you now think differently?

8 **Set standards but offer support**

If a job needs doing well, agree with everyone what standard you are aiming for. Then offer appropriate support to enable people to meet that standard.

9 **Change the church climate**

Seek to create a climate where continuous review of any activity or ministry, especially new initiatives, is seen as positive, a matter of problem-solving not blame. All are learners, 'disciples', no matter how experienced. Appropriate groups should be looking back at their sermons, home group meetings, newsletters, catering arrangements, meetings or whatever. Leaders need to be role models for this.

10 **Be open about the process**

If you manage others (paid staff or volunteers), explain to them that review is one of your responsibilities rather than seeking to do it covertly. People then do not feel manipulated. Ask them for their impressions first as to how they are doing or how a particular activity worked out. Seek to make it a two-way process so that you are genuinely vulnerable.

11 **Never blame your team**

Never shift blame to your team if you are the leader. Take your responsibility.

12 **Build one another up**

Work towards a church where everyone seeks to build each other up, where failure is an acceptable stepping stone to improvement, where everyone wants to see people's gifts used, and where all are prepared to be honest with each other. But accept too that some are more sensitive than others and everyone needs to feel the warmth of genuine love.

My prayer is that all churches seek to move in this direction from whatever their starting position. And, by the way, your helpful criticisms on what I have written above would be appreciated. I will try to take them with grace and to seek to grow as a result!

These notes are available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index then TN30. For advice on how to spot people who may be feeling critical, see Training Notes TN49, *What's going on under the water,* and TN119, *Group behaviours to beware of.* To consider one aspect of church leaders criticising members read TN55, *So, who should be in the dock?* and then TN96, *Courtesy in church.* On the topic of reprimand in appraisal see Article A32, *Be creative as a line manager.*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN30 under Leadership (with a link to Management).

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU
Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: https://www.john-truscott.co.uk