

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious the Most Merciful

Receiving Criticism in Public Positions

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With any position that puts a person in the public eye, they inevitably become observed and scrutinized, and subsequently accused and criticised. This can take many forms and occurs for a variety of reasons. This article will outline the Islamic guidance for a person who is subject to such criticism and the Islamic guidance for the critics.

Criticism is not entirely bad. It can at times be beneficial and praiseworthy, just as it can be harmful and blameworthy. In this article I do not call for people not to be critical. Rather it is a call for people to be critical of themselves before being critical of others.

I have chosen to speak about the criticism of people in the public eye due to what I see of the abandonment of respect and good etiquette when it is done. Think of the most recent public criticism you have seen or heard. Did the critic use good etiquette, or did they do things that Allah has forbidden? Is it a sincere criticism intended for the benefit of the person being criticized and the public? Or did the critic appear to have a different motive from their criticism?

Islamic Guidance on Receiving Information

I will begin by mentioning the checks we should all consider before speaking or writing. Allah mentions in the Quran:

((يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِن جَاءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌ بِنَبَأٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوا أَن تُصِيبُوا قَوْمًا بِجَهَالَةٍ فَتُصْحَبُوا عَلٰى مَا فَعَلْتُمْ نَادِمِينَ)) – سورة الحجرات 6

O believers, if a troublemaker brings you any news, verify it so you do not harm people unknowingly, to the point that you later become regretful for what you have done – Al Quran 49:6

((يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا اجْتَنِبُوا كَثِيرًا مِّنَ الظَّنِّ إِنَّ بَعْضَ الظَّنِّ إِثْمٌ وَلَا تَجَسَّسُوا وَلَا يَغْتَب بَّعْضُكُم بَعْضًا ؕ أَيُّحِبُّ أَحَدُكُمْ أَن يَأْكُلَ لَحْمَ أَخِيهِ مَيْتًا فَكَرِهْتُمُوهُ ؕ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ؕ إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَوَّابٌ رَّحِيمٌ)) – سورة الحجرات 12

O believers! Avoid many suspicions, indeed, some suspicions are sinful. And do not spy, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of their dead brother? You would despise that! And fear Allah. Surely Allah is Acceptor of Repentance, Most Merciful – Al Quran 49:12

Allah also gives us guidance in relation to slanderers, warning us not to follow or obey them.

وَلَا تَطْعَمْ كُلَّ حَلَاظٍ مَّهِينٍ. هَمَّازٍ مَّشَاءٍ بِنَمِيمٍ. مَّنَاعٍ لِلْخَيْرِ مُعْتَدٍ أَنِيمٍ. عُنُقٍ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ رَنِيمٍ – سورة القلم 10-13

And do not obey any contemptible one who swears much. A slanderer, going about with malicious gossip, preventer of good, transgressor, sinful, coarse, and on top of all that, an imposter – Al Quran 68:10-13.

Advice for those on the receiving end of public criticism

The more you are in the public eye, the higher the likelihood you will be criticized, and with time you can learn to identify what is helpful and discard what is not. Remember that it is not always bad. Critical friends help us identify the areas where we need to improve. This idea is supported by the hadith of the Prophet peace and blessings upon him;

المؤمن مِرَاةُ أَخِيهِ، وَالْمُؤْمِنُ أَخُو الْمُؤْمِنِ، يَكْفُفُ عَلَيْهِ صَنِيعَتَهُ، وَيَحُوطُهُ مِنْ وَرَائِهِ. – رواه البخاري في الأدب المفرد

A believer is the mirror of his brother and the believer is the brother of another believer. He protects him against loss and defends him behind his back – Narrated by Imam Al Bukhari in his book Al Adab Al Mufrad.

We don't always see the areas of our work that need improvement. For this reason, it is good to have the right kind of people share their honest thoughts.

I would also suggest you consider the type of public criticism. Some public criticisms should not be addressed. A good idea is to take the following principled stance: if the criticism is related to your public duty then it should be addressed. If it is about your personal or private life and does not compromise your ability to perform your public duty, then there is no need to engage the critic in the matter. This ploy is often used to discredit someone in the absence of a relevant criticism. There is no need to confirm or deny the accusation. Even if the accusation was true, it is usually not relevant to your ability to perform your public duty. If we waited to find flawless people who have done no wrong to fill our public positions, the positions would all remain empty.

Be like Abu Bakr and Omar: The First 2 Khalifs after the passing of the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, actively invited criticism. We see this in their rhetoric when addressing the people. Abu Bakr may Allah be pleased with him said in his acceptance speech:

“Obey me so long as I Obey God in regards to you. And if I disobey God then there is no obedience upon you towards me”

Omar may Allah be pleased with him was quoted on numerous occasions inviting criticism. One example is:

“O people, whoever sees any crookedness in me should straighten it”

In our present world, we hear about polls for approval ratings of our heads of states and their competitors. The benefit of these polls is limited because they often don't identify the matter of approval or disapproval. Valuable advice is specific.

Advice for the critics

Be an advisor and not a critic. The prophet, peace and blessings upon him, is reported to have said:

لَا يُؤْمِنُ أَحَدُكُمْ حَتَّىٰ يُحِبَّ لِأَخِيهِ مَا يُحِبُّ لِنَفْسِهِ - جامع الترمذي

None of you believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself – Narrated by Imam Tirmidhi.

Therefore, consider before offering your criticism why you are doing so. Are you doing so because you want the person and the service to the community to improve, or do you have a different agenda? Sometimes it is difficult to clearly identify what you want. I would encourage you to consider your rhetoric and what you are asking for.

Consider your language and what you expect to happen. Remember the hadith of the prophet, peace and blessings upon him:

مَنْ كَانَ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ فَلْيُكْرِمْ جَارَهُ وَمَنْ كَانَ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ فَلْيُكْرِمْ ضَيْفَهُ - صحيح مسلم

Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should either utter good words or keep silence; and whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should treat his neighbour with kindness and whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should show hospitality to his guest.

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