

Praise or blame, all the same

By [Ruth Everhart](#)

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A recent article in the NYT, "[Learning to Love Criticism](#)," discusses a [Fortune.com](#) study of performance reviews, which shows that women are criticized more severely, and in more personal ways, than are men. In other words: It's not our imagination!

I am familiar with the dynamic described. As a clergywoman, my work requires me to make decisions, talk frankly to people, and speak the truth. At the same time, I deal with people at vulnerable moments and am heavily invested in communicating the love of God at all times. That is already a difficult dance to manage. Add the gender piece and now the dance floor is littered with holes that can grab your (figurative) high heels and pitch you to the ground.

Women who speak frankly are called *strident*. Women who are decisive are called *aggressive*. Women who exert their authority are called *control freaks*.

How can we do our job without paying a price? Perhaps the answer is that we can't. So we must calculate the price and count it against the cost of not doing the work.

The NYT article speaks about the "impossible tightrope" women must walk to do "substantive work." The tightrope referred to is how to be professional and make tough decisions while at the same time be seen as *nice*.

I am familiar with that tightrope. As an associate pastor in my first church, I was told that I too frequently used "I" language. This puzzled me. I had just spent a great deal of time and energy learning about [family systems theory](#), and was committed to using healthy communication patterns. I thought that using "I" language was a good thing, not a problem. Even the committee members giving me the criticism were unable to further explain what the problem was, or how I should change to please them. One said: "They just think you should let the group make all the decisions, I guess."

In that same group, we routinely ended our meetings with a time of open prayer. After everyone had prayed and the silence stretched for some moments, I would bring the prayer to a close. As soon as I said *Amen*, one particular person would invariably say “I was just going to pray but you ended!” So the next time I would wait longer. Still the person would not offer a prayer. So I would close and the person would protest. The pattern continued, with constantly lengthening periods of silence until it was ridiculous—a full two minutes of silence.

Finally, one of the older members pulled me aside and said: “Don’t you see? It’s the perfect complaint. No matter how long you wait, it will never have been long enough.” I am grateful for that wise elder, whose comment freed me from the need to try to please someone who was determined to not be pleased with me. A criticism that is a perpetual *Gotcha!* is not worth heeding.

I would like to think that this story is hopelessly outdated and that things have changed since the early 1990s. But I doubt it. Just as I was finishing this blogpost, my friend [Carol Howard Merritt wrote about a similar dynamic](#). I know that I over-learned the practice of back-seating my own opinions. I became too enamored of a consensus model of leadership. I undervalued my own ability to help a group discern its next steps.

Now I am trying to learn new behaviors.

What we professional women must do is not easy. But we can feel empowered. Rather than waiting for the tightrope to disappear, we can change how we receive criticism. We can hear whatever bits are helpful, but not let any mean-spiritedness impair our ability to do the work. The work is what matters. The work is *always* what matters.

As Richard Carlson [so memorably said](#): Praise or blame—is all the same.

*Originally posted at [Love the Work \(do the work\)](#)*