Achievement, Worth, and the Need to Prove · About 4 minutes

Keep the Correction, Leave the Insult

Taking an error seriously without making humiliation the method

The appointment is at the wrong time. That is a mistake you can do something about. The insult that arrives with it has nowhere useful to go.

Self-criticism often combines an observation with an attack. The observation may be important: a number is wrong, a promise was missed, someone was hurt. The attack expands the event into a verdict about the person who made the mistake. While you argue with that verdict, the practical problem may still be waiting.

Dana, in this fictional situation, sends a client the wrong appointment time. The client makes an unnecessary journey and loses part of a workday. Dana thinks, “I'm completely useless,” and begins reviewing mistakes from several years ago. The present error now appears to prove a whole case against her.

A more useful account is plain: Dana sent the wrong time; the client was inconvenienced; the error needs acknowledgment and a practical response. She may need to apologize, arrange an appropriate appointment and review how the time was entered.

The client can remain frustrated. They do not owe Dana reassurance about her character because she feels bad. Her response needs to attend to their experience without asking them to help her recover from hearing it.

Gilbert and colleagues studied different forms and reported functions of self-criticism in female students, including efforts to correct oneself and impulses to attack oneself after failure.[1] The study cannot identify the purpose of a particular thought in your mind. It does suggest a useful distinction: is the criticism helping you identify something to change, or keeping you occupied with condemnation?

“I sent the wrong time and need to address it” may not feel comforting. It need not. Its usefulness is that Dana can act on it. She does not have to believe a glowing account of herself before making a responsible correction.

Sometimes there is no error to extract. A person may blame you for a task you were never assigned or an outcome you could not control. Searching for a lesson should not manufacture responsibility. The needed response may be to check the facts, clarify a role or protect yourself from repeated mistreatment.

Even when the criticism has a valid point, humiliation is not evidence of its accuracy. You can retain the specific information while declining the insult. This is especially important when a familiar critical voice sounds authoritative simply because you have heard it for years.

Dana might also need a better scheduling system, more training or a manageable workload. Those conditions do not erase the client's inconvenience. Addressing them may help prevent another mistake. Responsibility includes looking at what would make reliable work possible.

A wrong appointment time offers a chance to care about accuracy and leave the verdict about worth aside.

Find the right time. Let the person know. There is dignity in the plain work of putting something right.

Companion reading · The Life You Keep Trying to Deserve

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Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Achievement, Worth, and the Need to Prove (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Gilbert, P., Clarke, M., Hempel, S., Miles, J. N. V., & Irons, C. (2004). Criticizing and reassuring oneself: An exploration of forms, styles and reasons in female students. British Journal of Clinical Psychology, 43(1), 31–50. Source.

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