Invite Criticism

Goffman, the famous sociologist, in his "Looking Glass" theory concluded that we create our self image from the reflection we comprehend from how others react to us. Certainly our self esteem, indeed our very happiness, is derived from how worthy others make us feel. So, it's reasonable for us to seek approval.

But there are tremendous dangers, particularly in a business context, with seeking approval. Within such an environment subordinates might "yes" their bosses when a "no" would be more appropriate. The result is a decline in innovation and constructive thinking as everything gets done the way the boss wants, whether it's the best way or not. The extension of this, naturally, is the boss who surrounds himself (or herself) with people who simply reinforce the decisions made. The lack of critical thinking does more than prevent mistakes from being identified and corrected, it also stifles any pursuit of excellence. Excellence by definition is born out of criticism as each player strives to make the task as great as it can be by challenging the others not to settle for anything less.

Criticism does not need to be a negative thing. The rules for criticism are embedded in the culture of an enterprise and begin with the leader and his or her acceptance of (indeed demand for) criticism. Such environments enable criticism by rewarding everyone evenly for success and promoting criticism as a means toward maximized potential. This disables politics and personal vendettas and instead creates teamwork and mutual support.

Sure we all like reinforcement and we all want to feel valuable. Criticism need not negate these feeling if we invite it into our processes. And, what, we ask, is wrong with that?