

Right or Wrong? Listen to detractors

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A consultant suggested our church should listen only to positive, encouraging people, rather than pay attention to internal and external detractors. This doesn't seem wise. Can't we learn from both encouragers and discouragers?

Your question defies a simple answer. Churches today face daunting challenges of declining attendance and giving. For this reason, many of them retain a congregational consultant or coach. Good consultants and coaches provide invaluable ministries. They help churches see themselves as others see them. They also help them develop a coherent sense of mission and formulate strategies to fulfill that mission.

In your case, your consultant suggested you not pay attention to internal and external detractors. As for internal detractors, the Scriptures give us clues about how to relate to them. Passages like Proverbs 19:20 advise us to listen to wise advice. Sometimes detractors offer wise advice, and sometimes they don't. The challenge is to discern the difference. Ecclesiastes 7:5 says it's better to heed a wise man's rebuke than to listen to the song of fools. The rebuke of a wise detractor could be what you need to hear.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:2-3 the church should be humble and gentle, bearing with each other in love. We should make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We have to presume this applies to dealing with detractors.

As for external detractors, they may have wise words for you as well. In our church's coaching process, we learned many people in our community

described us as “the church that fights all the time.” Ouch! Those were tough words, but we needed to hear them.

As Christ followers, we shouldn’t ignore or marginalize internal and external detractors. At the same time, we should seek to discern the spirit and wisdom of their criticisms.

In *One Minute Wisdom*, Anthony de Mello describes a master whose disciple was sensitive to critics. The master advises him to listen to detractors. They can reveal what others are hiding. But he also says not to be weighed down by what critics say. No one ever erected a statue to honor a critic. Statues are for those who are criticized.

As a Christ follower, you should love and honor your brothers and sisters in Christ. You should deal with them humbly, gently and lovingly. You should listen to them, even if they are detractors. Nonetheless, you shouldn’t allow them to stop your church from pursuing its vision. If they offer criticism without positive solutions, they’re not helping your church.

Our church had a great congregational coaching experience. Our coach helped us listen to detractors while not allowing them to dominate the experience. He structured the process so people of positive vision were able to express themselves and set the tone for the congregation. This is a difficult task, but a skilled coach can make it happen.

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