To be civil

A couple of years ago, I received a review of an article I wrote in which the referee suggested I find some other line of work more consistent with my limited level of mental abilities. My receiving this review reflected two extraordinary events. The first was that the referee would have written such a savage remark and the second was that the journal editor would send the review to me.

I shrugged the review off, even finding it mildly amusing. As someone who then had been writing articles for 25 years, I was used to nasty ad hominem remarks. This one was worse than most, but probably not the absolute worst I have seen. And I even have seen published critiques of my and others’ work where the primary goal of the critic seemed to be character assassination rather than scientific exchange.

Such events are not daily affairs, but they are not rare either. What concerns me is not so much when senior people are objects of vitriol—most of us get used to it—but when junior people are. To someone who is just starting out a career, such remarks can be devastating. And they certainly are unnecessary.

I have not allowed them in the journals I have edited—Psychological Bulletin and The APA Review of Books: Contemporary Psychology—and I cannot understand why any other editor would allow them, whether privately or publicly.

Hostile reviews have a number of detrimental effects on the field (see also Sternberg, 2002):

- They can discourage investigators, especially junior ones, from doing their work or even continuing in the field.
- They cheapen the level of discourse and scientific exchange.
- They are not constructive and therefore fail to suggest how investigators can improve their work.
- They particularly hurt us in funding, reinforcing the view of some nonpsychologists on grant panels that psychologists really do not do very good work.
- They violate everything we know, or at least should know, as psychologists, about how effectively to achieve behavioral change in those to whom we give feedback.
- They are often based on conflicting ideologies between referee and author, rather than on anything substantively wrong with the work.
- They show psychology and the referees making such remarks in an unfavorable light.
- They are factually incorrect. No one is as useless as hostile reviewers suggest.

Hostile reviews violate everything we know about how effectively to achieve behavioral change.

As one of my APA presidential initiatives, I am working with the APA Publications and Communications Office and the Publications and Communications Board to construct guidelines for reviewers and editors alike that will reduce, hopefully to zero, the number of hostile reviews in APA publications. I am also editing a book, to be published by APA Books, on how to serve as a referee.

I wish the problem of hostile interactions were limited to scientific publications, but it is not. Many of us who have become involved in APA governance have experienced hostility, from time to time, from members of groups that may see things differently from the way we see things. Although the absolute number of people who interact in a hostile way is small, such people often are vocal, and can end up with disproportionate influence. Rather than being positive leaders and attempting to lead through a positive and constructive agenda, they attempt to succeed as negative leaders—by creating some outside enemy and trying to rally their forces against this enemy.

When I was an assistant professor, I received excellent advice from my mentors, advice that, in combination with my own, I have attempted to pass on to the next generation (Sternberg, in press). One of the best pieces of advice I received was from Wendell Garner, my mentor when I was a junior faculty member. He told me that, as psychologists, we ultimately are judged by the positive contributions we make. Indeed, if one thinks of great psychologists in any field of endeavor, they are known primarily not for their critiques, but for their new and useful ideas. As a field, we need to set better examples for our colleagues and for the next generation by exerting positive rather than negative leadership, and most importantly, by being civil to those with whom we interact.

REFERENCES