

“Don't take this personally, but...”

When people begin a discussion like this you've got to wonder if they really think you won't take what they're going to say personally. A sentence like that is equivalent to “It's not what it looks like!” And anyone who has ever heard this sentence upon walking into a room knows that 99% of the time it is exactly what it looks like. So, don't be surprised if you've taken it personally...

Most of us take statements about ourselves and the work we do personally, some more than others. As we've been told, women tend to build much of their self-image on how they are treated by others, what is said to and about them. Men tend to build more of their self-image on what they think about themselves. It seems to have some truth to it. Take for example the incredibly confident loser who hasn't taken a few social hints and figured out that he's a loser. If this is true, in general, about women and men, we can assume that a woman will take much of what is said to her personally (making this phrase a useless bunch of words thrown in front of what we intend to say) and men will probably not take it personally regardless of whether they should (also making it a useless bunch of words).

Why do people bother to say this part of their sentence? To make themselves feel better about saying something negative. An example: “Don't take this personally, but I don't want to date you anymore.” The hell that's not personal! And if their “Don't take this personally, but...” comment hasn't alleviated their guilt for hurting you in a very personal way, they might throw on an “It's not you, it's me” comment. Please let them know you agree that it's them before you walk away. We all know it doesn't feel good to dump a decent person and feels even worse to be dumped, but let's try to be more creative with our language when we do it.

Who we are and what we do with ourselves, i.e. our work, friends, lovers, hairstyle, clothing, hobbies, etc. is personal; it's what makes each person an individual. Therefore, when our boss or colleague says “Don't take this personally, but the work you did on that last project wasn't exactly up to standard.” Yes, that's the work *you* did, take it personally. We must then consider the source of the comment in an honest, non-defensive way:

- Is the person qualified to critique me/my work?
- Do they have a motive to be unjust or untrue?
- Could this be a mere difference of opinion?

And if the person who said this to you is qualified, just, honest and shares opinions with you at least 50% of the time, you must look inward, into your person, and work to figure out what you will do with this information. This is especially true if you hear similar comments often. This means being open to the idea of making changes in yourself. Regardless of the source, we must always ask this person the relevant question “What is not up to standard about it and how can the work better meet the company's standards?” This kind of productive question posed after being criticized is possible because taking something personally is not the same as becoming an emotional and defensive wreck.

Sometimes we luck out and the comment is just a random whatever that came out of a person's mouth who is having a bad day, directed at us because we happen to be in their path. Let's not use too much energy contemplating that type of comment or pass on that kind of irritability to anyone else. Those are the comments that we truly should not take personally, no buts about it.