

The Importance of Critique in Black Creativity

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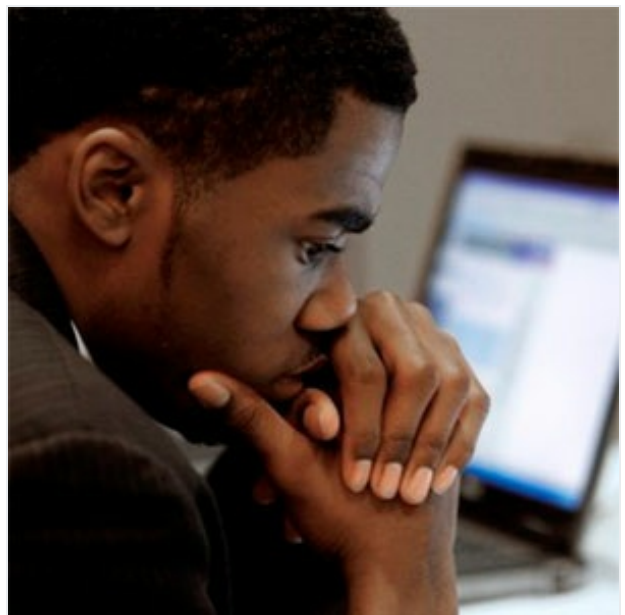
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In one of last season's episodes of HBO's *Insecure*, Lawrence, an app developer, is ready to present his app to his White, male tech firm co-workers. They seem impressed, but offer no follow-up questions; instead, the conversation shifts to them making compliments about Lawrence's vintage Jordans. On ABC's *black-ish*, Andre "Dre" Johnson works as the head of the urban division at an ad agency, and he and a new client come up with a campaign for a new champagne called Uvo. Dre's fellow ad men love the initial pitch, but at home, his wife and mother are disappointed that his concept expressed some of the worst stereotypes of modern African American life: cartoonish over-consumerism and blatant misogynoir.

Some of you may have been in identical situations. You are really excited to show something you have worked on to your peers, but instead of encouragement, thoughtful questions, useful advice, or even consideration of your input, you get empty praise, no substantive critique, or the worst—nothing at all.

As companies and organizations become more inclusive by hiring Black designers, developers, and writers, creative teams are also figuring out how to ensure everyone is

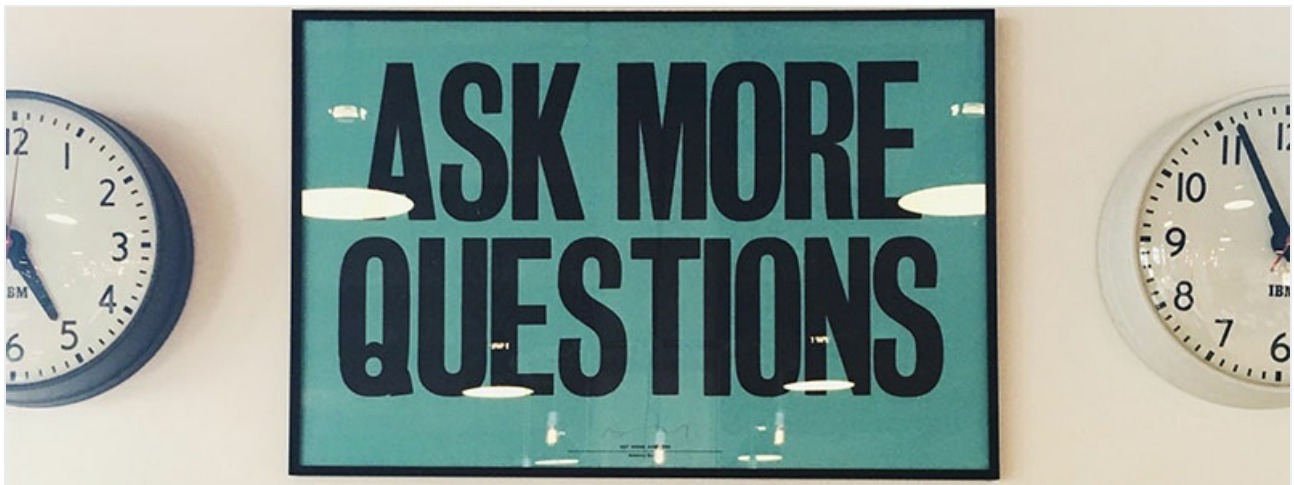


welcomed, understood and brings their full selves to work. Perks and benefits are nice to offer, but so is fostering an environment where talent is allowed to flourish through the exchange of ideas with rigor, debate, and maybe even a few hurt feelings.

So why are our colleagues reluctant to give constructive critiques to Black creativity?

While it is important to not make feedback personal, deeper, honest discussions around the creative work we produce should occur whether it's in the workplace or not. Giving and receiving critique may be difficult, but it could prevent mishaps like the use of derogatory stereotypes that could potentially harm the audiences they want to reach. With that in mind, we must be open to our own ignorance and biases as well, and be willing to learn together.

In addition to those who may have never experienced critique of their work, many Black creatives also have different approaches to design and code criticism in general. Your teammates may not be equipped with the tools to provide effective critique either, but using the right words matter. For example, saying someone's design is 'interesting' is not the same thing as saying it is outdated, or even potentially unviable, not to mention giving the business reasons why they came to those observations. Your fellow workers may express an appreciation of your "perspective" and "energy", but is there a real expectation of rigor or professional development? Striking a balance is key.



We must continue to learn where design critique is happening in formal environments so that Black designers and their co-workers can learn what it looks and sounds like. Design thinking for social innovation is one field of study where design critique meets a public good. For example, Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) offers an MA in Social Design, and students are encouraged to use design thinking methodologies to address real-world issues ranging from liveable public housing to community policing. Students work in cohorts, where their approaches to problem solving are formally critiqued, and their final projects are exhibited to the public for their feedback. This type of instruction carries over into many different environments, and helps make designers better equipped to give and receive feedback to their work.

It is hard to critique the work of your coworkers or peers. But as working professionals, when we deny Black creatives good critique, we deny them the opportunities to improve their processes, defend their decisions, and ultimately make them better at their craft.