

Are you leading from reactivity or creativity?

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Being human is unavoidable.

Even in successful organizations, personal stress, complexity, uncertainty, and the normal dynamics of groups and power can trigger disruptions in communication. Under stress and pressure, a minor slip into poor communication can lead to a chain reaction of misunderstanding and breakdowns in work relationships.

I refer to such behaviors as *reactivity*—responses to stress that interfere with good relationships and results. This happens to great leaders. It happens to you. It happens to me. (1)

Use three practices to diminish reactivity.

In reactivity, we are pulled out of our best level of communication skills. The following practices are the initial steps to get back in touch with our best skills. For further steps in finding the way back to good communication, you will find guidance in a variety of resources. (2,3) But, clarity about what actions to take often emerges using these three practices alone.

Definitions

Experts from multiple fields have found it useful, from a practical standpoint, to divide behaviors roughly into two types (4 - 8)—I call them **reactivity** and **creativity**:

- **reactivity**: behaviors unhelpful to and not aligned with producing desired outcomes
- **creativity**: behaviors helpful to and aligned with producing desired outcomes

Practice #1: Remember the power of reactivity and learn your own indicators.

Early in human evolution, brain centers developed which generate automatic responses for survival. Activated by stress in modern times, these ancient centers cause problems—they can bypass higher centers and grip us in strong emotions leading to opinions and actions based on faulty judgment. Our reactivity may be invisible to us—we tend to feel completely justified.

It is humbling to stay aware of this aspect of being human. But the practice of sustaining awareness helps substantially to counter the power of reactivity.

Indicators

It can be hard to distinguish the two types of behaviors in the moment—it takes practice to learn our patterns. There is also no single behavior that is definitively diagnostic—the same behavior that is reactive in one situation might be creative in another. Sometimes you have to look at the results over time to make a decision about a behavior.

But, there are a few common, fairly reliable indicators (9):

I am likely to be in **reactivity** when:

- I feel very certain about my ideas and I treat discussions as contests I intend to win.
- I start pushing and arguing for my ideas and dominate discussions.
- Contrary to my values of non judgment, I blame others for the problem.
- Alternatively, I may go silent and withdraw from participation.

I am likely to be in **creativity** when:

- I assert my opinions with the intent to see all sides equally and learn.
- I seek multiple perspectives to get to the best possible solutions.
- I avoid blame. I assess how well actions (including my own) are aligned with goals.
- I am careful not to go silent. I muster discipline and courage to offer my own views.

Practice #2. Choose the goals you want to achieve.

Reactivity tends to keep us stuck in looking at external causes for things not going right. Moving toward creativity requires intentionally shifting our focus to the goals we want to achieve in two areas:

- the business goals (e.g. marketing, strategic, financial, quality, customer satisfaction)
- the nature of the relationships we are trying to build.

Practice #3: Prepare for conversations by pausing to reflect before taking action.

Moving out of reactivity is not easy work. It requires self-reflection to put the brakes on taking action, to modulate strong emotion, and to let go of strong attachment to our convictions. In addition, I find it useful to remember assumptions that orient me toward creativity. Here are a few examples:

- We all can act at our worst at times.
- My first impulse in communication is likely to make me part of the problem.
- By aligning my actions with creativity, other people are less likely to be as reactive.
- My strongest convictions are theories that need to be tested.

How often is it necessary to practice?

The time to use these practices is...every day, in each conversation. Watch for minor communication disruptions. Learning is easier when situations are less heated. Practicing with a team is powerful—teams with shared knowledge of reactivity catch it earlier.

References

1. See [Invisible barriers to communication](#) for a review of research.
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5. Connor, Daryl R. **Managing at the Speed of Change** Villard Books, 1992
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7. Emerald, David **The Power of TED (The Empowerment Dynamic)** Polaris Publishing, 2010
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9. A more complete list of indicators can be found at [Reactivity vs. creativity, possible indicators.](#)

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