

Defusing the Distress

While it's easy to lash out or retreat during office flareups, there's a more productive response: when triggered, do nothing. **BY SARAH LEVITT**

When I began writing this column, it was before the COVID-19 crisis. I'd wanted to discuss the oft-occurring friction in media finance departments between sales and credit/collections teams, when sales wants to generate ad revenue and collections, well, wants to collect.

Finding ways for teams of any sort to navigate those waters is crucially important. But perhaps this national crisis is providing us with a particularly good opportunity to resist the urge to act quickly when we're triggered. After all, right now there is an ever-present hum of concern in our minds and hearts.

In the greater context, it is all about finding our way through moments (or days) when we are on high alert rather than centered.

It reminds me of a sales and R&D battle, which provides larger lessons for all sorts of intra-departmental battles. Some time ago, I led a strategic off-site for members of the senior leadership team of a mid-size manufacturing company. They had a strong product line, a great CEO and robust senior leadership. However, the sales VP and the engineering VP were at war. It was a common problem: sales thought research and development should be faster, and R&D was furious that sales kept selling things that weren't fully developed.

It was a big issue for the CEO, because they weren't able to be client- and prospect-facing often enough. Instead, they had to keep playing referee in the sandbox between the two VPs. The clash wasn't just about the wear-and-tear of friction and lost time; this was about lost opportunity and lost revenue.

At the first off-site, I worked with the team to create a strategic, team-designed plan with specific actions and mile markers. Everyone had responsibilities related to it. When we reconvened three months later, we discussed where we were getting traction and where we needed to tweak things. The

team worked in earnest. I coached the CEO, and in six months they were a different team entirely.

The CEO was able to turn over some responsibilities to both leaders rather than being in the middle between them. A tremendous success all around. But. That's not the whole story.



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Augmenting their efforts was something in the background, something I delivered to them on the first day we met. I told them about the concept of fight, flight or freeze and suggested that if anyone were to experience it, to do nothing.

We all get triggered. (My clients love the story of how, when I was in the middle of an argument with a man that I was dating, I hung up and then called him back simply to hang up again.) When that happens, we're not equipped to make good decisions about how to relate to whomever or whatever is triggering us. Instead, the emotion that's churned up – and the thinking that's entangled with it – is guiding our decision-making.

How do you know if you're triggered?

Most of us can tell by tuning in to what's happening in our bodies. Our respiration might speed up; our hearts typically beat faster and sound louder within us; we might feel heat in our faces; our muscles might tense.

The good news is that with some time away (which might be a walk outside, for example), we can help ourselves return to center. And center is where it's at. That's where we're calm and grounded, where we're more likely to seek and see a solution rather than defend or attack.

When you're centered you won't feel any urgency to fight, flight, or freeze. Your body will feel relaxed, not amped up. For clients who exercise, I ask them to describe what it feels like after a run or bike ride. Or taking their dog for a long walk. System relaxed. That's baseline.

If you question whether this is applicable to executives, consider that Steve Jobs meditated; Oprah retreated to her office closet for 10 minutes when she needed a break; and several Fortune 500 organizations from Nike to Google have all implemented mindfulness programs.

When you're triggered by a colleague or boss, simply ask if you can get back to the other person at a mutually agreed upon time. And during this time of national unease, take extra care to maintain centeredness.

If you're triggered, do nothing.



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