



Handling a Nuclear Reaction to a Firecracker Event!

We have all seen it happen. Something small happens and it sets someone off in a manner which leaves people shaking their heads and wondering "What is their problem?!" We cannot understand what the big deal is or why anyone would react that way. Ironically, all people react to situations in a manner that makes sense to them at the time, so what could this be all about? Often this reaction is caused by past incidents. Some people experience a situation that hurts them in some way. If the person chooses not to deal with the feelings at the time and stuffs them, then a bit of scar tissue is left in the person. When something of a similar nature happens again, the person may choose not to deal with it and again stuff their emotions. An individual can only do this for so long before they erupt and react in a manner that shocks people. What you are witnessing is not a reaction to the event that just took place, but a culmination of all the times they have stuffed their feelings around a similar issue. How then can we deal with a person in a manner that meets their needs and ours as well?

First, Try Not to Take it Personal

When we take things personally we believe the other person's actions are intentional. A look, a raised eye brow, an off-colored remark finds us reacting. We sometimes assume intent when there is none. Take a step back and try not to become reactive, because often the other person's reaction has nothing to do with you. In similar circumstances, this person would probably behave the same no matter with whom they are conversing. It's not about anything that you have done or not done. What you are experiencing is the attacker's insecurities. It is not that they are bad people, they're just in pain.



Allow them to vent without escalating the exchange. Encourage the person to talk and listen attentively to them. Do not guess what the other person meant, but ask them for clarification. Ask them if your perception of what they said is what they meant to say. Often we misunderstand the intent and it affects how we deal with the other individual from that point forward, and our actions are based on a faulty assumption.

Acknowledge the other person's feelings and remain grounded in your confidence in yourself. This can be very difficult, however, when someone is verbally attacking you. Remember, it probably has nothing to do with you. You may need to ask yourself, "Why am I taking this personally?" When I hear this what am I telling myself? Is my reaction a result of my old scars? This allows you assess the situation and then make a choice about how you will respond. It also may be helpful to view the situation from the other person's perspective and ask how you would feel given the state of affairs. However, **never** remain in a situation that can be dangerous.

Second: Listen with Empathy

- Listening empathetically is more than just hearing the person's words. It includes using your body language to show sincere interest by facing the person and making eye contact with them.
- Minimal encouragers such as nodding or tell me more, help the other person to feel that you are listening.
- Paraphrase and tag-a-feeling. After a few moments of listening, summarize what the person has said to you and think of how you would feel in a similar circumstance, then tag how you might feel on the end of your summary. For example, "You say you have been here for five years and worked very hard for the promotion and it was given to someone who



just joined the organization and you feel _____. ” Do not worry about tagging the wrong feeling, as the person will correct you and in the process know you were listening to them.

- Some obstacles to effective listening may include preoccupation with our own thoughts. Very often, instead of listening, we are in our head preparing a rebuttal or thinking of other issues. This happens because our minds have the capability to work fast. We speak at approximately 100 – 175 words per minute, yet we can assimilate about 600 – 800 words a minute. This leaves a lot of time for our minds to wander, and impedes our ability to listen. Often it is tempting to finish the sentences of others or interrupt the other in an attempt for them to hear us. In order to hear the other person accurately, we need to temporarily put out own needs aside while actively listening to the other party. Although it is tempting to intervene, you should spend more time listening than speaking. Let the other person know you were listening by briefly summarizing the main points of the conversation. Assess the information by asking open ended questions to assure understanding. Once the individual has had time to offer their opinions, you will have a better chance of them hearing you.

Third: Understand Your Biases

We all have biases and preconceived ideas that influence how we filter our communication. When we enter a conversation, we bring with us all of our life experiences up to that point. This includes anything that impacts how we perceive the message the other person is sending. For example, if we have had experiences with others who appear to overreact to situations, we may become defensive when someone acts out in a “nuclear” fashion. This may hook some of our previous experiences, making our reaction a culmination of many past experiences. When you sense yourself reacting, take a moment to understand what is underlying your



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feelings. You can teach yourself to hesitate long enough to play out your reaction in your head. We sometimes allow our past experiences to change the meaning of the message being communicated, and that interferes with the communication process.

Stress also influences our perception as we do not see things the same way when we are under stress. We perceive communication at any given moment based on our frames of reference including our beliefs, knowledge, values and goals. By knowing yourself and how your experiences influence how you look at the world, you are less likely to allow your baggage to cloud the communication process, and not become reactive. With a little work, you get your needs met while meeting the needs of others.