Pause

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Rollo May wrote:

Human freedom involves our capacity to pause between the stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight. The capacity to create ourselves, based upon this freedom, is inseparable from consciousness or self-awareness (May, 1975/1994, p. 100).

This is a recipe on The Pause – that moment after you have heard or read something that triggers a reaction without you fully thinking it through. This can lead to the situation becoming (often unintentionally) worse, when a different response might have been far more effective. Making such judgements about the best way and time to react is not easy and we are all very human – so this recipe presents a few pointers on making use of that ... pause.

It can be hard to separate thought and action. We very often speak in order to think, as E.M. Forster put it: “How can I tell what I think until I see what I say?” (1927), and recent evidence suggests that the area of

our brain that deals with ‘word production’ actually reduces in cognitive activity when we speak (Flinker et al., 2015). Like many other cognitive processes, we are largely unaware of it happening (e.g. Wilson, 2002; Mlodinow, 2012; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999): our ‘conscious’ selves are often left to deal with something our ‘subconscious’ has already started (Kunda, 1990). We are also pretty terrible at being objective when it comes to explaining such thoughts (e.g. Hastorf & Cantril, 1954).

It is perhaps hardly surprising that we (over) react when other people speak without thinking first – we are all human – but even if you are reacting to something that is obviously inappropriate, it is useful to consider The Pause. That extra split second not only can make all the difference to the effectiveness of your response, it can stop the situation escalating out of control.

Ingredients

- Some ideas (see Method step 1) to help develop the pause habit.
- Some good friends.
- A bit of self-reflective honesty.
- Self-respect.

Method

In the first few seconds:

1. Give your brain a chance to catch up with your mouth (or your email fingers). It's rarely a good idea to respond immediately to anything – especially if it's online!

Possibilities include a physical reminder object (I have a “Keep-your-mouth-shut-Alison” pebble) or brightly-coloured PAUSE Post-it note on your desk.

A deep breath is also effective in counteracting the “took my breath away” reaction.

2. While mentally, physically and emotionally pausing, ask yourself if you are reacting to a point or a tone? Is he/she reacting to what I said or how I said it?
3. Repeat back what you think you just heard and observe the reaction.
 - Ask a question rather than state an opinion

4. If you realise that you have said something that could be considered offensive (we presume here you didn't intend it) then apologise immediately. It clears the air and builds trust.

In the next moments:

5. How can I help adjust the tone of the meeting, or resolve things positively? So much depends on context and judgement
 - If it's something that is clearly not OK then it's relatively straightforward – bystanding is no longer an option in the University. Have a look at *Be vigilant with your vocabulary* or *Say something* for circumstances where we should not remain silent. Some situations may be serious enough to require a more formal process and in such cases you certainly do not have to respond (see guidance notes).
 - If you are uncertain about whether it's OK, repeat back to yourself what you think you heard and try to imagine other ways of interpreting it. Ask for clarification of anything you think might be ambiguous.
 - If it remains ambiguous then it is OK to say so and see if two opinions on the matter can be discussed or created respectfully.
 - Sanity check: check it out later with someone else and ask their opinion on what was said.

Too late:

6. If it's too late then that's fine – it's rarely useful to restart a particular discussion but for your own peace of mind it is good to resolve it in some way. Have a look at the *Unravelling rhetoric* recipe and work on your timing for the next occasion.

Finally:

7. Online you should still be acting in a way you are happy with. The trick is to find your own set of personal 'rules' and stick to them. The authors' rules include NEVER responding immediately; ALWAYS write the response offline; ALWAYS run it past a neutral third party before transferring it to email; REMEMBER that the emotional bank account (<http://www.stephencovey.com/blog/?tag=emotional-bank-account>) which you have built up with colleagues over months, if not years, can empty in a split second.
8. Reflection at the time and afterwards is crucial; as G.K. Chesterton observed: "Merely having an open mind is nothing. The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid" (Chesterton 1936).

Cook's tip

The final test of a Pause is: "Do I feel more self-respect?" When the answer is yes, the Pause has done its work.

If you work at University of Edinburgh, you can consult a Dignity and Respect advisor to discuss matters: see <http://www.ed.ac.uk/equality-diversity/help-advice/dignityrespect/advisors>. The Dignity and Respect Policy is here: <http://www.ed.ac.uk/equality-diversity/help-advice/dignityrespect>