



## **Act; don't react**

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Watching someone's behaviour when things don't go as expected for the person reveals a lot about them. It is fairly easy to behave decently and appropriately when things are going well, and people are being considerate. Our behaviour often changes though, when things don't go the way we want them to and people don't agree with us. And then depending on how stressed or tired we are our responses can vary from the mildly inappropriate to completely out of line. This, in fact, is one of the reasons why during leadership assessment, potential candidates are given challenging situations to deal with. We want to know how you handle things when the odds are not in your favour.

### ***What does it mean to act rather than react?***

We react when we let what someone says or does influence our response. Mostly this happens at a subconscious level. Reactions tend to be automatic responses we give without much thought to what we are doing. To react means our behaviour is dependent in some way on what another person has said and done. To act, means to deliberately choose a response that works best for us. It means we think about the consequences of our actions, we think about what we want to achieve with this situation, we think about the future ramifications of our behaviour, and we select a strategically appropriate response which will result in the outcome we want. It means to act as an independent, thinking adult, determining our own outcomes. It also means to take responsibility for our actions and not act like a victim.

### ***What do most people do?***

Most people react. You can find situations to observe and notice how much the responses of others depend on the words or actions of someone else. We tend to give kneejerk responses because what the other person says triggers us in some way. We take personally what the other person says and does, and we react, usually immediately, without thinking of alternate ways to respond which may get a better result or even lead to a better relationship.

### ***Why is it important for leaders to act and not react?***

Generally speaking, for any adult individual, it is healthy to act and not react. You want to take

action, that is respond, in ways that align with who you are as a person. You also want to take action based on thinking through different scenarios that may result, and choosing the one that is best for you and others. When you react, you respond without thinking through the consequences of your response, and often, the result is more problems. Leaders set the direction of an organisation, group, or team, and you don't want someone who doesn't think through the consequences of their actions determining your future. Leaders also are responsible for critical stakeholder relations. When they react and don't think through their responses they can make enemies of friends. And then of course, leaders get noticed. Lashing out with some inappropriate reaction does not inspire confidence or respect from others. No one ever said, "Wow, that was so impressive, the way he lashed out at that reporter and lost his temper." If anything, reacting is a sign of immaturity and we don't want to see that in people who are supposed to be directing our futures.

When you react, you are disempowering yourself. You are in fact, playing the victim, because someone else has determined how you will respond. When you act, you are empowering yourself to respond as you want to. Acting disempowered and with a victim mindset is not what we want to see in leaders.

### ***Why do people react?***

Young children usually cannot respond other than to react. As the brain develops and the child becomes an adult so the processes which allow one to slow down and delay responding, think about different responses and the consequences thereof, and choose the best way to act, develop. Like anything, the people you are exposed to, the way you are brought up, your education, your peers, and your own personal development will influence how good you can be at this. Skills develop with practice. Then there are situational factors such as illness, stress, and exhaustion which also make it easier to just react. It takes a fair amount of glucose and oxygen, and a refreshed brain to be able to think strategically about the consequences of various actions and choose the right one. So, no matter how skilled you may be, towards the end of the day, when you have flu, and when nothing is going right in your life, you are going to find it more difficult to act with intention instead of just reacting.

### ***How to act, rather than react.***

In order to not just react, you need to be able to do several things. Firstly, you need to have thought about who you are as a person and how you want to be. What actions and behaviours are acceptable to you and what are not? How do you want to be seen, and what do you not want to be associated with? Secondly, you need to have developed neurologically sufficiently to be able to think through the long-term impact of different actions. In other words, you need to be good at seeing the short- and long-term consequences of your actions. Thirdly, you need to care about the consequences of your actions. And fourthly, you need to have enough emotional control and self-regulation that you do not get emotionally hooked into what someone else is saying.

But learning to act and not react is not only for leaders. If you want to be in charge of your life, and achieve your goals in life, then you need to empower yourself. You need to act with agency and be deliberate and conscious about your words and behaviour. People who react are disempowering themselves and choosing a victim state. That just stops you from attaining what you want in life. And then you start apportioning blame to others because of the way in which they behaved. You let the behaviour of others determine what you will do next. The reason you may not be where you want to be in life is because of you. You cannot turn around and blame it on other people. That is being a victim. You want to always do what brings you closer to your goals and the life you want. And to do that you need to act consciously and with intention, you don't want to let others decide what your response will be.