
CHAPTER

1

Why Is It So Hard to Pause?

Man will only become better when you make him see what he is like.

—Anton Chekhov

You've got this big idea. It's something you've been working on for months. It took a while to move out of the details and focus on the big picture, and you finally have the approach. All that's left is to share the news and get your team to implement the vision. The moment you say it aloud, there's push-back. "We don't have enough bandwidth for this." That one comment leads to a domino of reasons why this can't, shouldn't, or won't happen in the way you dreamed or when you need it by. Your anger and frustration come quickly, and within seconds you're slamming your hand on the table, moving papers around angrily and yelling. Maybe this behavior doesn't happen all the time. Likely 95% of the time you can disagree and can hear

different voices and challenge them calmly, but this other 5% of the time, when you buckle under pressure, it feels impossible to not lose your cool. And what's hard is that these are the moments your team and those around you remember. What's most memorable is what's out of the ordinary—the moments that aren't routine. When the stakes are high and you lose your ability to respond in a measured and balanced manner, others see it, and when those in leadership roles breakdown, research shows, so do their teams.

It's been studied and decided that leaders who can't engage in dialogue under pressure create a negative impact on their team, leading to lower morale, lower quality standards, and missing deadlines and budgets (Maxfield and Hale 2018). Team members are more likely to leave their jobs, shut down, stop participating, and stop going above and beyond. While building trust and making your people feel safe can take years, losing integrity, credibility, and professionalism takes only a few seconds.

Conflict is a part of business (Douglass 2023), it's unavoidable, and most of us have been given the advice along the way to pause before saying something, and it sounds simple enough to do . . . but why is it so hard?

Why Is It Hard to Pause Under Pressure?

In the introduction I mentioned that most people and companies and organizations focus in communication training and workshops on how we speak and listen by providing scripts and using dialogue partners, etc. The reason a lot of the workshop content doesn't stick back in the real world is because our language and reactions are controlled by our biology, and, well, most communication courses miss the body completely. Communication is

a body–mind practice, which means you can't pause in a high-stakes conversation without paying attention to the body first, thinking mind second.

When we start to look at our biology, we can see why it's so hard for us to pause in challenging conversations and also the way to make it easier.

Our Biology

Go back with me for a moment 200 000 years ago to the Stone Age. Here we are, living in a cave; our focus is on shelter, finding food, and protecting ourselves and those we love from predatory animals and the elements. There is not a moment where we aren't attuned to what is happening around us, so when a threat is known we're ready. If it's not the sounds that keep us up in our cave at night, it's the fear of infection, animals, or other tribes. We're always on high alert. To be on guard at all times we rely heavily on our sympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is the fight, flight, freeze response (Taylor 2023). It is an involuntary physiological reaction that happens with a perceived threat. It starts in the oldest part of the brain, the reptilian brain (Baars and Gauge 2010), and releases tons of hormones—adrenaline, cortisol (the stress hormone), and these hormones then activate physical changes within us so that we're prepared to fight off a threat, flee to safety, or pretend we're dead so the big animal passes over us. These changes happen instantly, because they're designed to save our lives. Here's what's interesting: evolutionary psychologists have found that our bodies still react to a perceived harmful event, attack, or threat in the same way as it did back in the Stone Age. Today, we call this the stress response.

The Nervous System

There are two aspects of our nervous system: the somatic or the voluntary nervous system that controls all the voluntary muscles in the body such as moving our arms and legs. And then there's the autonomic nervous system, which is outside our control; this is food digestion, heartbeat, blood pressure. The autonomic nervous system has two branches: the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system; both of these are always working within the body, and we shift between them during the day. The sympathetic nervous system is the fight-or-flight response. The parasympathetic nervous system is the rest-and-digest response. Understanding a bit about each of these is important, as we'll be working with both of them to be able to pause in heightened conversations.

The stress response is good when you're in emergency situations; however, any stressful situation (physical, environmental, psychological, or emotional) can trigger the stress response, and we know that the interactions we can get ourselves into at work are both psychologically and emotionally stressful. Instead of a lion that's threatening your survival, now it's conversations with your colleagues, employees, team members, administrators, shareholders, investors, even your partner and kids that are sending the nervous system into fight, flight, freeze. And this reactivity may be happening more often than before, because many of us are in a chronic state of stress day-in and day-out.

Right now, everything happens so quickly that it's hard to see the cycle of what's really going on in a stressful moment. Let's break it down.

1. You're in a conversation, and someone says something that pierces your heart—makes you feel unsafe, uncomfortable, in some way.
2. The amygdala turns on, which is the section of the brain responsible for fear. The amygdala then signals your hypothalamus, which stimulates the autonomic nervous system.
3. Your body senses danger or a threat and must protect itself. Your sympathetic nervous system kicks in and stimulates your adrenal glands to bring on the adrenaline and the cortisol. Your senses become sharper and more focused, you're more alert, your breath rate increases to oxygenate the body, your heart beats faster, blood pressure rises. Muscles start to tighten, and
4. You react instantaneously
 - (a) Fight: You blame, yell, criticize, judge, stomp your feet, pound your fist on a table, slam a door, throw papers around the room, swear.
 - (b) Flight: You walk out of the meeting; emotionally you have to escape because it's too overwhelming; you avoid, ignore, maybe seek out distraction.
 - (c) Freeze: Your whole being is stuck, unable to speak, move, or make a decision. You're like an unplugged arcade game, completely shut down.

Take a look at Figure 1.1 for a visual of the cycle that's happening now.

Anytime we're in conflict or disagreement, where we feel attacked by someone's words, thoughts, ideas, or opinions, we perceive it to be threatening, and so the limbic system treats it as if it were a potential threat to our very survival. We react because this old part of the brain, the reptilian or primal part, takes over, making it hard to respond wisely and in a controlled and balanced way.

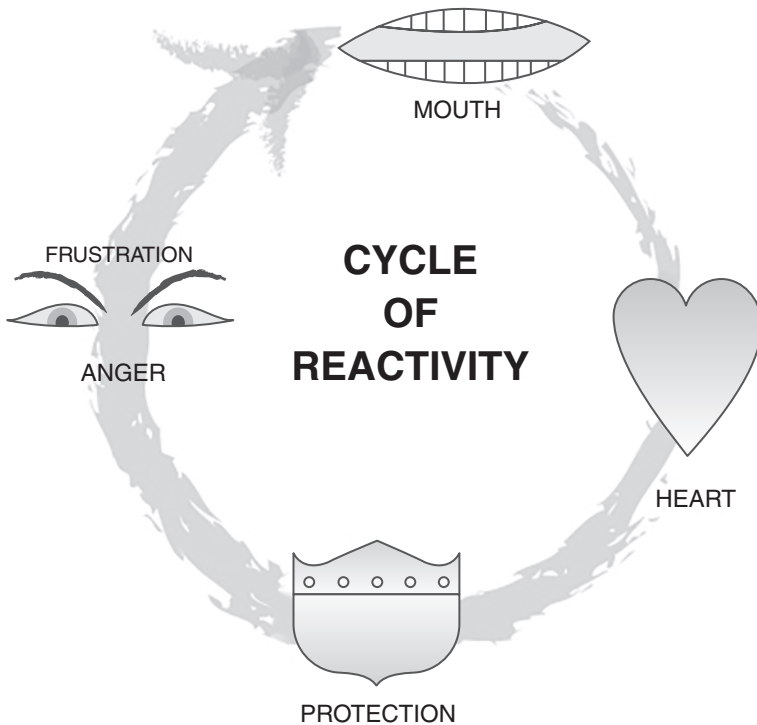


FIGURE 1.1 The cycle of reactivity: shows the cycle of what’s happening now within our conversations that make them hard to pause.

Source: Kevin Gillespie.

Because we are wired to protect ourselves, reactive you is running the show, which is making it impossible to pause and lead intelligently in these conversations. It’s a sweet gesture on our biology’s part; however, in our working world, this isn’t the kind of safeguarding we need. While it may feel like this is the only option available, it’s not. We also have the parasympathetic nervous system.

Where the sympathetic nervous system is the flight-or-fight response, the parasympathetic nervous system is our “rest, digest, and relax” response. While you may not feel at ease in tough spots, you’ve definitely experienced the parasympathetic system before.

Maybe it's that early-morning moment where it's quiet and you and the birds are the only ones awake. Or when you're on a walk, after a workout, watching a sunset. It's that moment of exhale, where everything loosens, and your mind isn't directing the way. We're such a doing and thinking society that it's often hard to access these moments. I've worked with many leaders who find this place of rest to be uncomfortable, more stressful than the office, because it can feel as if they're not doing anything, as if they're being lazy, or it feels selfish and unfair. What they begin to see and learn is how crucial it is to find this place of rest in the body to be able to pause so they can be candid, curious, willing to listen, open minded, make informed decisions, and cultivate a healthy team and company culture; it's what differentiates great leaders from average or poor ones.

The parasympathetic system is activated when you feel safe and it allows the body to function optimally, creating an environment for tissue healing and restoration. Here the feel-good hormones increase and the cortisol and adrenaline decrease. The heart rate and blood pressure normalize, circulation improves, our immune system strengthens, our muscles relax, we can see the bigger picture. When we're in our parasympathetic nervous system we're able to problem solve, think clearly, be more intentional with our actions and words.

The move in the conversation from chaos (sympathetic) to calm (parasympathetic) is the pause itself; it is the moment between stimulus and response.

To pause is an active practice. Think of it like subbing in a sports game. You're intentionally stopping the play so you can take out what isn't working, and bring in what will. In the context of conversation we interrupt the sympathetic nervous system, take it out of the game, and sub in the parasympathetic nervous system. Check out the subbing in Figure 1.2 to see rest and digest sub in for the fight-or-flight response.

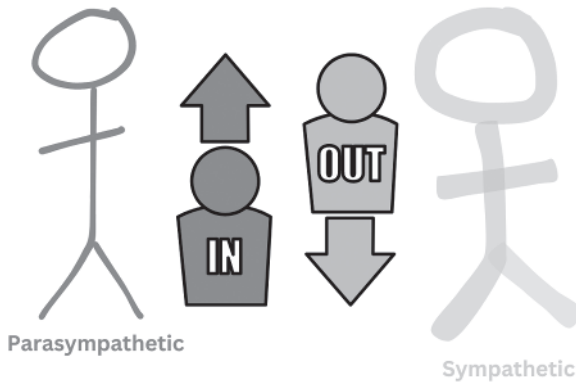


FIGURE 1.2 Parasympathetic nervous system subs in for the sympathetic nervous system.

We want to be able to access our parasympathetic nervous system within difficult conversations. So essentially what we're learning to do is to take the sympathetic nervous system out of play and sub in the parasympathetic.

Now I don't want you to think the sympathetic nervous system is bad, because it's not. Or that the goal here is to get rid of it, because it's not. We need both of these systems to function properly and keep us protecting and enjoying our lives. It's more that for us to be more adaptable and compassionate and balance policy and politics in tough conversations with skill, we need to find a way to disrupt our stress response and switch into calm.

Now you know our biology (sympathetic nervous system) is what prevents us from pausing in stressful conversations and that to pause is the act of accessing more of our parasympathetic nervous system in these moments.

This all sounds great in theory, but how do we actually do it? Let's get into that in the next chapter.