

Surviving Personal Attacks

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By definition, change agents are the messenger – and one thing change agents can be certain of is that as messengers, shots will be fired at them.

‘Shooting the messenger’ is considered a subdivision of an *ad hominem* attack, which is insulting or belittling one’s opponent in order to attack their claim or invalidate their argument, or pointing out true character flaws or actions that are irrelevant to the opponent’s argument. This is logically fallacious because it relates to the opponent’s personal character, which has nothing to do with the logical merit of the opponent’s argument.

A lay term for *ad hominem* is ‘playing the man and not the ball’, an expression from various codes of football, where a player targets the body of the player with no intention of attempting to tackle to take possession of the ball.

It’s against the rules because players are supposed to be focused on the ball (the issue or debate in question), not taking out an opposing player (engaging in character assassination or ridicule intended to undermine an opponent’s position).

How should a change agent manage their response to messenger-shooting and/or an *ad hominem* attack?

Firstly, be aware of the nature of the response you receive. Even if you have become the target of hostility, be aware that it is your message, not you personally, that the person or group is reacting to.

When people attack the person delivering the message instead of debating the issue raised by their message, they are reacting to someone placing them in a state of cognitive dissonance – or where their view of the world is suddenly interrupted and made uncomfortable by new information or ideas that conflicts with their established understanding and belief system. The reaction is because your message has clashed with an individual or group's beliefs, or challenged values they hold dear.

Secondly, manage your own response. Like most human beings, your initial reaction to hostility is unlikely to be rational, as such an attack triggers 'survival' mode, bypassing the conscious mind and going straight to the 'older' parts of the brain. Physical reactions may include a racing heart, a surge of adrenaline, a flushed face, perhaps even shaking hands or voice. You may feel your temper rising, the need to defend yourself and your argument, or the overwhelming desire to sting the person who has stung you (how dare they!).

STOP.

First, make sure you listen to what the other person is saying – really listen, as the words they are speaking might not be exactly what they are reacting against, there may be a deeper issue. Reflect back to the person what you have heard for two reasons – to make sure you've understood them, and so that they know they have been heard, and that you've not been preparing a counter-argument while they've been speaking.

Often, a few moments of silence can work wonders to cool an inflamed situation. Pause before answering. Take a slow, deep breath.

Visualise a white light around yourself – allow yourself to be present, and respond, but without internalising hostile energy.

Ask strategic questions. Create effective conversations by being curious without being judgmental. Practice empathy.

Most of all, realise and accept that your role is to take the heat for being the bearer of change.

It's hard – hard when people arc up, hard when they're attacking positions you yourself hold to be true, very hard when you're being attacked personally and/or dismissively 'shot down', especially when someone has misinterpreted something you said. The most unbelievably frustrating scenario is when people are attacking something you didn't even say.

Remember – amazing leaders would be found everywhere if it was easy!

Helpful resources include [Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through The Dangers of Leading](#) by Harvard University's Ronald A Heifetz and Marty Linsky, which includes guidance on 'Anchoring Yourself', 'Holding Steady'/'Taking the Heat' and 'Controlling the Temperature'; some excerpts below:

When you take 'personal' attacks personally, you unwittingly conspire in one of the common ways you can be taken out of action – you make yourself the issue.

Adaptive work generates 'heat' and resistance, which present forms of danger to leaders... Learning to take the heat and receive people's anger in a way that does not undermine your initiative is one of the toughest tasks of leadership.

Leadership takes the capacity to stomach hostility so that you can stay connected to people...Receiving anger is a sacred task, because it tests us in our most sensitive places. It demands that we remain true to a purpose beyond ourselves, and stand by people compassionately, even when they unleash demons. Taking the heat with grace communicates respect for the pains of change.

It's a deep and natural human impulse to seek order and calm, and organizations and communities can only tolerate so much distress before recoiling. Raise the heat enough to that people sit up, pay attention and deal with threats/challenges – no distress means no incentive for change. But lower the temperature when necessary to reduce counterproductive tension.

The book also makes the point that you may also be facing resistance from friends and allies, as well as those opposing you – people who want you to calm things down, not stir them up, because the upheaval has become uncomfortable for them. It also provides useful insights into other tactics often used to neutralise or marginalise those undertaking change work.

[A New Earth](#), by Eckhart Tolle – Tolle experienced a profound transformation aged 29 when he was on the verge of suicide, and heard himself saying ‘I can no longer live with myself’. This very statement enabled him to wonder ‘who is this self I cannot live with?’ and to begin to separate his egoic self from his true being. A New Earth examines the current collective and individual egoic state of humanity, and how a shift in consciousness is the evolutionary leap we need to make to survive. Here are some selected quotes from Tolle’s chapters on ego, which are highly relevant for the change agent:

Most people are so completely identified with the voice in the head – the incessant stream of involuntary and compulsive thinking and the emotions that accompany it – that we may describe them as being possessed by their mind. As long as you are completely unaware of this, you take the thinker to be who you are. This is the egoic mind...

The ego isn’t wrong; it’s just unconscious. When you observe the ego in yourself, you are beginning to go beyond it. Don’t take the ego too seriously. When you detect egoic behaviour in yourself, smile...

Nonreaction to the ego in others is one of the most effective ways...of going beyond ego in yourself...but you can only be in a state of nonreaction if you can recognize someone’s behaviour as coming from the ego...when you realise it’s not personal, there is no longer a compulsion to react as if it were...somebody becomes an enemy if you personalise the unconsciousness that is the ego. Non reaction is not weakness but strength...

All that is required to become free of the ego is to be aware of it, since awareness and ego are incompatible. Awareness is the power that is concealed within the present moment. This is why we may also call it Presence.

Please note, this is very much about the role of your own ego in any kind of exchange, as well as that of anyone you are engaging with. In the moment you become the target of an attack, the kind of reaction you may begin to feel manifesting is the ego in 'damage repair mode' – Tolle uses the example of road rage, the abuse of other drivers with language and gesture. By definition, the attacks cannot be personal, as you do not know the others involved, but if you are on the receiving end of aggression, you are likely to have an emotional/instinctual reaction before your rational brain has even engaged.

Becoming aware of your reaction – 'oh, it's just the ego, going into damage repair mode' – and being aware that 'you' are not your ego, can help you take a step back at a critical time and enable you to offer a considered, compassionate response instead of a kneejerk reaction.

[The Lotus Leadership Guide](#) provides a succinct summary of nine essential leadership capacities. They are all important, but perhaps the most critical ones for when the heat is on are:

Being Present means being fully aware and awake in the present moment – physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. This includes connecting to others, the environment around you and current reality.

Suspension and Letting Go is the ability to actively experience and observe a thought, assumption, judgment, habitual pattern, emotion or sensation like fear, confusion, conflict or desire, and then refraining from immediately reacting or responding to the situation.

Compassion is having unconditional acceptance and kindness toward all the dimensions of oneself and others, regardless of circumstance. Compassion involves the ability to reflect upon oneself and others without judgment, but with recognition and trust that others are doing the best they can in any given situation.

If you have practiced yoga, or if you meditate, you might already be aware of 'becoming the witness' – consciously becoming a detached observer of your own thoughts, letting them come, noticing them, letting them go, without judgement or attachment.

It is this technique that both Tolle and the Lotus guide are referring to when separating from one's ego (being aware of one's own thoughts), and practicing suspension and letting go.

Leadership and change involves being prepared to take some heat. While nothing replaces the baptism of fire of a real situation, investing some effort into creating an 'emotional hazmat suit' is well worth the time and an effective way of developing your leadership skills.

And with practice, you won't merely survive ad hominem attacks, you'll be able to turn a conversation around from what could have been a potentially destructive situation, and instead create a positive, empowering space for everyone involved.

Have you ever been attacked personally and publicly for breaching a taboo, or saying something that went against what appeared to be the general consensus of a group? How did it feel? How did you handle it?

What tactics have you developed to allow yourself to speak out, without internalising or reacting to others' anger, frustration or fear?