



PT07: Responding vs Reacting

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand the concepts 'response' and 'reacting' in a coaching context
- Learn how to use this distinction to shift or reframe a perspective
- Learn how to partner with the client to transfer new awareness, insight or learning into actionable goals.

MODULE SUMMARY

Bam! Reactions are immediate and sometimes astonishing or strange.

Reaction and impulse play a powerful and biologically important role in our lives but - just like an uncapped oil well – if misused, they can leave us feeling depleted, unsafe and full of regret. When we react to a person or event we have taken the focus off them and what they are saying or doing and placed it on our own feelings. Often hurts from the past have been triggered and are driving our response.

Where reacting is automatic and limits possibilities, responding is a choice.

Responding creates opportunity and the ability to act with a sense of responsibility and trustworthiness.

When we respond, we focus solely on the situation or issue at hand. Unlike reacting we are not hurried, or in the moment. Instead, we take our time to consider the options, to look consciously at the situation before we reply. Responding requires us to

take a considered approach; it's the magical moment that ushers forth options, alternatives and an ability to align our behaviour with our higher values. Through responding, we become self-reliant and resourceful. We have a chance to think, reflect and decide. We leave a reactive state and become proactive with the benefit of logic.

PT07: RESPONDING VS REACTING

At any given point in our lives, we are either responding or reacting.

When the world around us changes something that involves us - directly or indirectly - we either RESPOND or REACT and there are consequences to each action. The same goes for when an event occurs in our personal or professional life. We either respond or react to it. The act of responding is an act of freedom and consequently has the power within it. Responding creates opportunity and involves the ability to act with a sense of responsibility and trustworthiness. The act of reacting, however, comes from somewhere in the past and lacks power because the response is based on resistance or opposition without much thought. The reaction can often perpetuate a problem, or exaggerate an event.

Imagine it as a white water rafting experience. If the water splashes you constantly while in the raft, you might find yourself feeling annoyed, frustrated or even angry. You might be getting hooked into something unrelated to the water while your feelings are coming to the surface and you might even express such feelings by yelling or snapping at the guide or your fellow rafters.

When this happens, there is an automatic reaction to the situation. However, if you notice those feelings of annoyance and frustration while thinking to yourself: "What can I do about this?" and

choose any number of responsible actions, such as moving with the river, enjoying the water and finding the humour in the situation then the action is one of response.

As humans, we are at times a little robotic. For example, we sometimes do something so often that we no longer have to think about how we do it, we just move into doing it. Take driving a car or riding a bike for example. Once we learn how to do it, we just do it every day without even thinking. We might even notice at times that we were not consciously aware of driving the car or riding the bike. We are so automated that it is just happening without conscious thought.

The same happens in other areas of our life. We get up each day; begin the day in the same way, following the same pattern, creating the same routine every day. Routine is an important part of our life as it helps us to move through the day with certainty. However, when our routine is altered it can greatly impact our level of stress.

The routine is a part of us; it is us, so much so that we don't see it anymore. If someone asked you to write down what you do every day, you would have to think hard about it and you would probably miss out several moments of the day, as you just can't remember. These patterns have been refined for some time and so it is really hard to separate them from you. They are you. When we develop patterns, it is possible that we take on things that don't support us or that need to be altered over time as our life changes. The pattern needs to be altered to reflect this. So we need to check in with our routine to see that it is working best for us.

The routine we have in moving through the day is the same as the routine or pattern we have developed around communicating with people. We use a particular type of language, a particular tone and a particular style of communicating. Some of the patterns in our communication are really effective but again, like with our daily routine, we need to check in to see if all aspects of our communication are working for us. We will have certain triggers that we have set in place that create a certain way of communicating, perhaps a bit like Pavlov's dog, we have learnt to react to things in a certain way.

Reacting is an automated response

Something triggers a reaction. Like dominoes, the first piece is moved and as a result, many other pieces follow, leaving a trail behind it. The end result is that the beautiful pattern that was created is a completely different pattern, scattered everywhere.

Let's take this concept and apply it to how we communicate. Deep within each of us, we have triggers and reactions that we store. We bring them out when the trigger is presented. We react in the way we have programmed ourselves too. One of the concerns with having these types of triggers is that we don't know what our triggers or reactions are as they are part of us and difficult to observe. The other concern is that some of the triggers and reactions we have developed no longer work for us and can actually be destructive.

Imagine the following situation:

Kerry is a hard working person, who has set up her own business as a designer. The business began by Kerry creating design pieces in her spare time and people noticed them and wanted to buy them. She decided to sell her design pieces as a market. Over time more people came to want to purchase her pieces. She began to need to employ someone who could support her with the administration of sending the pieces to her clients. Before she knew it Kerry had 5 people working for her. Kerry found she had to give up some of her weekends to manage her business, especially her staff. She was very frustrated by her staff as she found that she spent a lot of time training them up and then after a while they would come to her with their letter or resignation. All this time training people only to have them leave.

One day she asked one of her staff why everyone always left. They looked at her and didn't respond. She asked them again and eventually, they explained to her that everyone left because they believed she didn't need them. She would train them up in

their role and then she would continue to do it herself. She would then complain that they weren't doing the job the way she wanted and it all became too much so they left.

Kerry had developed a belief in her world which was that she was the only person who could get the job done properly. Her trigger to this belief was when someone asked her to explain a task she wanted to be done at work. Her reaction was to dismiss them and say it was easier for her to just do it herself. She would convey this message to her staff in a very negative tone, sighing and breathing heavily in a frustrated manner using language that was very dismissive. All of this style of communication was a reaction to the trigger that she believed she was the only person capable of doing a job correctly. When this was pointed out to Kerry her reaction didn't alter, she simply believed that she had higher standards than other people and that eventually, she would find better staff or staff who had the same high standards.

Kerry's story is common. She had a set belief, she had a set trigger to this belief and she would react in a set way – a pattern mastered time and time again to perfection.

Patterns and our reactions

Everyone has these patterns; everyone reacts to certain triggers that are built on certain beliefs. However, it is a choice to react in this way. If you learnt the behaviour, you can also change it. Imagine if Kerry took a breath and had four seconds of silence before reacting to her staff. Introducing a breath before she reacts would change the pattern of behaviour from one of reaction to one of responding. She would choose how she wished to respond rather than falling back on her automated reaction. She might decide in her four seconds of breathing to ask a question, to bring herself into her conscious memory so that she can respond to the situation rather than falling back on her subconscious memory and reaction. In this one breath, she can bring herself into the present and then respond in a way that supports herself and her employee. Bringing an automated reaction into our conscious memory makes us aware of that pattern and then through awareness, we can begin the process of changing it.

Use your breath to move to response

Who would have thought – one breath! Four seconds! Sounds too easy. It is easy but it is a choice. Kerry must choose to want to change her reaction. Kerry must recognise the role she plays in her staff retention rates. Kerry must recognise the impact her automated reaction has on her staff. The moment she does this then this awareness will bring about a change in her reacting pattern.

Kerry can also decide to keep this reaction towards staff and continue to lose staff. We choose to keep patterns of behaviour that don't appear to support us. But maybe they actually do in some way. Maybe Kerry likes talking to her friends about her staffing problems. Maybe seeing her staff leaving reinforces her belief that she is the only person who cares and is able to do a job well. Maybe these thoughts will keep her belief but these thoughts will also keep her problem, staff leaving. If Kerry is serious about her staffing issue then she has to address the problem, she has to look at herself and become more aware of both her thoughts and beliefs and then her reactions.

Our patterns of beliefs fuel our triggers and our reactions. These patterns can be good. You may train yourself to get straight up when your alarm clock goes off in the morning and to put your running shoes on and go for a run. Running makes you feel fantastic. This pattern, the triggers and your reaction are working for you. It is helping you stick to a routine that makes you feel good.

Kerry's pattern is not working for her. She needs to reprogram to respond differently to a situation. If we have reactions that are working for us then this is fantastic, but knowing this means we are checking in with ourselves to make sure this is the case. However, life is complex and there are many situations in every day where we are confronted by something we have never done before or thought of before. We need to respond at the moment. So we need to know what our triggers are. We need to learn to stay present.

SELF APPLICATION

Uncovering what we are reacting to

The first step to stop reacting is to uncover what we are reacting to. Think about the times when you have felt some sort of negative feeling. What was your reaction to this feeling? Sometimes we suppress how we feel and cover it up with another feeling, a better feeling. For example, maybe we are feeling tired and stressed and so we try to make ourselves feel better by doing something that distracts our mind from this feeling. We might go shopping, eat something, watch television. If the purpose of doing any of these things is to suppress an emotion it may not work as that emotion may be growing stronger inside us leading to an even bigger reaction occurring at any time. Nothing like that poor person who was just standing near you when you suddenly decided to react to the last 3 days of feeling emotionally stressed. Watch out – run for cover. We have all seen this type of situation. Someone reacts in a huge massive way out of the blue and lets it fly straight at us. Whatever was happening at the moment has completely been forgotten and a whole barrage of emotion is storming your way.

Denying ourselves the time to feel our emotions means we store them up and then we are no longer in the moment but in the storage department of our life, stock taking, feeling how angry, tired or stressed we are and totally convincing ourselves of how the person sitting opposite us is totally to blame.

Enjoying life and having a fulfilling life is about experiencing life and responding to it as it comes along.

Reacting to our triggers is not living in the moment.

COACHING APPLICATION

Coaches support their clients to see the triggers that exist in their life. Coaches must also know the triggers they have as well so that when they are coaching they don't appear in their

coaching. Reacting to something a client says in the coaching can get in the way of competent coaching.

Firstly, the coaching may very well shift from being in the moment and client centred, to be in the past and coach centred. Your reaction could make the session all about you. The energy of the moment will totally shift as well. Your coaching will feel uncomfortable and your client appears difficult.

Releasing our judgements while coaching is the best way to avoid getting hooked into our own triggered reactions to the client or their issue. Stepping back before we react with the help of a deep breath can allow room for masterful coaching.

REFLECTION

1. Write down the pattern you created in your life when someone speaks to you about your working habits.
2. Write down the pattern you have created when working in a team.
3. Think about the last time you reacted to something. Do you know what the trigger was and the belief behind it? Are there any examples of situations that you would find yourself reacting to when you are coaching?
4. How do you prepare before a coaching session, to ensure you stay in the moment?
5. How do you manage a situation in your coaching where your client reacts to something you say?

ICF COMPETENCIES

C. Communicating Effectively

7. Evokes Awareness

Facilitates client insight and learning by using tools and techniques such as powerful questioning, silence, metaphor or analogy

- Challenges the client as a way to evoke awareness or insight
- Asks questions that help the client explore beyond current thinking
- Helps the client identify factors that influence current and future patterns of behavior, thinking or emotion
- Invites the client to generate ideas about how they can move forward and what they are willing or able to do
- Supports the client in reframing perspectives

8. Facilitates Client Growth

Partners with the client to transform learning and insight into action.

- Works with the client to integrate new awareness, insight or learning into their worldview and behaviors
- Partners with the client to design goals, actions and accountability measures that integrate and expand new learning

[See all competencies](#)