

Communicating at all Levels in our Organization

By Jan Molnar Fitzgerald, Exec. Dir.

Responsive versus Reactive

Reacting to a situation or stimulus is natural and easy. For example, having side effects from a drug or having an allergic reaction to food doesn't take any effort on our part; we simply experience the reaction. If someone calls us a liar, we easily react without any thought. We may say, "I am not," or "I'm not lying." Or we may easily get angry and fire back swearing at the person in our defense. Being reactive is the easiest path in communication.

Emotions and feeling are behind reactions. We can't help having emotions and feelings; that's part of being human. Trying to control emotions and feelings is not a good idea. The effort and attention spent attempting to control them often backfires. Then we are reinforcing and giving power to emotions or feelings. At that point, they are controlling us.

Responding to situations and stimulus is also easy but takes more thought than reacting. It requires us to bite our tongues and pause long enough to formulate an alternative to simply reacting. If our organization is to succeed, we must communicate responsively to each other.

Responding means we focus our speech and body language (and other forms of communication) on our mission and on our desire to succeed. We become responsible adults. We understand we have feelings and emotions, but we **choose** not to react with them. And then when we do react, because it's human, we are able to own up to the inappropriateness and revise our **reactive** behavior to **responsive** behavior.

The examples that follow will help us distinguish between being reactive and responsive. Please read them all. The last example shows how we can "own up and revise" our communication after simply reacting. Be sure to read that one. We are all reactive

at times. With a little practice, we will be more responsive and our communication with each other and our community will reflect our love and compassion for our jobs, our organization, our mission, and our community.

Recognizing that humans often choose to be reactive (choosing the easiest way,) will teach us to be tougher-skinned and not take personally what other people say to us. We know they are reacting to their feelings and emotions instead of being responsive.

Communicating will be focused on our responsibilities.
Communicating will be more meaningful and productive.
Communicating will be a pleasure.

How-to Conversational Example #1:

Director: "Mary, Mike Allen told me that he stopped by the office on Thursday. He said Nancy was here at the same time to see me. I wish you had left me a note saying they were here..."

Reactive

Mary the Employee: "I had already locked the office door; I was worried about protecting your office and property. Besides, I was in a hurry to get to an appointment."

Mary was **reactive**. She was honest (as far as we know,) saying what she was feeling at the time, saying what came easiest to her. Feelings or emotions are behind reactions.

Had she paused and thought about how to respond in a way that focused on the organization's mission and desire to succeed, she would have said something like this:

Responsive

Mary: "Right. Next time you have visitors, I'll be sure to leave you a note, or call you and leave a voice mail, so that you can contact the person. Those people were both seniors and might have needed our help. I should have asked

them if they needed something. Or who knows, maybe they wanted to give us a donation."

That's a **responsive** reply. Being responsive, means we focus our replies on our organization's mission and on our desire to succeed. We become responsible adults, taking and showing responsibility in our jobs by thinking before we react.

How-to Conversational Example #2:

The wife, who has come to pick-up her husband at the Adult Day Service, is talking to the bookkeeper about payments when she hears the alarm sound on her husband's oxygen concentrator, meaning the rechargeable battery is dead. He's not getting oxygen. She runs over to the activity table where he sits with the activity director and the assistant who are in charge of his care. Neither of them gets up to help with the oxygen.

Wife: "Oh, my. Now, I won't have any oxygen to get him to the car. I like to keep the oxygen concentrator plugged into the wall outlet as much as possible to reserve the battery."

The wife rushes across the room to get the A/C adapter that lies on another table in order to recharge the concentrator.

Reactive:

Activity Director: "We had it plugged in all day."

Assistant: "Yeah, we had it plugged in."

The wife gets down on her hands and knees to plug the cord into the wall outlet: "Well, maybe the connection wasn't right. Was the indicator light on?"

Activity Director: "No, no, the light was on the connection was right."

Assistant: "Yeah, the light was on."

This may seem like a poor example, for no employee or volunteer would actually take so lightly a participant's oxygen requirements, but we all get lackadaisical at times, that's human too.

Had both employees chosen to focus on our mission and our desire to succeed they would have refrained from acting like teenagers denying they broke their mother's favorite vase. They would have responded something like this:

Responsive

The alarm sounds on the participant's oxygen. Before the wife could get to the table, both employees took charge of the situation: one runs to fetch the A/C adapter, the other turns off the bleating alarm. The wife rushes to the activity table.

Wife: "Oh, my. Now, I won't have any oxygen to get him to the car. I like to keep the oxygen concentrator plugged into the wall outlet as much as possible to reserve the battery."

The assistant attaches the cord to the concentrator and to the wall outlet.

Activity Director: "I know you do, Mrs. Jones. We normally follow your directions to keep the concentrator charged. I'm not sure what happen today. We'll get the concentrator charged up enough before you leave so your husband has oxygen to walk to the car."

Assistant: "Can I get you some popcorn and something to drink while we wait?"

How-to Conversational Example #3:

Director: "Have you gotten any requests from the community for in-home services, yet, like for a ride to a doctor's appointment?"

Reactive

Volunteer: "I've been working very hard, really."

That's not what the Director asked. A better answer would have been:

Responsive

Volunteer: No, I haven't received any requests for in-home services. However, I am not worried. We've just begun handing out brochures, so few people know about us or our services.

How-to Conversational Example #4:

Director: "Do you have the schedule of activities for this month's calendar?"

Reactive

Activities Director: "I've been collecting things to do. I need more materials and craft items. I have more ideas..."

Reactive

Director: "But it's already April 4th. I need to send the calendar to the participants so they know what activities we are doing in April. I needed a calendar of activities for last month and I didn't get it; now I haven't gotten one for this month either.

Reactive

The Activity Director goes silent and hardly talks the rest of the workday. She does not produce or even attempt to create a calendar of activities in the activities notebook.

Reactive

The Director waits for the schedule that she never gets. She observes the hurtful and pouting expressions of the Activities Director throughout the day but doesn't talk to

her anymore with regard to the calendar. The Director's energy is zapped by the tension over the calendar.

Let's replay this scene with each person being **Responsive**.

Director: "Do you have the schedule of activities for this month's calendar?"

Activities Director: "No, I don't. I haven't found the time to sit down and do it. I'm sorry."

Director: "We need to send the calendar to the participants so they know what activities we are doing in April. We need to do that every month. How about letting me lead the Balance Exercises for you for the next 45 minutes, while you sit down here and make the calendar of activities. O.k?"

Activities Director: "OK, I can do it."

Director: "From now on, let's schedule 30 minutes each day for you to sit down and work on the schedule. You can assign the program assistant and a volunteer to entertain the participants during that time. From now on, the deadline for the next month's calendar will be on the 15th of each month. Thirty minutes a day should give you the time you need to make that deadline."

How-to Conversational Example #5: An example of a volunteer "owning up and revising" a reactive statement in an E-mail

An E-mail message from Director: *I'm working on the calendar of Activities for April. What time on Wednesday are you doing the hanging basket class? 10 a.m. is good, after exercises.*

Reactive

1st E-mail reply from Volunteer: *I just received a card in the mail today reminding me of a dental appt (quarterly cleaning) in Salem at 11:00....so, if Ok with you, can we change the basket making class to the following Monday the 18th.*

This hasty response leaves the Director with no activity for that day, and still doesn't give the time of day for the activity if it were to be done on the following Monday. Essentially the volunteer's reaction was based on her own needs, instead of responding responsively to the mission and needs of the organization.

Revised to a Responsive reply focused on the organization

2nd E-mail reply from Volunteer: *I will drop off the plants, pots and soil for our project on Wed as planned....I can't stay to help, but I'll leave you with instructions. I will pick them up after I get back from Salem and start fertilizing them in my Sunroom...I will drop them off to you about 9:15. See you then, unless you want to reschedule the class for Monday the 18th.*

End Note:

This first training session is about how we are **Reactive** and **Responsive**, the two easiest ways to communicate and engage with others. The second session will discuss the hardest thing to do: Initiate. Our **Initiative** will ensure the success of our mission and our organization.

I welcome your comments and feedback about this training session. I may not always reply to you but I will take your thoughts seriously and value your input. You will be helping me to improve these training sessions.