



Episode 27: The Secret to Being Less Reactive

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Let's start by pressing the pause button in our lives and taking a few deep breaths. As you inhale, let your belly all the way out and take a deep belly breath. And as you exhale, let all of the air out of your lungs. How does that feel?

In our coaching sessions, I frequently invite my clients to breathe deeply just like this, to slow down their thinking and get grounded. Because in our day-to-day lives, we have so much on our minds and so much to do...and we often forget to or feel like we can't take the time to pause.

Today, let's focus on the pause, because taking the time to build in space in our conversations and thinking can help us tremendously. Pausing gives us power and possibility. Pausing is not just a nice to have as a leader, it's a need to have. When we put space in between a stimulus and our subsequent action, we can respond intentionally instead of reacting.

Pausing is a leadership strategy that gives our brain a moment of peace to be less reactive and more intentional. When we take a deep breath, we keep our brain from reacting immediately and saying something we wish we didn't or sending an email answer that isn't as clear and kind as it could be.

When we don't pause, we're more likely to react. In fact, our brains and bodies are reacting to the stimuli and information around us all day long. Most of the time, though, our reactions keep us safe and protect us, for example, if we swerve to avoid an oncoming car.

For situations like these, our reactions can be lifesaving. But what happens when we react without thinking to a message, or feedback, or something a colleague is asking for? We might get defensive, go to a place of shame, or send a short, half-baked email answer.

Reacting without pausing keeps us from showing up as our most thoughtful, collaborative, and innovative selves. And I'm guessing you know this firsthand.

My clients share examples all the time of when they wish they had responded instead of reacted. For example, the escalating Slack exchange that ends up with the other person complaining to their manager about them, or the meeting that ends in tears because they received unexpected news. These frustrations and misunderstandings happen when we allow ourselves to operate in reactive mode, instead of pausing to act from responsive mode. Immediately reacting to a stimulus can damage our reputation, hurt others' feelings, and, frankly, be a waste of everyone's time.

The good news is that we can change from being reactive to responsive, simply by using the tool of the pause. Pausing allows us more space, thoughtfulness, and clarity.

Pausing is powerful because it allows for possibility. When we pause, the potential responses we can say or the potential actions we can take multiply. When we're in reactive mode, our brain thinks there is only one thing we can do or say. And that's just not true. There are many ways to respond. When we pause and give our brain a moment, we can harness our effective, prefrontal cortex thinking so that our

brain can recognize all of the choices we do have in that moment and choose the one that works best. Pausing allows us to control our response, rather than letting our reaction control us.

A pause allows us to be intentional with our words, tone, and body language and allows our brain the space to consider these 3 questions to guide what we say and do next:

1. What's really important here?
2. How do I want to show up?

And 3. What are my choices?

I see pausing as a leadership tool, so let's talk through how to put this tool into action.

When I'm coaching a client, here's how I incorporate the power of the pause. Let's say that my client is describing a situation in which they reacted in a way that didn't feel good.

After they share the story, we'll revisit the situation, imagining how it could have gone had they paused. We'll start by clearly identifying the stimulus, meaning, what happened? What was the incoming information?

Then, we'll take a breath or two or three to get centered and grounded.

Then, I'll ask them a question like, what are 5 different ways you could have responded to that information or person?

Pausing is magical because it reveals choices. After my client pauses and breathes, they start to see that they actually had many more choices than their brain was originally telling them. They realize that they could have used different tones and words, they could have been silent, or they could have asked a clarifying question instead.

Revisiting situations and talking them through with the benefit of a pause helps our brain learn for the future. It gives our brain more awareness and ideas about how it might respond differently the next time some upsetting information comes its way. This exercise is teaching your brain a new habit – that you can take a moment to be intentional about what and how you want to respond, given how you want to show up and what you want out of the situation.

If you're wondering about how to make this actionable for you so that you remember to pause, here's my suggestion. Take a look at your calendar for the upcoming week to see when you might have a conversation that has the potential to make you negatively react. Then take a sticky note and write the words Pause and Breathe on it, and put it near your computer or in your office, where you're likely to see it as a reminder.

When our brain is learning new habits, it's also really helpful to practice these habits in low-stakes situations, when our brain is calm and comfortable. When we practice putting space in between a stimulus and our response in everyday situations, our brain more easily learns this new way of operating.

And if you're a leader who sees themselves as a multiplier, here's another suggestion for you. Please use this tool when you're coaching a team member and helping them debrief a situation that didn't go as planned. After the person shares what happened, invite them to take a few breaths to slow down their

thinking. Then, ask this key question: Imagine this information comes at you again in the future, what are 5 different ways you could respond?

This question will help their brain keep building new neural pathways to be less reactive and more intentional. It will help their brain be in growth mindset, to learn from the challenges to feel more empowered next time.

The truth is that we can all benefit by pausing more. Pausing and taking a deep breath can help all of us be a bit less reactive, so that we can be more clear, kind, and compassionate.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you found today's podcast helpful, please share it with a friend. And be sure to check out my website, debelbaum.com, where you can sign up for my newsletter, get some free coaching resources, and contact me for a complimentary conversation. I'm here to help you show up as your best self to keep moving in the right direction.

Until next time!