

This is the 3rd article of 7 in the Managing Your Triggers Toolkit. You can download the articles in this series, and other tools at: atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation

The 4-step Practice of State-Shifting

All of us get triggered. Our emotional hot buttons get pushed. Our ability to think gets disrupted by the flight/fight response. The things we do and say when we're triggered almost always make situations worse.

This is a major problem for leaders and those that follow them. As leaders, when we're triggered our potential to do damage is magnified by the power we wield. We're out of control. We have no capacity to gauge our impact. The goals we work so hard to achieve can be undermined. People can be hurt.

We don't have a lot of choice about whether or not we get triggered. Our triggers wire deeply into our upbringing and our life history. But we *do* have choice about what happens next. We can learn how to manage ourselves when we're triggered.

As leaders, we must train ourselves to refrain from acting when in a triggered state. We don't want to wield our power until our neo-cortex has re-established control. In the words of the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tsu:

*"Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving until the right action shows itself?"*

Managing our own state of being should be a core competency for all leaders. And, a powerful tool for developing this mastery is the 4-step practice of **state-shifting**.

What Is State-Shifting?

State-shifting is the practice of learning to consciously shift our energy out of our triggered state and helping our neo-cortex to re-establish control. As leaders, we want to learn to do this as quickly as possible, so that we can respond appropriately to triggering situations.

The essence of the state-shifting practice is cultivating a discipline of not acting when triggered, then using any one of a number of tools to bring ourselves back to a state of balance and inner clarity. The practice helps us achieve better results and avoid the collateral damage that usually comes from acting when triggered.

There are four steps to the state-shifting practice:

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| Step 1 | Name it. |
| Step 2 | Take space appropriately. |
| Step 3 | Shift your state. |
| Step 4 | Deal with the situation. |

Let's look at each of the four steps.

Step 1. Name it.

Step 1 is the key step – **Name it**. Identify what’s happening. Say to yourself, “*I’m triggered.*” Until you do this, you’re helpless. Your amygdala, a primitive part of the brain not capable of rational thought, is in control.

Unfortunately, simply naming for yourself that you’re triggered doesn’t make it stop. The stress hormones will still be racing through your body. Your emotions will still be inflamed. However, the moment you say to yourself, “I’m triggered,” instead of only being a wild animal fighting or fleeing, your adult self has just woken up. We now have a witness, someone inside who knows that you’re triggered. Even though you’re still triggered, you’re now potentially sane enough to remember the 4-step state-shifting process, and you can proceed to Step 2.

There’s only one problem to actually accomplishing Step 1. We’re triggered! And when we’re triggered, we can’t think clearly. We’re not even smart enough to know we’re triggered. However, there are certain tell-tale signs that get set off in our body and mind when we’re triggered. These signs are different for each of us.

We may feel hot. Our stomach or jaw may begin to clench. Our voice involuntarily starts to rise. We may instantly feel intensely judgmental of the person or situation. Or perhaps we start to space out and have trouble thinking.

As we learn to identify our particular tell-tale signs of being triggered, it becomes increasingly easy for us to **Name it** – even when our analytic capacities are impaired.

To learn more about recognizing when you’re triggered, see the 4th article in this series:

How to Recognize that You’re Triggered

Step 2. Take space appropriately.

The key to state-shifting is to remember: ***Do not act when triggered.***

Once you’ve been able to **Name It**, the critical next step in state-shifting is to **Take space appropriately** from the triggering situation. There are two reasons:

1. If you stay in the situation, you will keep getting retriggered.
2. If you stay in the situation, you are likely to say or do something you will later regret.

For those of us who tend towards fight, taking appropriate space may go against your instincts, which are screaming to defend yourself.

You must take space, but please notice the word ‘appropriately’. There is a danger that the way you take space can inflame a situation. Here’s an example of an unskillful way to take space:

“You’re a _____! I don’t want to deal with you.” And you storm out the door.

It might feel really good to let off some steam to your reptilian brain, but now you’ve created a mess that you’ll have to clean up later.

Here are a few examples of how to take space – *appropriately*.

There are the direct approaches:

- *“I’m feeling a bit reactive/unclear/emotional. I could really use a little time to collect my thoughts. How about if we get together after lunch and try to resolve this?”*
(Never say, *“You’re triggered!”*)
- *“It seems like we’re bogged down. How about we take a break and come back later and take a fresh look.”*
(“Cooling off” periods are often used in conflict resolution and mediation work when people are triggered and emotions are running high.)

And there are the indirect approaches:

- Bathroom breaks are a universally recognized opportunity to take some personal space.
- Buy yourself some time. The other person has just made a proposal that completely triggers you... *“Interesting suggestion! Let me check with my colleagues/run some numbers/do a bit more research, etc. and get back to you tomorrow.”*

There can be challenges to taking space appropriately, but when you really understand that your successful leadership in a situation completely depends on your taking the space you need, you can usually find a way to do it.

When it’s difficult to take physical space, it may be possible to take some psychic space. (Most of us learned during those long hours in school to keep our eyes open and look like we’re paying attention while our minds were actually far, far away.) If you get triggered in a meeting, try taking the needed space by simply temporarily withdrawing from the discussion.

Important note to those of you who tend to avoid conflict and difficult interactions:

Take space appropriately does not mean that you’re off the hook for dealing with the triggering situation. Quite the opposite! The whole purpose of training leaders in state-shifting is to help you be better able to respond to the situations that trigger you. Remember, Step 4 is **Deal with the situation**.

Once you have removed yourself from the triggering situation, we can proceed to Step 3 – how to actually shift our state of being and return to sanity.

Step 3. Shift your state.

Once we are no longer actively provoked by the trigger, the flight/fight response will usually subside gradually, and we begin to return to balance.

But, it can take a while. Recovery time is impacted by:

- The intensity of the trigger and the degree of emotional reaction and/or neurological trauma
- How quickly you remove yourself from the triggering situation
- Your general state of mind/body wellness.
We're more susceptible to being triggered when we're overtired, have low blood sugar, etc. These same factors also influence how quickly we can re-center ourselves after having been triggered.

Because we're dealing with psychological rather than physical danger, we can actually keep re-triggering ourselves by thinking about the situation. You've likely experienced this. It's many hours after you got really triggered by someone, but you're still upset. Like a hamster on a treadmill, your mind is racing, replaying the same conversation over and over in your head.

When there has been a serious emotional hijacking, full recovery can take hours – up to a day or more. As leaders, we cannot always afford the luxury of letting nature run its course and waiting until we've come back into balance. We're often in situations that require a timely leadership response.

Fortunately, there are a number of techniques we can use to speed up the normal process of recovery. We call these **state-shifting tools**.

There are many ways to shift your state. You likely have developed some ways of your own to help calm down – perhaps a ritual of making and drinking a cup of tea, going for a run, or listening to music. (Unfortunately, many of us have become dependent in unwholesome ways of using various substances to shift our state.) It's good to have a variety of techniques. Some tools work fine when you're just a little triggered. You will need more heavy-duty tools when you've spiraled into deep core wounds. Some techniques require you to be in a private space. Others can be utilized in the middle of a meeting.

The more quickly you recognize that you're triggered, take space and begin to state-shift, the easier and quicker the recovery time.

Some of the most effective techniques work directly with our body to help us calm down and regain balance: deep breathing, physical exercise, various forms of psycho-physical self-regulation. Other methods work directly with our thoughts and emotions such as: various forms of self-reflection, emotional release, meditation and prayer.

To learn more about specific state-shifting tools and how to use them, see the 5th article in this series: *The Art of State-Shifting: 13 Tools For Recovering Your Sanity*

Step 4. Deal with the situation.

As leaders, the purpose of taking on the practice of state-shifting is to be more effective. We learn to better manage ourselves so that we can better manage the potentially triggering situations that arise in our organizations and our work.

When we are triggered, we have lost the intelligence and capacity to function well. We use the state-shifting process to help bring ourselves back to our zone of leadership: a place of centeredness, inner balance and focus, where we have full access to our life experience and ability to creatively solve problems.

We are now able to act – not simply react. We look back at the original situation that triggered us. Is there something that needs to be done . . . or not? Often we're triggered by events that do not require us to do anything other than calm down.

If we do choose to act, we can assess the situation, get clear on our goals, and plan how to best achieve these goals. Only then do we act. We may or may not be successful, but our success ratio will be vastly higher than if we had acted while our brain was under the control of our amygdala.

Let's say we were the object of a sexist, racist or homophobic remark or action. We get triggered. The huge rush of emotion is partly about what just happened. But mostly, it's about a lifetime of pain and rage at being subject to an oppressive system. Fortunately, we've been practicing state-shifting, so rather than dumping our lifetime of emotion at this person, we notice we're triggered, we step away from the interaction and do some state-shifting.

Once we recover our balance, we're ready for **Stage 4. Deal with the situation.** Perhaps the offending person is someone with whom I don't have a significant ongoing relationship. Do I really want to spend the energy to go back and try to "educate" them? I sure felt like I wanted to give them a piece of my mind when I was triggered. But upon reflection, I don't have the relational context or the interest to engage with them.

But let's say this person is a teammate, someone I'm going to be working with closely over time. In this case, I may want to have a conversation. Now that I'm not triggered, I can be clear on what I actually want to accomplish, and how to go about the conversation in a way that will most likely produce that result.

Some FAQs about Triggering

Does this mean that I'm never supposed to get emotional?

Not at all! Someone says something that moves you deeply, and your eyes start to tear. It is not necessarily the case that you're really feeling sad about some childhood experience. You feel angry in the face of injustice or afraid when reading about the threat of climate change. Your anger or fear is not always due to some past trauma. Your authentic emotions are an important part of your humanity.

Emotional triggering has certain characteristics that distinguish it from authentic, human responses to real situations:

1. The intensity of our response seems disproportionate to the stimulus.
2. Our reactions overwhelm our ability to effectively respond to the situation at hand. Our neo-cortex gets disrupted by our limbic system.
3. When we reflect later on our reactions, things may look rather different than we “assessed” at the time.

Managing your triggers does *not* mean that all our communications as leaders should be in sweet dulcet tones, totally calm and reasonable and without passion. There is great power in our emotions. There are times to sound the notes of outrage or to allow our loss and grief to pour forth like a river. We want to be able to give passionate voice to our dreams and visions. But, it is also true that as leaders we want to be conscious about our impact.

“It is easy to fly into a passion. But, to be angry with the right person, and to the right extent, and at the right time, and in the right way – this is not so easy.”

– Aristotle

For more on how, as a leader, to skillfully deal with emotions (our own and others), see our article: *Managing Emotions*

“Will I ever stop getting triggered?”

Some degree of triggering seems to be part of being human. You probably won't suddenly reach an enlightened state of being where you no longer have any triggered reactions to events that come your way. You may always get to encounter the imprints of your life history.

However, there is a great deal we can learn about how we *relate* to our triggers. The practice of state-shifting is a powerful tool that helps us to not be at the mercy of our own triggers. By repeated practice of state-shifting, we can develop an ability to witness our own reactions. We can learn to no longer believe what our minds are telling us when we're triggered. And importantly, we can learn how *not* to act when we're triggered.

Each time we interrupt our being triggered and do the practice, it's as if we're strengthening a muscle through repeated use. We're actually laying new neural pathways that, over time, start to develop a new habit. Before learning state-shifting, perhaps it might take us hours to recover from being triggered. With practice, we can greatly shorten that recovery time. We can start to notice we're triggered sooner and sooner. And the sooner we notice we're triggered, the easier it is to state-shift. Perhaps one day, we start to get triggered and almost instantly, without conscious effort, the thought arises, *“I'm triggered,”* and we state-shift in the length of a single breath.

When asked by a student,

“Master, how do you stay centered all the time?”

Morihei Ueshiba, founder of Aikido (a martial art form), responded,

“I'm not centered all the time. I simply recover faster than before.”

Summary of The State-Shifting Practice

Step 1. Name it.

The sooner you notice that you're triggered, the quicker your recovery.

Step 2. Take space appropriately.

Don't act when triggered! Find some relatively graceful way of removing yourself from the triggering situation.

Step 3. Shift your state.

Use any of a range of state-shifting tools to bring you back to a state of inner clarity and balance.

Step 4. Respond to the situation.

Respond rather than react.