

*This is the 7th 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*

What Do I Do When Others Are Triggered?

In previous articles, we have explored how to manage ourselves when emotionally triggered. But what about when others are triggered? As leaders, how do we deal skillfully with people when their rational adult mind has been hijacked by their limbic system?

Some seemingly minor offhand comment by a leader may trigger a lifetime of rage at authority figures dating back to childhood. A momentary failure to be acknowledged might send a team member hurtling into a pit of pain and unworthiness due to already existing wounds around feeling unseen and unloved. To others, the provocation may appear slight, but to the person who is triggered, physiologically and emotionally, their body literally responds as if their life were in physical danger.

It's challenging to interact with people when they are triggered, because they're actually not capable of rational thought. Attempts to explain things or "get through" to people when they are triggered almost always fail.

Those of us working in the world of progressive social change get lots of chances to deal with triggering. Our people are very passionate about their work and tend to have strong opinions, and often strong triggers. Some carry varying degrees of trauma that gets re-stimulated at work. Many activists are inexperienced and untrained in dealing with their own emotions.

The purpose of this article is to support leaders, consultants and coaches in developing greater sensitivity and skill in dealing with the emotional triggers of those with whom they work.

Recognizing when others are triggered

Our first task is to identify when others have been triggered. By being alert to recognize these clues, we can tend more skillfully to people and situations before things spiral out of control.

While people may act in many different ways when triggered, here are some possible indicators:

- Emotional outbursts (a rather obvious indicator)
- Expressions of intense judgment with an agitated or tight tone of voice
- Argumentativeness
- Personal attacks, blame, accusations
- Expressions of feeling victimized, powerless
- Non-verbal cues (e.g. clenched jaw or fists, grimaces and other facial expressions, etc.)

- Withdrawal, passivity, avoidance
(for those who tend towards flight rather than fight, the symptoms of being triggered are often of omission rather than active)

What not to do

1. Don't try to work things out when you are also triggered.

If you're triggered, your first job is always to use the 4-step State-Shifting Practice to shift your own state of being. Until you're clear and centered, almost anything you do will likely further inflame the situation. Many destructive interactions are the result of two triggered people trying to "work things out."

2. Don't try to reason with someone who's triggered

I recently watched my daughter try to reason with her 7-year-old son when he was upset because the Lego set he got for Christmas was missing a "critical" piece. There was nothing that she was going to say, no reasonable solution that was going to sooth his meltdown.

This is what it's like trying to reason with someone who's triggered. It's easy to get confused, because the triggered person is still using adult words and may think they're making sense. But, their ability to take in and process information is severely limited. Trying to convince, reason or argue with people who are triggered is not only useless – it often triggers them further.

3. Don't accuse someone of being triggered

Telling someone who's triggered that they're "over-reacting" is usually like pouring gasoline on a fire.

4. Don't ignore or dismiss the content of what's being said.

Just because someone is triggered doesn't mean that there isn't some validity to what's concerning them. (Though while they're triggered may not be the best time to actually try to deal fully with the content.)

How to deal with someone who's triggered

Triggers, people, situations and contexts vary greatly. But here are three basic strategies for dealing with people when they are triggered:

1. Take space appropriately

Taking space appropriately is Step 2 in the state-shifting practice and is very much what someone who is triggered needs in order to self-resource. But, we must be sensitive and skillful in how we offer space, e.g. not like this:

"You're triggered! I think you need to go cool off."

People don't like being labeled, and rarely like being told what they need. You might try something like:

"Would you like to take some time before getting back to me on this?" or

"It seems like this is a charged topic. We both might benefit from taking a bit of space to get clear how to best move forward."

2. Create connection

When triggered, some people need connection and support more than space. We can best offer this through our deep listening – one of the greatest gifts we can give another human being. The experience of really being heard often helps people feel validated, safe and respected, helping them to calm down.

Remember that hearing someone does not mean you have to agree with everything they're saying. (When people are triggered they often say things that even they wouldn't agree with later.)

3. State-shifting

In the right relationship and context, we can cautiously use some of the same state-shifting techniques we would use on ourselves when we're triggered.

a. Move energy

While five minutes of all-out dancing is great for state-shifting, it's probably not a feasible option in most leadership situations. But, be creative about how to get people physically moving. For example, I was facilitating a meeting of the senior management team of a large corporation. The leaders of this prestigious group had managed to get themselves quite triggered. The meeting was beginning to deteriorate rapidly when I had everyone put their coats on, take the elevator down 50 floors, and walk briskly around the long city block several times. When the team came back up to the boardroom, the energy had shifted, their neo-cortexes were back in control and the meeting was able to proceed.

b. Express deeper feelings

A way for some people to state-shift is to access and express the deeper, more vulnerable feelings that lie underneath the immediate fight/flight response.

You can help them by:

- providing deep listening
- offering empathic responses, e.g.
 - *"It sounds like this is really difficult for you."*
 - *"I hear that the way I responded to your suggestion caused you to feel not respected."*

c. Connect to purpose

At the right moment (and especially after people have experienced really being heard), it is sometimes possible to call other to a higher, shared purpose.

For example:

"I know this is really challenging for you. But we have a big program coming up and the team really needs your full participation and experience to be successful."

d. Mind-body practices

If you know the person is committed to a particular mind-body practice (e.g. Tai Chi, *Forward Stance*¹, *Generative Somatics*², etc.), at the right moment it might be helpful to gently invite the person to do the practice (or do it together, if appropriate).

Preventing Triggers

As leaders (not to mention human beings in any ongoing relationship), we want to be mindful of the triggers of those with whom we interact regularly. When speaking about issues that we anticipate might be triggering, here are some tips to possibly minimize needless reactivity.

- 1. Framing and context**
Take care to provide sensitive and appropriate context and framing when raising potentially triggering topics.
- 2. Attention to time and place**
Don't raise sensitive topics when people are preoccupied, rushed, already off-center or upset, or will be taken by surprise.
- 3. Sensitivity and empathy**
For potentially difficult communications, take the care and time to consider how the receiver might experience this.
- 4. Non-violent Communication**
We often trigger others by speaking in ways that cause them to feel blamed or criticized. NVC (Non-Violent Communication³) offers a useful approach and good tools for learning how to communicate in ways less likely to trigger others.
- 5. Inoculation**
When you know someone has a particular trigger about a topic to be discussed, take initiative to name and address directly what's sensitive (rather than hoping they won't notice)
- 6. Learn about the triggers of those with whom you are close.**
The more you understand their sensitivities, the better able you are to avoid unnecessarily setting them off.

When you're the trigger

Triggering tends to run high in close relationships where there are elements of emotional dependency. We see this, of course, in intimate and parent/child relationships. We also tend to see more triggering in those who have less power in a given relationship. So as leaders, some staff are likely to get triggered by you. When I ran a good-sized consulting company, I had to make my peace with several people being angry at me on any given week.

¹ *Forward Stance* is a mind-body approach utilizing the physical experience to develop, explore and demonstrate human actions. Developed by Norma Wong and based on Zen practices, progressive groups are being trained in Forward Stance to help shift the way they move in the world.

² *Generative Somatics* is a body-centered path, methodology and change theory by which we can embody transformation, individually and collectively. It is being taught to progressive leaders and organizations through the work of Staci Haines and <http://www.generativesomatics.org>

³ www.cnvc.org

When people are obviously triggered, it's all too easy to dismiss the problem as only being them and their triggers. But, sometimes the problem is actually you and your behavior. As leaders, it's always important to reflect on our own contribution:

- How might I have contributed to this person being triggered?
- Have I heard similar feedback before?
- Is there possibly anything for me to learn here?

Group triggering

Emotions tend to be contagious and spread like wildfire through groups due to **limbic resonance**.⁴ We may see entire teams mutually triggering each other. Budget discussions may degrade into struggles where rational discussion ceases, as people are triggered into primitive fears around survival and control.

For more on how to manage triggers in groups, see our article: *Managing Emotions*

This concludes our series of seven articles on Managing Your Triggers. We invite you to take on the discipline of managing your own energy to better manage people and organizations.

The 4-step State-Shifting Practice will help you to create more and better results, with less collateral damage.

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

– Lao Tsu

⁴ **Limbic resonance:** The capacity for sharing deep emotional states arising from the limbic system of the brain. These states include the dopamine circuit promoting feelings of empathic harmony, and the norepinephrine circuit originating emotional states of fear, anxiety, and anger... a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby two mammals become attuned to each other's inner states. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limbic_resonance