

Leadership Skills Series: 3 - Handling Your Low Reacting Behaviors

By Nick Anderson



This is the third in my Leadership Skills series to help Leaders assess where they need to develop their people skills. In my last Post I introduced the research-based model that led to many useful insights into how to create and manage effective meetings. I covered the impact of Filter and Amplifier meetings which

were the names the researchers coined to distinguish the different ways in which ideas or proposals were managed. This Post focuses on people who are difficult for many to handle or feel comfortable with, *and* you may be one of these people under certain circumstances.

Typically, you will work with one of these people who naturally behave this way *and*, in certain situations you may change the way you behave, often without realizing it.

How do you recognize you are dealing with one of these mysterious people?

Let's look at one aspect of behavior – **Reacting**. It's a group of behaviors you can choose to use; each of which when used repeatedly will have certain effects on the people you interact with, for better or worse. Let's take the first of the Reacting Group – **Supporting** someone's ideas or position – what's your most likely response?

Supportive, likable...I guess

Yes that's right. Secondly, there is **Disagreeing** with someone's ideas or position. How are you likely to feel?

Well, I could see them as negative if they are aggressive or defensive...

That's interesting....funnily enough people don't see people who are high in disagreeing as necessarily negative, because they are rational, and seen as more objective...*if* they stick to a person's proposals or ideas and do **NOT**

focus on the person themselves. If they do get defensive or aggressive they are not disagreeing, they are Defending/Attacking. No surprises there about how such emotional people are viewed by colleagues and family members, for that matter.

OK, so who's this mystery person... high "disagreer," or defend/attacker?

Neither. This person is called the **LOW REACTOR**; they use lower levels of all three behaviors in both their verbal and non-verbal behavior, they show very little reaction to others.

So, they are very quiet individuals...right?

Not necessarily. They may, for example, have high levels of **Initiating** and/or **Clarifying** behaviors. ***The only thing they avoid is Reacting.***



Why is this Low Reactor a problem?

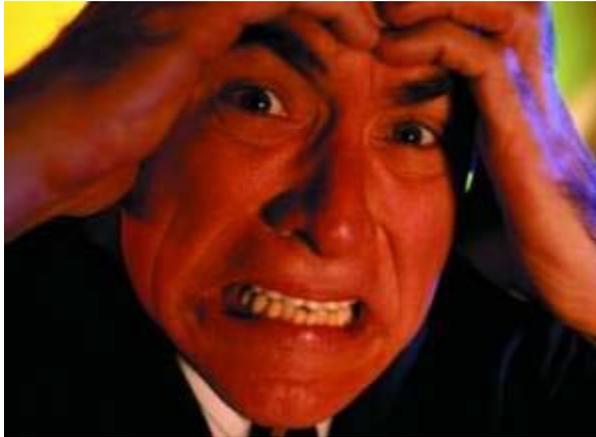
They give very little feedback about whether they approve of points you present. This tends to make people feel uneasy and people tend to handle them ineffectively. For example, even experienced sales people find it difficult to make their case convincingly when they are faced with somebody whose lack of response makes it hard to judge. One salesperson summed up the difference between high "disagreers" and low reactors.

"You know where you stand with someone who is prepared to disagree. What makes it hard with the Low Reactor is that he doesn't even disagree!"

Some research to back up this comment was presented in the famous Xerox Research Project in the late 70's (Neil Rackham, Simon Bailey & Linda Marsh, Huthwaite Research Group), one element of which looked at this very point. The researchers showed that while high "disagreers" are harder to sell to, the hardest to sell were the Low Reactors.

How much different were sales people's success rates?

It was quite striking. The researchers looked at calls which advanced to the next stage or a deal was signed. For average reactors, salespeople were successful in about 11 out of 20 sales, where selling to high "disagreeers" only 8 out of 20, and finally, Low Reactors only 3 out of 20 sales.



That's a big difference...did they find out why selling to Low Reactors was so difficult?

It turns out that there are **Five Common Traps** people tend to fall into when trying to persuade a LOW REACTOR. Let's see if you have experienced any of these...

Ok go ahead... I am sure I have fallen into at least one and not realized it!

That's an excellent point...most people don't know what's happening to them ... other than this person seems awkward to deal with.

Trap 1 – Losing Control over Your Speaking Pace

Because people lose confidence in front of Low Reactors they do one of two things, either they talk faster to get to something that will spark interest or they run out of things to say due to the lack of reaction. For example, sellers' normal speech rate was 119 words per minute (wpm) where it was 138 wpm when selling to Low Reactors and the number of pauses, or "umms" more than doubled. In fact, the number of redundant words significantly increased as well, like "Well, you see...what I meant to say..."



I bet this doesn't apply to just sales situations?

Quite right, job interviews are another good example of finding Low Reactors – more situational – Interviewers know they are not supposed to support or disagree.

Fascinating, what's the second trap?

Trap 2: Losing Sequence during Presentations

This was common in any situations where someone needs to make a verbal presentation. If either the decision maker or Leader is a LOW REACTOR or they are evaluating and making a big decision presenters will tend to jump around or lose sequence. In a study of 23 leaders, presenters “back tracking” occurred over 50% more often and “jumping the Gun” occurred 3 times as often.

What's the Third Trap?

Trap 3: Over-Reacting. (Over-stating to get a reaction)

This is the most common and most dangerous trap to fall into. In a study of twenty-eight trade union officials and their management counterparts researchers actually observed real life labor negotiations and listened for emotionally charged statements. The differences were stark when the low reactor was on either side of the negotiation table – nearly 50% more emotionally charged statements were made.

In another study of salespeople, selling to **LOW REACTORS** led to a drop in factual statements and overstatements went up from 4% average to 13% with **LOW REACTORS** also untruths went to 3% from 1%.

Well it confirms that sellers do lie on occasions...doesn't it?

Yes, BUT, so does the general population...some of the time.

OK... two more to go...what's number 4?

Trap 4: Asking Fewer Questions Than Usual.

Asking more questions is usually a good thing to do with **LOW REACTORS** to find out where you are if nothing else! Especially; “How do you feel about this point?” Unfortunately 80% of people say they should ask more questions yet only 30% actually do. In one sample of 196 sellers questions fell by one-third to one half.

What’s the fifth trap?

Trap 5: Giving Too Much Information

For example, in selection interviews, law courts and other places where low reaction is normal, people often come away having given a great deal more information than they wanted to. In one study, sales people gave 50% more feature statements to **LOW REACTORS**.

Do we all fall into these traps?

No. Some people are more susceptible than others.

The 5 Traps: Your likelihood to fall into them

1 Pace 10-15%

2 Sequence 25-30%

3 Over Reacting/Stating 55-60%

4 Fewer Questions 75%-80%

5 Blah, blah, blah (Talk too much) 75%-80%

What proportion of the population are LOW REACTORS?

That’s difficult to say considering factors like ethnicity and cultural differences – e.g. Scandinavians vs. Italians. What the researchers indicated is that the bigger the decision someone makes the more likely that their reaction levels will be lower. For example, in selling larger sized machines researchers found that **LOW REACTOR** levels rose from 18% to 46% and when people were making a decision for someone else Low Reacting goes from 16% to 47%.

How do you define Low Reactors?

Typically researchers found that Reacting Behaviors less than 10% of all behaviors identified a **LOW REACTOR**. But it's clouded by reaction levels being higher in one-to-one situations, so for groups the number is 7%, and the other problem is with those people who just don't say much at all.

What is the significance for Leaders?

Let's look at how leaders could actually set up their people to fail (placing these traps in their way unintentionally). If you are not aware of how your reaction levels drop, and under what circumstances they drop, you can set up your people for progressive confidence loss. Are you a natural LOW REACTOR anyway? It is natural for many leaders, as they rise up the corporate ladder, to learn that reacting either in support or disagreement too quickly can create risks. So, many senior leaders exhibit the "keeping your cards close to your chest" behavior.

Your Low Reacting behavior can deplete your peoples' confidence and create risk avoidance in their behavior. This can result in lower levels of informal communication, especially from junior staff members. The point is that Leaders may not want to lower their reactions with their people too often. For example:

Can you imagine leaders lowering their reaction levels during big presentations? Given the above traps, less experienced people might suffer a confidence loss and start to think you are disagreeing with them, when in fact you are thinking things through.

How are you going to set and manage team expectations to avoid – or at least manage – falling into one of the above traps?

Think about your expectations when people are preparing next year's first round budget presentation. How apprehensive were they last time? How did this detract from an effective process and the team's engagement?

How can you set expectations to improve this process?

For example, you might say:

"I expect that you will give me feedback on the impact of my behavior when making big decisions." (How are you setting yourself up for unintended Low Reacting?)

“At the end of this meeting we will agree to expectations that I have of you and what you expect from me.”

“Before we start budget planning I expect people to come to a review meeting to assess how effectively the process and people’s preparation helped or hindered during that first round?”

Given that Low Reaction levels will occur, how can you help your people feel more comfortable?

Brief your people when you know your reaction levels are likely to fall. If several subordinates are presenting, it can be helpful to ensure certain reactions are planned. For example, say something like:

“I expect team members to give feedback directed at the expectations we set in the Review meeting...”

“I expect that all feedback will focus on the evidence presented and not how it was presented.”

“I expect that all proposals put forward during presentations are not rejected or accepted immediately.” (We owe it to the presenter to seek to understand and try to help their ideas come to fruition.)

What Conclusion Can We Draw?

Low reacting levels are normal and often more situational, rather than an indicator of a person’s preferred behavioral style. As a leader, it is within your control to set expectations to avoid and/or manage the negative impact of such behavior.

Low reacting can be turned to advantage, forcing ideas to be fully explored before people react. It also facilitates a sense of team by encouraging Building rather than Reacting Behavior.

What can you do about this situation?

Madness can be defined as ***“doing what you have always done, yet expecting different results.”*** So, what expectations do you now have for yourself in terms of managing your reaction levels?

Doing different things is about “purposeful practice” and then getting feedback from others. What mechanisms or structures do you have in place to do this? How are you going to restructure major interactions with your staff to lower their chance of falling into traps?

