



Do You Know What Triggers You?

Description

Do past experiences impact your actions today? The answer is most likely yes. Based on my own experience and learnings, people carry baggage from the past that they may not even be aware of. Then in certain situations, their response is influenced by an event or circumstance called a “trigger.” While not directly related to the current situation, this trigger can lead to an action that may not be the best way to respond.

Studer Community Institute provides exceptional development opportunities aimed at increasing one’s leadership skill set. In attending these, I find those who do take part in the sessions are already good leaders. It seems the good always strive to be better. Part of that process is often learning to identify and manage one’s own triggers.

Bonnie Artman Fox—a mental health advocate, workplace conflict expert, and best-selling author from Healthy Workforce Institute—was the facilitator for a recent SCI session. She is marvelous. During the session, she shared research and other learnings on why a person may act in a certain manner based on past experiences.

One example is a person who grew up in a home in which there was great pressure to be perfect. Thus, when a situation occurs that shows the person is not perfect, they feel like a failure. They may not do well with feedback, or they may take feedback way more personally than is healthy. Another example is a person who was raised in a home where circumstances required them to take care of others. As an adult, the person may tend to rescue or enable those they lead when the best thing would be to develop them and hold them accountable for handling things on their own.

Bonnie shared how human beings tend to move quickly to the negative. We spend more time obsessing over what is wrong versus focusing on what went well. Often it is a lack of security. The insecurity leads to the need to appear perfect.

Leadership is not a smooth highway. Anyone can lead when there are no bumps, curves, hills, or valleys. Like a good driver, a leader wants to be proactive so those challenges are prevented or minimized; however, at times things show up unexpectedly. Leadership involves handling and doing what is at times not comfortable.

I am fortunate. When I was 31, I hit a wall in life. It was so painful that I sought help. Therapy is a safe environment in which to learn about oneself. Today I am still active in a 12-step program. It is a consistent opportunity to gain self-awareness. What I've learned is that one of my challenges is handling feedback.

For the past 25 years, I have been conducting training sessions as well as presenting material to hundreds of groups and thousands of people. After these sessions, the attendees complete a survey. They rate me as a facilitator and/or presenter and leave comments. As I receive these results, my eyes tend to move from the positives to the not-so-positives. Sometimes 98 percent of the comments can be positive and 2 percent less-than-positive. If I am not careful, I will give the 2 percent more weight than the 98 percent.

I recently presented to 150 CEOs of organizations. On a 5-point scale, my rating was a 4.83. The letter from the organizer stated it was the top rating of the three-day conference. They included comments. These were all very positive except a few. One said I was very slow to get started. My brain quickly moved to, *Who was that person? Was I too slow? How do I fix it? I don't like that person.*

That one comment out of 150 brought me to a quick decision point. I asked myself, *How accurate is the comment?* Seeing that only one person out of 150 said that, it seems this feedback was only one person's opinion. I respect their right to feel that way. Do I let the comment have too much impact? At one time, this one comment would have erased all the positive ones. This is an example of what Bonnie presented on: My insecurity around not being perfect can negatively impact me if I allow it to do so. Today, I can look at such feedback through a wider lens.

I work with many organizations that measure employee engagement. A senior leader can have many of their areas do very well. They also receive comments. It seems if they are not conscious of their tendency to zero in on negative feedback, they will miss feeling good about the positive and beat themselves up for the few areas that need improvement. I believe accepting the validity of the overall numerical ratings is vital. Yes. There will be comments. Many will be positive. It is best to focus on these rather than obsessing on the less-than-positive ones.

It can be frustrating when people wait for a survey to make a comment. The thought is, *Why can't they tell me that earlier? Why do they wait?* After a pause, we need to ask ourselves, *What can I do as a leader to create a safer environment for people to share their thoughts?* This does not mean we have to agree with the thoughts; it does mean things can be resolved more quickly. For me, it means meeting with people and asking them, *What can I do so people feel more comfortable coming to me versus waiting until there's a survey to share things?* While there will usually be some who will still not be comfortable, it is better to be proactive in these situations.

In summary:

1. Take time to look for triggers from your past that carry into the present that may impact how you react to situations. Bonnie Artman Fox's book is titled *How Did My FAMILY Get in My OFFICE?! Surprising Ways Your Upbringing Impacts You at Work and What You Can Do About It*. I highly recommend it.
2. Realize that as humans there is a tendency for us to focus on what is wrong when there are a lot more things that are right.
3. Be kind to yourself. This is my number-one recommendation.

We are all from different backgrounds and family situations. We all have strengths and challenges. I believe we all have a human responsibility to maximize our strengths and overcome our challenges. We will never be perfect and that is okay. We are all works in progress. I am so grateful there are people such as Bonnie to show me how to be a better leader.

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Author

quint-studer