



WOMEN OF WITNESS

TIPS TO BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

How to Stay Cool Now When Life Gets Hot

Reaction Management: The Problem May Not Be the Problem

By Dr. Alan Zimmerman

Thousands of books and seminars have been devoted to **management** — performance management, people management, time management. But there's one kind of management that almost never gets discussed and yet affects every part of your life: **reaction management**. It's how you handle yourself when things don't go your way — when someone says something stupid, when a situation turns sour, when stress sneaks up and grabs you by the throat.

The truth is, **your success, relationships, and even your health depend more on how you manage your reactions than on almost anything else.**

Without conscious reaction management, you can damage your credibility, make bad decisions, and send confusing or even destructive signals to others.

Your parents were right when they said, *"Think before you speak."* They just didn't tell you **HOW** to think. So let's fix that.

Over the years, in working with thousands of people — from CEOs to teachers to parents — I've found that the most effective leaders and happiest people stop and ask themselves a few key questions before reacting. Let's walk through them.

1. Does this situation really matter to me? You'd be amazed how many people get all worked up over things that, in the big picture, don't matter. Someone cuts you off in traffic. A coworker forgets to include you on an email. Your partner leaves a wet towel on the bed.

Ask yourself, *"Does this really matter to me?"* — and be honest.

Don't let guilt, habit, or someone else's opinion decide what's worth your emotional energy. One of my clients, a hospital administrator, once told me, "I used to spend my mornings angry that people didn't stack the printer paper the right way. Now I remind myself — no patient ever died from crooked paper."

That's the power of perspective.

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2. In the grand scheme of things, how big of a deal is it? Our problems have the size and power we give them. Blow them up and they'll feel overwhelming. Keep them in proportion and they shrink back to manageable size.

So before reacting, ask yourself: *Will this even matter a day, a week, or a year from now?*

Comedian Rodney Dangerfield once told his psychiatrist, "Everyone hates me."

The doctor replied, "That's impossible, Rodney. Everyone hasn't met you yet."

Most of our "big" problems aren't as big as we think.

In other words — stop making mountains out of molehills or you'll soon be hiking the Himalayas of stress.

3. Are you sure you're seeing the situation accurately? Here's where reaction management gets really interesting.

The problem is rarely the problem. It's how you **see** the problem that creates your stress, anger, or despair. Two people can experience the exact same situation and see it completely differently.

When a company announces a reorganization, one employee says, "Great — new opportunities." Another says, "This is a disaster."

Same event, two realities. The difference isn't in the situation — it's in the perception.

The same is true at home. When the kids move out, one parent says, "Finally, freedom!" and another says, "My heart's broken."

The problem is not the problem — it's the *interpretation* of the problem. Let me illustrate.

Years ago, I met a friend for lunch. He said, "Alan, I'm worried. My wife might be pregnant with twins."

Knowing he already had four children and not much income, I immediately jumped into problem-solving mode. "That's tough," I said. "How will you afford two more?"

He looked surprised and said, "I'm not worried about money. I'm worried I won't have enough time to give each child the attention they deserve."

Same situation, two totally different interpretations. I saw an economic problem. He saw a time and love problem.



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So before you react, to make sure you're seeing a situation accurately, pause long enough to check your perception. Ask yourself these questions.

a. Am I taking it personally?

When someone says "no," criticizes your idea, or ignores your email, it's easy to take it personally. But most of the time, it's not about you at all.

Maybe the other person was stressed, distracted, or having a bad day. Don't automatically assume you're at fault.

Don't make the mistake one of my clients did. After a project deadline was missed, she immediately apologized to the team for "letting everyone down." Later they discovered the entire delay came from an IT system crash no one could have prevented. She had shouldered guilt for something completely outside her control — all because she *assumed* she must be to blame.

Pause before you personalize. Ask: *"Is this really about me — or is it just happening around me?"*

b. Is now the right time to respond — or is it wiser to wait?

One of the best skills in life is knowing **when** to react and **when** to hold your fire.

Some situations demand immediate action — like stopping a safety issue or confronting a clear ethical breach. But most of the time, your first emotional impulse is not your best guide.

Before reacting, pause long enough to ask yourself: *"Will speaking up right now make things better or worse?"*

A quick, emotionally charged reaction might give temporary relief — but often at the cost of long-term damage. A measured response, even delayed by a few minutes or hours, can completely change the outcome.

Your instincts can be powerful, but they can also be impulsive. As I tell my clients, "Your gut is a great first opinion — not a final verdict."

When in doubt, wait. Take a deep breath. Go for a short walk. Pray. Sleep on it.

The time you spend cooling down often saves you from heating things up unnecessarily.

In fact, many people discover that when they come back to the situation later, it's no longer a crisis — it's just another item on the day's to-do list.



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c. Are my thoughts helping or hurting me?

When something stressful happens, your thoughts can either calm you or crush you.

You can think, “This is terrible, everything’s ruined,” or you can think, “This is frustrating but I can handle it.”

Perspective changes everything.

If your restaurant meal takes too long, remind yourself that there are people in the world who would love to have any meal today.

If your Wi-Fi drops out during a meeting, remember — a century ago, people were thrilled just to get electricity.

When you shift your thoughts, you shift your reactions. And when you manage your reactions, you manage your results.

The Payoff

When you ask these questions —

- Does this really matter to me?
- How big of a deal is it?
- Am I seeing it accurately?
- Are my thoughts helping or hurting? —

you begin to practice reaction management at its finest.

You stop letting emotions drive your behavior and start letting wisdom lead the way.

Remember, the problem may not be the problem. But your reaction to the problem can be.

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