

## The Quest4Life Podcast Show Notes:

### *Season #3, Episode #25: Reacting vs. Responding*

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At first glance, the difference between reacting and responding may seem to have the same meaning or any distinction between the two is merely semantics. In fact, if you pull out a thesaurus, each word is likely a synonym for the other.

In our lives, however, there is a significant difference between the two, particularly when you are faced with challenges and stressful situations. And being able to effectively manage this difference helps you level-up your mindset to achieve peak performance.

#### **What is “Reacting?”**

The Latin root of the word “react” is “back, to do, perform.” The implication here is that you are taking action back at someone or something in response to someone or something.

Taking action back AT someone or something, reacting, is driven by the amygdala, one of the most primitive parts of our brain. This is the part of our brain that is responsible for keeping us alive when we feel threatened. It drives our survival instincts.

In such moments, our amygdala trumps our pre-frontal cortex, which is responsible for executive function. When we perceive a threat, our amygdala fires and triggers our fight-or-flight reaction, which increases our chances of effectively dealing with the threat and living another day.

In modern times, most of us don’t confront many physical threats, but you find that your amygdala is working when you experience a psychological threat, such as a threat to your self-identity, your self-esteem, or the goals you have for your life. Thus, when you perceive a threat to how you perceive yourself, how you evaluate yourself, and/or impediments to achieving a fulfilling, successful life, your survival instincts kick-in.

This shows up in the form of “baggage” like the fear of failure, fear of not be accepted by others, fear of the unknown, perfectionism, the need for control, and the like. And how we “react” in those moments is, in effect, a “knee jerk” reaction in the pursuit of survival.

In those moments, executive function goes out the window in exchange for an instinctive, visceral reaction.

#### ***What is “Responding?”***

The Latin root of the word “respond” is “back, answer.” The implication here is that you are answering back to someone or something in response to someone or something.

Fortunately, you don't need to live in a perpetual state of "reaction mode" because you DO have a pre-frontal cortex. As previously mentioned, this area of the brain is responsible for executive function, which allows us to plan, analyze, problem solve, assess costs and benefits, and to make reasonable, measured decisions.

The pre-frontal cortex allows us to respond TO, not AT, someone, or something by engaging in deliberate thinking, which guide our behavioral responses to situations in which we find ourselves. Let me mention, however, that this requires tremendous discipline in the moment because, for most people, the amygdala fires first.

Please understand that your amygdala exerts significant influence over your thinking, emotions, and behavior. The upside is that your pre-frontal cortex can override it in most situations provided that you become conscious of what is going on, which will allow you to respond more appropriately and more effectively.

### ***Level-Up Your Responses***

#### **#1: Notice feelings as they arise.**

Now, this requires you to demonstrate a high-degree of self-awareness moment-to-moment. In particular, you need to be able to identify the sensations, the feelings, and subsequent thoughts and urges that fuel intense reactions. When we become aware of how we are feeling in the moment, we can press "pause" and begin to gather our thoughts. It's important to note that how you're feeling in the moment is real and fair, but it may not be objectively real.

#### **#2: Pre-plan your responses to the extent you can pre-plan your responses.**

It's not revelatory in any way to assert that things won't always go your way. That said, if you were able to give deliberate thought ahead of an event and pre-plan how you will TRY to respond if you get the short end of the stick, you're more likely to respond more effectively.

#### **#3: Practicing compassion for others.**

The reality is that we have no idea, no way of knowing for sure how other people are thinking and feeling from moment-to-moment. Unfortunately, because the world makes you sick with experience, which, invariably, leads people to develop a high degree of cynicism and jadedness, we tend to "round down" for others. But what if your default setting was to "round up" for others in the hope of better understanding what's going on with them.

#### **#4: Practice compassion for yourself.**

I find it fascinating that people are more willing to practice compassion for and extend grace to others than they are to themselves, especially after we react in ways that are either inappropriate, ineffective, or even hurtful. As with "rounding up" and demonstrating empathy for others, you should "round up" and demonstrate empathy for yourself. How this shows up is when your inner dialogue is kind or, at least, neutral.

For example, if you recognize that your reaction to someone or something is intense that, upon reflection, wasn't appropriate, say to yourself, "I'm feeling a lot right now." Or "I'm dealing with a lot right now." Or "This is a lot to deal with and it's hard to be me right now." The goal here is to disrupt the neurochemical groove that's been cut and allow your pre- frontal cortex to gain a foothold in the situation. Another way of saying this is that using kinder or more neutral language gives you a shot at breaking the negative cycle of reacting so you can respond in a reasonable, measured way. #

## **5: Connect to what's important to you.**

When you're in full "reaction mode," when your amygdala is firing, it provides you extremely valuable information because it informs you about what you care about, what's important to you. For example, if your significant other lashes out after s/he had a bad day, your typical reaction may be to come out guns blazin' and fight back. Well, why do you do that?

There are many potential reasons, but one that seems obvious is you are experiencing disconnection in the moment, which is to say that you feel disconnect from them. You're experiencing injustice because they didn't have to treat you that way and your feelings are hurt. And, in your reaction, you make the disconnection worse, which creates a negative feedback loop. Why is this valuable information? Because you don't want to feel that way!

You don't want the disconnection and never wanted it in the first place. What you want is connection because it sucks when we feel disconnected from the people we care about the most.

Fortunately, there is a better way, as you, through deliberate practice of the previous 4 ways to level-up your mindset, can anticipate your reactions in exchange for better responses. Make no mistake, all of this is crazy hard.

### ***Final Thoughts***

All of this speaks to the tenets of developing and demonstrating a high degree of emotional intelligence. And if you know how to do this well, you know that it requires a high degree of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship management.

Interestingly, when most people look at these 4 areas, they view them as a linear progression from self-awareness to relationship management. My contention is that we should work backwards.

Immaterial of how any of this content is envisioned, the application of the principles and concepts discussed is key. And when you evolve from merely reacting to consciously responding, every one of your relationships will improve because you've taken the time and energy to level-up your mindset.

Answer the following:

- 1) Can I put words to the physical sensations, the feelings I'm experiencing in a stressful situation BEFORE I react?
- 2) What would it look like if I pre-planned my responses to situations that don't go my way?
- 3) Am I willing to show compassion to others with the understanding that I am likely unaware of what is going on in their life to make them show up the way they are in a given moment?
- 4) Am I willing to show compassion to myself when I react inappropriately and get situations wrong?
- 5) What will I do with the information stemming from my reactions to respond more effectively in the future?

Answers to these questions and the application of the principles and concepts will make every area of your life better and there's no downside to that.

As usual, it's food for thought, Fellow Questers.

