



Book Standing in the Fire

Leading high-heat meetings with clarity, calm, and courage

Larry Dressler
Berrett-Koehler, 2010
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Recommendation

Your mother may have told you not to play with matches, but you can’t always avoid fiery exchanges when you facilitate a meeting or lead a group. Organizational development consultant Larry Dressler explains why you should encourage rather than stifle heated discussions. He shares ways to control those personal “hot buttons” – sensitivities you’ve developed from past experiences – that can make you lose your cool in the heat of the moment. He reveals six steps for dealing with hot topics to help you successfully run a meaningful session when tempers flare. The book is a bit repetitious, and its advice may be familiar to readers of self-help books; however, it does contain practical suggestions and useful anecdotes that do a good job of illustrating its points. *BooksInShort* recommends its expert guidance and practice exercises to anyone who leads or works with teams, whether in the workplace, on the playing field or at home.

Take-Aways

- During a meeting, a contentious issue can spark into a heated exchange. As a leader, you need to remain in control and guide the fire toward constructive ends.
- However, maintaining your poise can be a challenge when a fiery debate pushes your own “hot buttons.”
- Meetings can intensify if their outcomes are uncertain, an issue is poorly understood, the group is fatigued, members aren’t open to others’ opinions and the team is diverse.
- Yet blazing discussions can help participants see old problems in totally new ways.
- To handle flare-ups in meetings, practice the “Six Ways of Standing in the Fire”:
- First, be more self-aware so you can limit your inappropriate responses when challenged.
- Second, stay in the moment and focus on what’s happening. Third, keep an open mind.
- Fourth, know what you stand for, and fifth, roll with the surprises that might occur.
- Finally, show compassion; you don’t have to agree with everyone, but you should respect them.
- To build your skills, “practice in the heat”: participate in teams as a member, co-lead meetings with a partner and run all types of meeting to polish your “fire tending.”

Summary

“The Power of Fire”

If you work with groups – particularly if you lead meetings – you often will find yourself “standing in the fire” of a heated discussion. A fire is more likely to ignite when a meeting’s outcome is unpredictable, a lot rides on its decisions, or its topic is difficult or easily misunderstood. Passions also can erupt if the group has experienced past

defeats and is exhausted, or if its members don't welcome divergent opinions, have hidden agendas or are a mix of very different personalities and perspectives. Too often, leaders stifle hostile conversations and discourage disagreement, but if you manage these challenges wisely, then dissent, confusion and even breakdown can lead to positive change. If you remain open, you can create an atmosphere where people feel comfortable and safe enough to share how they really feel. Focus on perfecting your role as a "fire tender" who channels the dynamic energy of conflict and passion into productive, innovative forces.

“Destructive and Creative Group Fire”

As discussions intensify, the participants can become repressed and upset, or even hostile. Ad hominem attacks may occur. If the leader mishandles a single heated interaction, dissent can grow and spread like wildfire through a company. It can destroy trust and have a negative, long-lasting impact on workers and their relationships with one another. Yet a well-tended fire generates numerous benefits, such as:

- **“Energy”** – People with a particular point of view bring vigor to the discussion. They aren't passive or disinterested. Use this energy to tackle real challenges.
- **“Illumination”** – A discussion's breakdown can help people see an issue differently.
- **“Cleansing”** – As people share how they really feel about an issue, they clear the air. This enables them to tackle the topic with renewed enthusiasm.
- **“Regeneration”** – Like the renewal of soil after a forest fire, heated interactions can introduce new and important lessons that inspire innovative solutions.
- **“Transformation”** – The story of the Abraham Path is an example of transformative conflict. The Abraham Path is a hiking road that links conflicted countries in the Middle East. When its founder, William Ury, first visited the West Bank to seek local Palestinian support for his project, he encountered hostility and doubt. As the arguments against the path grew louder, Ury kept quiet. He thought, “Let go. Abraham's story is about letting go of control and trusting that a wisdom will emerge.” He assured the local leaders his plan would respect their needs. The Abraham Path now receives enormous support from those leaders.

“The Fire Within”

To maintain control over volatile meetings, keep a cool head. Your childhood, education, family and life experiences contribute to your instinctive reactions or “default beliefs.” But to deal with conflict, you must be conscious that your beliefs aren't the only truths, and that other legitimate perspectives exist, since “an infinite number of legitimate points of view can be taken on any given topic or situation.” Two people experiencing the same high-intensity moment won't necessarily process it the same way. Learn to control your personal “thermostat” by observing a group's intense heat without taking it on yourself. Acknowledge your emotions, but maintain your good judgment. Dispassionately observe your team, and understand the system in which they work and the questions they must examine. Develop a variety of coping skills to deal with the group dynamic. Know yourself and what you bring to the table – after the meeting, few people will recall what you said or did, but they will remember how they felt in your presence.

“Six Ways of Standing in the Fire”

When a situation becomes tense, you can withstand the heat six ways:

1. “Stand with Self-Awareness”

Leading a tense meeting is challenging enough without having your personal issues and sensitive “hot buttons” add fuel to an argument. But preventing this problem requires knowing yourself well. Recognize that these hot buttons will dictate your reactions, which might not always fit the situation around you. Identify sensitive areas from traumatic moments in your life so you are prepared if someone triggers your emotions. Otherwise, when an offensive comment or action activates a hot button, your brain will launch into a “fight-or-flight mode,” protecting you from negative emotions, thoughts or feelings. This could impel you to argue, act defensively or even feel self-righteous.

“Nothing interesting or innovative has ever really happened in groups without the heat of passion, disagreement, fear or confusion.”

Such responses may comfort you, but they can undermine your ability to provide the leadership your group needs. For instance, if someone's words make you uneasy, you might cut him or her off in midsentence; another group member's criticism might elicit your sense of shame and cause you to shut down. Becoming more self-aware means you'll be able to limit any inappropriate responses. To start, note the people and situations that set off your most powerful reactions and observe the way you behave when you feel these emotions. Consider past experiences that may have prompted these responses, then identify other ways to interpret today's troubling situations. Your new interpretation may help you feel differently.

2. “Stand in the Here and Now”

Don't linger on what you “should have, could have or would have done” if you were smarter. Ignore the internal chatter that undermines your ability to focus on the situation at hand. Try this exercise: Observe people in a neutral situation, like in a coffeehouse or at a park, and zero in on the present moment, on what is happening, and on what you see and hear. As different thoughts enter your mind, return your focus back to the actual moment. Consider how paying attention can help center you as a leader and facilitator.

3. “Stand with an Open Mind”

When you dismiss others' ideas because they differ from your own or because you think you know better, you undermine your effectiveness as a leader. The key to opening your mind is to accept your own ignorance; practice saying, “I don't know,” and note your physical and emotional reactions. Be curious about opposing opinions. You don't need to be right – your job as a facilitator is to learn from and to guide others. To practice standing with an open mind, listen for 30 minutes to a TV or radio commentator whose opinions you thoroughly abhor. Rather than trying to disprove this person's arguments, consider what questions you might ask to find out why he or she holds these views.

4. “Know What You Stand For”

If you lack a clear sense of purpose, you may allow others' emotions or agendas to derail a meeting. You might question your skills as a leader. To know what you stand for, commit to a "guiding intention" derived from your responses to these questions:

- **"What am I here to contribute in the world?"** – Though highly individual, your answer to this question can help you put a heated exchange into a healthier perspective. Knowing your goals can calm and strengthen you when you feel overwhelmed.
- **"What principles guide my work?"** – The values, assumptions and beliefs that you hold about yourself and your work provide a structure you can use to guide your reactions and choices.
- **"Who am I here for?"** – You may be serving people who are not in your meeting. For example, if your group raises money for a charity, consider its beneficiaries.
- **"What does the group want to achieve?"** – Knowing how a group "defines its success" will enable you to get your meeting back on track when conflict erupts.
- **"What is...and is not my job in this meeting?"** – Clarify your role as meeting leader, which may change over time from facilitator to observer to active participant.

5. "Dance with Surprises"

Be flexible when the unexpected happens in your meetings – surprises help you learn new things. If you attempt to control an unanticipated situation, you may lose your sense of humor, worry that the meeting is off course, give up or even pretend that the surprise never happened. To get comfortable with the unexpected, note your impatience as you go through your day. Observe your mood when a customer service agent keeps you on hold or as you wait in a long line at the supermarket. What inflexible attitudes do you bring with you to meetings? Try to let them go and allow matters to flow.

6. "Stand with Compassion"

When a meeting presents you with challenges, you may start to detach from it, feeling superior to the people around you and judgmental about them. You may find yourself labeling other team members as "inappropriate, manipulative or dumb." But instead, remember that every person has a life outside your session. Since you never can fully know another individual, try to hold each one in "unconditional positive regard." This term, coined by noted psychotherapist Carl Rogers, refers to the "unwavering support and acceptance of people as worthy of...respect, regardless of what they are doing in the moment." You don't have to agree with everyone, but try to respect each individual.

"Cultivate Everyday Readiness"

The following exercises can help you achieve a more relaxed and focused way of being. They can move you beyond limiting attitudes, help you become more compassionate and let you reconnect with your ultimate purpose. Select some to practice on a regular basis:

- **"Physical centering"** – While standing, get a sense of your physicality – your breathing, your heartbeat, your muscle tension. Inhale and exhale slowly, and relax your muscles. Lift your head upward and spread your feet to shoulder width; become aware of the space you occupy. This exercise leads to peace of mind and awareness.
- **"Mindfulness meditation"** – As you begin to incorporate meditation into your schedule, at first set a timer for two to three minutes, then gradually increase the time. Sit up comfortably in a quiet place; keep your eyes open, but unfocused. Clear your mind, and concentrate on your breathing. Let each thought come and go. If you think of something you need to do or begin to worry about the future, don't suppress the thought, just make a quick note of it, stay calm and continue. Let your breathing anchor you. If your mind wanders, observe where it takes you, but always return to your breathing. When your time is up, sit for another minute, reacquaint yourself with your surroundings and get up slowly.
- **"Self-guided inquiry"** – Each day, set aside time to reflect on a specific problem. Use a journal to record any insights, experiences and changes that you observe in your thinking process. Review the journal every few weeks to spot themes.
- **"Peer mentor relationships"** – Meet with a trusted friend regularly to explore times when you each feel overwhelmed, resentful or insecure in the meetings you run. Review the beliefs that interfere with your leadership abilities.
- **"Clearness committees"** – First used by Quakers 300 years ago, a clearness committee consists of five or six individuals to whom you bring issues that trouble you. The committee cannot offer advice or judgment; they only can ask questions to help you deepen your understanding of the problem and elicit your "inner teacher."
- **"Compassion journaling"** – Keep a personal journal about the sentiments, both pleasant and unpleasant, you experience every day. This will increase your awareness of your emotions and those of the people around you.
- **"Compassion breathing"** – In this Buddhist practice called *tonglen*, breathe deeply and connect with whatever you find distasteful or distressing. Don't repress or ignore the feelings; rather, allow the negative thoughts to enter as you inhale and pass them through your body. As you breathe in, feel a connection with life and the world around you. As you exhale, extend a personal wish for the relief of others' suffering and embrace the release you experience.

"Practice in the Heat"

To become a better group leader, participate in teams as a member, not the leader, as often as possible. This will change your perspective and increase your sensitivity toward group dynamics. Create "heat" for yourself by running a meeting with a co-facilitator. Working with a partner demands a high level of trust, flexibility and openness, and it will help you keep your "ego in check." Finally, find opportunities in your work and personal life to chair all types of meeting to practice your different "fire tending" approaches.

About the Author

Larry Dressler, an organizational development consultant, also wrote *Consensus Through Conversation*.

