



Book Comebacks at Work

Using Conversation to Master Confrontation

Kathleen Kelley Reardon and Christopher T. Noblet
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Recommendation

Find the words you have been dying to say when people challenge you and receive the respect you deserve. Kathleen Kelley Reardon (writing with Christopher T. Noblet) offers insightful tips and tools that can help you respond more effectively – and without hesitation – to snide comments from insulting, bossy or troublesome co-workers. If you don’t feel ready to fight with office bullies, don’t worry. Reardon also provides a variety of less confrontational ways to deal with them. You may find a few of her ripostes a bit unrealistic or harsh – though often she suggests a tough answer only in response to someone else’s provocative meanness. Overall, most of her examples are useful, helpful and effective in fighting that sinking feeling of not know what to say – until hours later. *BooksInShort* recommends her behavioral insights, real-life anecdotes and snappy comebacks.

Take-Aways

- You have control over at least 75% of how others relate to you.
- If you routinely let insults pass, people will step all over you.
- Choose the right comeback to fit each situation.
- If you know you will freeze when challenged, prepare by memorizing and practicing different comebacks.
- People with a rare variant of the “mu-opioid receptor gene (OPRM1),” which is associated with sensitivity to pain, are more susceptible to social rejection.
- Listen to what people say and watch how they say it before you respond.
- You don’t always have to respond; sometimes silence is the best reply.
- Remember the “R-list” response tactics: “reframe, rephrase, rejoin, revisit, restate, rebalance, reorganize, rebuke” and “retaliate.
- If someone threatens your career, that’s personal, so comeback in a memorable way.
- However, no matter how you are provoked, don’t get drawn into a fight that will undermine your long-range goals.

Summary

Are You Quick on the Comeback?

How honed are your comeback skills? Consider how you might respond to these types of people:

- **“The spoiler for an argument”** – To frustrate those who want to show their superiority, incline to agree with them. “I see what you mean...I hadn’t thought of it that way.” You can also use their comments against them or respond sarcastically.
- **“The critic”** – In 1999, a *New York Times* reporter called American painter Norman Rockwell a “mere illustrator instead of an artist.” Rockwell turned the insult into a compliment. He unexpectedly found merit in the criticism, saying, “To us, illustration was an ennobling profession...with a great tradition, a profession I could be proud of.” He. Accepting an insult as something positive is a great way to defuse it.
- **“The blamer”** – Ted Turner, CNN’s founder, used to own the Atlanta Braves baseball team. In his memoir, he admits he did a lousy job running the team. After one awful season, Rankin Smith, owner of the Atlanta Falcons football team, asked Turner, “What does it feel like to lose a hundred games in one season?” Turner said, “Well, I don’t look at it that way...the way I see it, we won 62 games, and that’s more than the Falcons have won in the last 10 years!” Turner didn’t attack; he turned things around. To avoid a fight, note that everyone involved in a mistake can share the blame, but that the project is best served by fixing the

problem and not by placing blame.

- **“The puppeteer”** – These people erect roadblocks and manipulate others. Respond by turning the whole issue over to them; make them untangle the barriers they’ve erected. One employee refused to be manipulated into extra work. He told a critical co-worker, who had spotted what he considered a problem, that he could have the authority to fix the issue since he understood it. The employee then listed the steps required to complete the job, after which, somehow, the critic’s objections vanished.
- **“The complainer”** – Suggest that complainers use the “thought stopping” method. A preacher once invited his congregants to wear bracelets to help them break the habit of complaining. Each time people complained they had to move their bracelets from one arm to the other. This heightened their awareness. Propose this tactic to a complainer, or recommend simply replacing each negative thought with a positive one. Great comebacks include, “I only allow myself to complain for five minutes each day and my time is up.” And, “Can’t do complaining today. Did it yesterday and it didn’t help.”
- **“The ‘it can’t be done’ type”** – Avoid these people. If an unhelpful customer service rep answers your call, for example, hang up and redial. Solve your issue with someone else.

“The Perils of Patterns”

In his article “Good Communication That Blocks Learning,” Harvard professor Chris Argyris says people develop “master programs” early in life that they deploy often in tough situations. Alas, these learned responses don’t always work. If you hit any of these obstacles, it’s time for a change:

- **“Communication ruts”** – A frustrated candidate for CEO of a major firm thought workers were blocking his promotion because they disliked his domineering management style. So, instead of pushing his agenda when he disagreed with them, he asked them to help him understand their issues. After a few weeks of his deliberate attempt to get out of a communication rut, workers began to appreciate his interest in their thoughts and ideas. After several months, he became CEO.
- **“Unwanted repetitive episodes”** – These are dysfunctional patterns into which people can slip. Don’t be predictable. People who always respond the same way “are sitting ducks.” If someone offends you, tell them or they’ll do it again.
- **“Unwillingly divulging personal information”** – If you share too much personal information, co-workers can lose respect for you. If they ask your age or salary, smile and say, “I’m not sure I know you well enough to answer that kind of personal question.” Or, say that if you answer them, you have the right to ask a personal question, too. Or, change the topic by saying, “Someone needs to change the direction of this conversation, and it clearly isn’t going to be you. So let me just put us on another track.”
- **“Jumping to judgment”** – Answer slowly. Watch a few minutes before spouting your comeback. To buy time, say, “I usually respond defensively to comments like that even if no offense was intended. So give me a moment.” Invite the person to reconsider: “Are you angry at me or just angry?” “Is it me or is there tension between us at the moment?”

“Overcoming Comeback Brain Freeze”

If you freeze up in challenging situations, don’t worry – you can change. First, explore the source of your hesitation. Did you have a prior bad experience under similar circumstances? Did you grow up in a family that didn’t practice quick comebacks? Your frustration may be part of who you are. Psychologists from UCLA found that a gene associated with physical pain sensitivity also plays a role in “social pain sensitivity.” If you have a rare variant of “the mu-opioid receptor gene (OPRM1),” which is normally associated with physical discomfort, you are likely sensitive to social rejection. Just recalling an uncomfortable social event may feel as vivid and painful as when the incident first occurred. A rejection may instantly evoke other exclusions in the past. If you are highly analytical, you may also experience “comeback brain freeze,” where your efforts to gather and analyze facts slow your ability to offer a quick comeback.

Warming Up Brain Freeze with Metaphors

If you need a memorable comeback, try a metaphor. You can disarm someone quickly if you toss out a well-crafted metaphor with the right tone, smile or inflection. Create your own metaphor or expand on one you’ve heard. For example, if someone insults your lack of experience and calls you a “babe in the woods,” respond with, “I thought out of the mouths of babes come words of wisdom.” If a co-worker says, “We all have to be on board to make this work,” respond with, “That’d be fine if the ship weren’t sinking so fast. A sturdy lifeboat is what we’re proposing.” Memorize a few comebacks to buy time until your brain freeze thaws: “I’m going to step over here and pretend this didn’t happen. Care to join me?” Or one of these: “There are times when silence is the only option. This is one of them”; “I’m not sure that you really said what I heard you say”; or “I’ve known you too long to believe you intended to insult me.”

Use the “Comeback R-List” to Select a Relevant Comeback

Employ these rich, ripe, *R* techniques to craft effective responses:

- **“Reframe”** – Adopt a different perspective: “This isn’t a fight, it’s just a disagreement.”
- **“Rephrase”** – Offer better wording.
- **“Rejoin”** – Disarm offenders by agreeing: “Whatever spins your wheels works for me.”
- **“Revisit”** – Recall a past success and suggest using it as a model.
- **“Restate”** – Ask the speaker to clarify or repeat the intended message as you see it.
- **“Request”** – Pose a question to change a speaker’s flow.
- **“Rebalance”** – Shift the power: “As it turns out, I won’t be needing your help on this.”
- **“Reorganize”** – Restart the discussion at a better place; cut to a different issue.
- **“Rebuke”** – Reprove the offender, perhaps by noting that an intended joke fell flat.
- **“Retaliate”** – Attack. When people go after you, “get back at them” with a clever comeback, which will discourage them from attacking you again.

“Being able to decide what to say when...cornered, humiliated, frustrated, attacked, complimented or...on the spot, indeed requires both logic and emotion – a ‘gut feeling’ that what you’re about to say or do fits the situation at hand.”

Use comebacks that give people pause if an insult person threatens your credibility, will insult you again if not stopped, is deliberately insulting, has insulted you – or other colleagues – before, or makes a statement that is plainly “unacceptable.” However, don’t get pulled into a disagreeable situation or an unnecessary conflict that will only undermine your goals.

“Finding Your Comeback Comfort Zone”

Save your strongest retorts for countering the strongest provocations initiated by someone else – and even then, act strategically in a way that serves your long-term objectives. Knowing how to create comebacks doesn’t mean you have to use them. You can also:

- **“Let it pass”** – Stay quiet and offer a quizzical glance that shows you don’t think the negative comment merits a response.
- **“Silent eye contact”** – Look into the speaker’s eyes for a bit longer than ordinary.
- **“Give them a chance to do the right thing”** – Ask if you understood correctly and invite the person to rephrase the insulting comment.
- **“Set them straight for their own benefit”** – “For your own good, let me explain why you might reconsider.
- **“Consider yourself told”** – In very contentious situations you might say, “Consider yourself told that you’re a bully” and leave.
- **“You’ll wish you were never born”** – Glare at the speaker, pivot and leave, or drop a clever comment that leaves the insulter embarrassed for having treated you so badly.

“If we commonly let insults pass that should be addressed, we are telling other people that they can walk all over us with impunity.”

Stay in your comfort zone.

“The Gut Check”

The ability to shoot off a great comeback is based on your “gut instinct,” your observation of nonverbal cues and your memories of past interactions. Assess your abilities in mustering these forces. Determine your weakest areas, such as reading nonverbal signals. Diagnose whether you take too much time to think of a snappy comeback or if you speak too impulsively. Are you alert to lessons from your relevant experiences, or do nonrelated memories distract you? Can you adjust your comebacks to fit your real goals and the overall context of your conversations? And do you trust your gut?

“If...the other party has no room to move...give in graciously. You have to learn when to fold.”

Make sure you understand the other person so you answer appropriately. To figure people out, “pulse” them. Pulsing people means determining if they are receptive to your comments so you can adjust what you say. Remember, while you pulse someone, they’re also pulsing you. See if they understand you correctly. Set them straight if they seem to rely on stereotypes and labels.

“Ten Questions to Ask Yourself”

Ask these questions to choose a great comeback so you are never at a loss for words:

1. **“How much do you care about this relationship?”** – If it is important to you, respond in a way that doesn’t undermine the relationship or wound your co-worker’s ego.
2. **“To what extent is the offense purposeful?”** – People do many negative things without thinking. They are pushy, they say impulsive things, and they are sometimes rude. Save your energy and respond primarily to intentional insults.
3. **“Did you contribute? Do you own part of the problem?”** – People make up their minds about others quickly. If someone dislikes you instantly, did you somehow provoke that response? What are you communicating? Should you change your approach?
4. **“Is your credibility – or something else valuable to you – on the line?”** – If someone attacks your credibility or your future, fight back in equal measure with a comeback that is in your comfort zone and that saves the relationship whenever possible.
5. **“Did the person attacking you do enough damage to himself?”** – Those who try to make you look bad put themselves in a negative light. If you respond, it may make you look bad. Sometimes saying nothing is the best tactic, especially in public.
6. **“Are you inserting yourself into the response too much?”** – If you say “I” or “me” you may make the problem personal. To boost your comeback’s effectiveness, don’t discuss your feelings, but do discuss your observations.
7. **“Do [your critics] know what to expect of you?”** – Don’t be predictable. Doing or saying something unexpected can have a big impact, if you don’t go overboard.
8. **“What does your gut instinct tell you?”** – Watch the other person’s body language for subtle signals. If you smile when you make a riposte, the recipient may find you funny. Pause if others misunderstand you. Practice comebacks with a mirror. If you fear being ambiguous, ask trusted friends what they think you mean.
9. **“Are you sufficiently skilled to pull...off” a zinger?** – Don’t use a snappy comeback until you’re sure you’re ready. Engage in smaller battles. Develop comeback confidence.
10. **“Can you live with the outcome?”** – If your comeback will increase your problems, breathe deeply, remove yourself from the area, change the topic and resettle yourself. Then, assess the situation with a calmer head and decide how – or whether – to respond.

About the Authors

Huffington Post writer **Kathleen Kelly Reardon** is a full professor at the Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California. Her books include *The Secret Handshake*, *It’s All Politics* and *The Skilled Negotiator*. **Christopher T. Noblet** is a writer and editor.