

Tunings #3 MEI

My Word!: A Lexicon of Peaceful and Powerful Responsiveness.

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Several people have asked about the four levels of responsiveness that I described in my keynote address for the 2009 MEI Conference: My Word!: A Lexicon of Peaceful and Powerful Responsiveness. As I mentioned at the time, I am in the early stages of sorting out what I want to say about levels of assertiveness in our responses to bothersome situations. So, I'd like to sort that out a bit more here.

In *SongWorks 1: Singing in the Education of Children* (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997), we wrote of four levels of assertiveness for dealing with behaviors in a classroom. Using the two-word phrase, "Sit down," we described ways to increase the intensity of our meaning by the ways in which we speak the words. Level one is a courteous invitation. Level two is assertive and matter-of-fact. Level three is aggressive and very firm, and Level Four is harsh and oppressive. It was these four levels of assertiveness that gave me the idea for a framework in our responsiveness to difficult situations.

Why think about Levels of Responses?

By developing calm, assertive ways to respond and reply to conflicts (large and small), we can save ourselves and others the emotional turmoil and stress that so often accompanies difficult encounters and confrontations . . . encounters that leave neither of us satisfied and often leave one of us feeling subjugated by the other. Levels 2 and 3 of the framework described here offer both *peacefulness and powerfulness*, and these are the goals of this framework for responsiveness.

A habit of extremes?

My theory is that many of our responses to bothersome actions and words fall into the categories of 1 and 4, and these responses are rarely satisfying. In Level 1, we give our power away to another in order to avoid "rocking the boat," or upsetting the person further. And in Level 4, we are out-of-control when we use bullying behavior to punish one who has bothered us. For some of us, the repression of our feelings that are a hallmark of Level 1 builds and builds until we hear ourselves jumping from Level 1 to Level 4, with nothing in between. Levels 2 and 3 offer alternatives to these two extremes. So, I'll begin the descriptions of the four levels with Level 1 and Level 4, to show the contrasts between the two.

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The Four Levels

Level 1 is peaceful, but not powerful. In this response, we often say things we don't mean in order to avoid hurting someone's feelings. In other words, we give away our own personal power to maintain peace with someone else. This response may sound courteous, but it is also deferential. In Level 1, when a colleague says, "I'm sorry I missed our meeting today, but I was just really rushed!" we might say, "Oh that's okay, I know how busy you are!" In response to a colleague asking us to do extra duty when we really don't want to, we may say, "Sure, I'm happy to help out." In response to students talking too much in class and being disruptive, we may say, "I know you are really good kids and you don't mean to be naughty, so could you please be quiet for just 10 more minutes?"

The problem in Level 1 is that we go overboard to hide our feelings, in order to make other people believe we are not bothered by what they have said or done. We can sound meek, pandering, and overly nice. Our facial expression is often smiling with soft eyes, and our tone of voice is highly inflected, almost syrupy. In Level 1, we are approval-seekers, willing to sublimate our own sense of well-being in order to maintain the peace.

To be sure, there are times when we knowingly choose this response, and times when this level of response may be best for both parties involved. Yet, if we feel diminished and devalued during or afterwards based on our deferential attitude, this level of response deserves some critical reflection. In this level, we diminish and dismiss *ourselves*.

Level 4 is powerful, but not peaceful. In this response, our words are harsh, denigrating, disrespectful, and oppressive. In response to a student using profanity in the classroom, we may say, "How dare you use that word in my class! You sound low-class and stupid when you talk like that, and maybe you are, but you will not use that word in front of me again!" In response to a spouse telling us he/she won't be able to keep a commitment made earlier, we may say, "You always do this to me! I should have known that I couldn't count on you to follow through. I don't know why I even try to plan something fun for us; just go ahead and cancel, I'll find someone to go with me who is more fun than you anyway!"

As you can "hear" in these responses, they are brash and lack any opportunities for peaceful reconciliation. In Level 4, our facial expression is often angry, with hard eyes, and our tone of voice is loud or louder than normal with an edgy, dismissive tone. Level 4 is all about emotion and using (false) power to shame, demean, and degrade someone. It voices revenge, sarcasm, and haughtiness. In Level 4, we diminish and dismiss *others*: whether or not they are present to hear our rant about their behavior, and whether or not we give voice our words. If we are *thinking* the words, we are likely *feeling* the words, and such venom moves us further away from the calm, centered core for which many of us strive.

Level 2 is peaceful and powerful. This response is calm and assertive. Imagine an administrator saying, "I've heard some parent complaints about your teaching, and I'd like you to 'go easy' on the kids for awhile." A level 2 response to this may be, "I am always open to conversations about what and how I teach. How soon can we schedule an appointment, so I know what you are thinking?" In response to a waiter bringing the wrong order, we may say, "You may have thought I said pasta, but I said salmon. Is there a possibility of bringing the salmon within the next few minutes?" In response to a student interrupting during a lesson, we may say, "Allison, it is not your turn. Watch and listen to Meghan."

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Notice that responses in this level often carry with them a directive that lets the person know what to do next or what we would like them to do instead. In Level 2, our facial expression is neutral with soft eyes. Our tone of voice is light, calm, matter-of-fact, informative, and conversational. Responses in this level, tend to indicate “Oh, did you know?” or “Hmm, this is what I thought we agreed on.” The tone and message is one of observation for the situation rather than a judgment of right or wrong, good or bad. Neither person ranks higher or lower in this level, and the words, tone of voice, and message is one of *equal footing and equitable voice*.

Level 3 is peaceful and powerful, yet with more intensity. This response is calm and assertive, yet more aggressive than Level 2. My image of this response is when Cesar Milan (The Dog Whisperer) briskly points to a dog and gives a sforzando “Tzzsssst!” This level of response says, “Stop!” It is a cease and desist comment that makes it clear that a line is being drawn.

If a colleague makes an inappropriate comment or gesture toward you, a Level 3 response may be, “That is unacceptable to me. If you want to know why, ask me about it. Otherwise, just know that I am calling a halt to it right now.” If a telephone caller gets pushy, you may say, “This is my home, and you are intruding on my time. Do not call me again.” In response to a child saying, “I don’t want to do that, and you can’t make me,” we may say, “You don’t want to do that, and I don’t especially want to make you do it. But, we are going to stay here until this is done. So, you have some choices to make right now. I’ll watch and listen.”

In Level 3 responses, as in Level 2, we often give directives so that the listener knows when we expect. Our facial expression is neutral and very focused, with (almost) hard eyes. Our tone of voice is rather flat, often spoken at the lower part of our range, with a crispness of pronunciation, especially consonants. Level 3 responses are very firm in their messages, yet without demeaning behavior or language toward others.

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Five Guiding Ideas

As we try out these additional ways to respond to difficult situations, these five ideas for guiding the way may be helpful.

1. **Back up our words with feelings.** Unless “felt meaning” is behind our words, what we say can sound scripted, automated, and disingenuous. Saying words we don’t mean (Level 1) does nothing to grow peacefulness in us, and it gives our power away. Saying words that hurt others (Level 4) also does not bring us peace (at least not beyond the moment), and we are also giving our power away, letting our exaggerated emotions lead us. The residue of both these categories of powerless responses can stay with us for hours, and sometimes days!
2. **Plan for how we want to feel afterwards.** When we think of how we want to feel as a result of our responsiveness (peaceful and powerful), we let those feelings guide our demeanor, our tone of voice, and our words. Compassion and empathy can be a constant heart-felt state of mind in both Level 2 and Level 3. In fact, it is compassion that steers us away from Level 1 and Level 4. When we know that we want to feel strong and empathic *after* an encounter, that consciousness can manifest itself *during* the encounter.
3. **Monitor intent.** We can monitor our own words and feelings by asking ourselves, “What is my intent here?” If our intent is revenge or shaming (Level 4) or taking responsibility rather than risk someone’s disapproval (Level 1), take time to reconsider and reword.
4. **Practice.** Initially, it can be difficult to cultivate the wording that we want to use in difficult situations, but like any other habit-of-mind, words, feelings, and behaviors for Levels 2 and 3 come more easily with practice.
5. **Stay open to the flow of energy and communication.** The middle levels of 2 and 3 are neither pandering, nor punishing. They give us opportunities to behave without the inherent “rankism” of Levels 1 and 4; they allow for further conversation and negotiation.