

THE
PAUSE
PRINCIPLE

**HOW TO KEEP YOUR COOL
IN TOUGH SITUATIONS**

CYNTHIA KANE

WILEY

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Introduction](#)

[What Is This Book About? And Why Is It Different Than the Rest?](#)

[What This Book Will Teach You](#)

[Endnotes](#)

[PART I: Learning to Pause](#)

[CHAPTER 1: Why Is It So Hard to Pause?](#)

[Why Is It Hard to Pause Under Pressure?](#)

[CHAPTER 2: The Pause Principle: SOFTEN](#)

[What Are the SOFTEN Practices?](#)

[The SOFTEN Practices](#)

[What to Remember](#)

[PART II: The Pause Practices](#)

[CHAPTER 3: Sensation](#)

[What Is Sensation?](#)

[Three Basic Sensations in Tough Situations](#)

[How to Identify the General Sensations in the Body](#)

[Your Unpleasant Sensational Reaction](#)

[What to Remember](#)

[CHAPTER 4: Own Your Discomfort](#)

[The Practice: Own Your Discomfort](#)

[What Is Owning Your Discomfort?](#)

[Why Does This Practice Work?](#)

[Sensation + Own Your Discomfort = Pause](#)

[Make a Commitment](#)

[CHAPTER 5: Focus on the Present Moment](#)

[The Practice: Focus on the Present Moment](#)

[Why Does This Practice Work?](#)

[Sensation + Focus on the Present Moment = Pause](#)

Make a Commitment

CHAPTER 6: Take a Breath

Why Does This Practice Work?

Common Stressful Breathing Patterns

Sensation + Take a Breath = Pause

Make a Commitment

Note

CHAPTER 7: Eyes Toward Another

Why Does This Work?

Sensation + Turn Toward Another = Pause

Make a Commitment

CHAPTER 8: Need to Say

Why Does This Work?

Sensation + Need to Say = Pause

Can I Make This Feel Like a Little Deal?

Back to Neutral

[Name], You're in Control

Change Me Into

[Let It Go](#)

[Make a Commitment](#)

[CHAPTER 9: SOFTEN Meditation Practices](#)

[Why Does Meditation Work?](#)

[The SOFTEN Meditation Practices](#)

[Meditation Quick Start](#)

[CHAPTER 10: The Pause Principle in Action](#)

[The Pause Practice Jump Start](#)

[30-Day Pause Calendar](#)

[Final Thoughts](#)

[References](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Index](#)

[End User License Agreement](#)

List of Illustrations

Introduction

[FIGURE I.1 Old focus of communication \(big circle\) vs. new focus of communic...](#)

Chapter 1

[FIGURE 1.1 The cycle of reactivity: shows the cycle of what's happening now ...](#)

[FIGURE 1.2 Parasympathetic nervous system subs in for the sympathetic nervou...](#)

Chapter 2

[FIGURE 2.1 The cycle of softening: This is the new pattern we're looking to ...](#)

Chapter 10

[FIGURE 10.1 30-day pause plan.](#)

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*This book is dedicated to you, the reader.
May it help you find more moments of
connection even when it's hard.*

Acknowledgments

This is my favorite section to write because I love being able to take the time out of my day to sit here and thank the people who made this book happen. I can't help but smile when I think of how this all came to be and thank the universe for opening the doors so easily. The path is set—just walk forward. Well ... here we are! Thank you.

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cycle of reactivity image; it's still one of my favorites that I use all the time in my work.

This book has come out of the years I've spent working with men and women on helping them change the way they communicate, to become more responsive instead of reactive. Daily I'm aware of the reciprocal relationship between me and those I work with. This work isn't easy, and it takes a lot of courage to first admit something needs to change and then seek out a way for it to happen. I am so grateful for all those who I've worked with over the years. Each person has left an indelible mark on my soul and has helped me to grow in so many ways.

Since I was five years old I knew I wanted to write books. It was a clear dream and goal that continues to this day. And while the road hasn't been easy or short, the two people who have been there since my days of writing poetry under my dresser late at night are my parents. For every moment you have been there, and I'm so appreciative of your never-ending love and support. For every twist and turn and fall, you've been there to help me up and keep me going, and for every smooth sail and opportunity you've been right there cheering me on. Thank you for all of it. I love you.

To my big sis, gosh, you're such a light to me. Thank you for listening to me and telling me like it is. I love our weirdness and our yearly trip and our stories and our history. I'm glad you're always a phone call away because my life wouldn't be complete without you.

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Introduction

Through your actions as a leader, you attract a tribe that WANTS to follow you.

—Seth Godin

Let me be the first to welcome you here to this book. I know you're busy, you've got calls to make, and emails to respond to, you have meetings and family obligations, you have a life to be lived. I know how hard it is these days to take the time to sit and read, even when we know a book has the power to change the way we see and interact with the world and those around us. Because of this, I promise not to take your time for granted.

So settle in, and start here, as this introduction provides the basic foundation you need to understand what this book is about, why it's different than other communication books out there, and what it's going to teach you. I promise, you won't find any fluff in these pages—it was written with you in mind.

What Is This Book About? And Why Is It Different Than the Rest?

There's a lot of difficult, awkward, and intense conversations that need to be had when you're a leader within a company that can be downright uncomfortable. I'm sure you can name a few you've had even within the last week or month. And what's hard is that you want to treat others as you also want to be treated: to be fair and disciplined and to show your appreciation for your teams. Knowing their trust means everything, you want to make sure you have their best interest in mind and that you're continuing to create security for them and making the best decisions to help them grow as well as the company itself. While that's your intention, in the heat of a conversation, it may all come out completely different.

While not everyone is caught on camera like Travis Kalanick at Uber digging into one of his drivers, more and more of those in leadership positions are being called out internally for how their reactions or outbursts are causing a breakdown within company culture and environment. When we're in the heat of the moment it's hard to find the language to make it the best possible outcome. Where we want to bring people together and create a sense of trust and connection, instead we create a disconnect and divide, and soon our organization feels like a dysfunctional family—with rivalry, trying to one-up one another, and slamming the door too easily on the way out. Research from the Society for Human Resource Management^{[1](#)} reports that in the five-year period between 2014 and 2019, toxic workplace cultures have driven 20% of US employees out of their jobs—at a turnover cost greater than \$223 billion, while *Forbes* reports that companies with strong cultures saw a fourfold increase in revenue growth.^{[2](#)}

At the forefront of creating a thriving culture is the way those in leadership positions communicate, especially under pressure. And if you're noticing that it's more and more difficult to keep it together in stressful conversations, you're not alone. According to "The Learning Habits of Leaders and Managers"^{[3](#)} report, 50% of managers cited difficult conversations as the biggest challenge they face in their roles, and according to research by the US firm Gartner, 67% of managers feel uncomfortable with face-to-face communication with employees. This discomfort may be a

reason we're seeing more recorded videos being sent by those in charge either communicating layoffs, changes, or responding to challenging questions. There's even data that claims that 34% of managers admitted to putting off having difficult conversations for at least a month and that 25% had put it off for over a year.^{[4](#)⁵} Why are we so scared of these kinds of conversations? Not only because of the other person's reactions but also because of our own! The Chartered Management Institute (CMI) research cited that 43% of senior managers admit to losing their temper and shouting when placed in a difficult conversation, while 40% have admitted to panicking and telling a lie.^{[6](#)} And it's miscommunications like these that cost companies with 100 employees an average of \$420 000 per year.^{[7](#)}

What's happening then? What's making it harder to be wise in the room and have calm conversations now more than before? The daily stressors and challenges of being a leader, that's what. There's having to work nonstop, needing to fix fires, pivot instantly, improve relationships between employees or within a team, moral and financial challenges, mistakes being made during crunch time, having to constantly adjust to demands, and let's not forget also having to answer to bosses, boards, shareholders, customers, numbers, what's happening in the world, and insert whatever else has your mind running laps here.

Being in charge means you're having multiple conversations in your head and with others at all times. And I'll say what we all already know, COVID has added a whole new complicated conversation to the already existing pressures, with people not wanting to come back into the office, negotiating remote and hybrid work, higher employee turnover, loss of company loyalty, and on it goes. We want to be that open, trusting, and appreciative leader in these tough situations, but the conversations we have to have today can make it hard to do.

Handling stressful conversations without blowing our top or getting passive-aggressive, defensive, dodging, or shutting down has always been good for business, but now more so than ever. As mentioned, COVID has truly changed the landscape of work: where before people may have stayed within a team or company where the leadership was rude, dismissive, or aggressive, now employees are less likely to stay, and CEOs and managers are being asked to leave or are being pushed out.

Given that there are about 11 million meetings held every day and the world's challenges continue, it's safe to say that you're going to find yourself in many more difficult, awkward, stressful, and high-stakes conversations as time goes on. So who do you want to be in those moments? As someone in a leadership role, what you say and what you do matters. It is you who others are following, imitating, and influenced by; it is you who sets the tone. A Gallup study found that 70% of the variance in employee engagement is directly related to the manager.⁸ Frontline managers, in particular, are the most crucial lever when it comes to engaging an organization's employees. That's a big responsibility to have as it means that the way you handle tough conversations has the potential to make or break the bottom line.

Most companies try to fix “heat of the moment” reactions by enlisting employees in communication courses or training on effective communication skills. Here the focus is usually on active listening, speaking, and breaking off using dialogue partners. These programs give instruction and information, and people will often leave with a script to use. Then what happens? The course, training, is over, the employee is dropped back into the real world, and everything they “learned” doesn't work—they're still being derisive and antagonistic in tough situations, and they're wondering why. Why did these theories work in a controlled environment but out in the wild I'm making things worse? Has this ever happened to you? It's definitely happened to me. Here's what the issue is—we don't see communication as a practice; we see it as a learning objective—and we are all focusing on the wrong part of communication.

Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl wrote that “between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

To keep our cool in high-pressure moments, we need to put our attention not on the words we use or how we're listening but on that split second between the other person's words and our reaction—the space in between. How can we expand the space in between, lengthen the time between the stimulus and the response so we can choose calm, clarity, and compassion toward others in moments we maybe want to go for the jugular, overexplain, or run for the hills?

As you can see in [Figure I.1](#), the text inside the large circle is what we usually focus on when it comes to communication—the automatic reaction or default reaction. This means we spend a lot of time trying to fix this part by learning how to say the right thing and listen in the correct way so as not to ruffle any feathers. However, changing our default reaction and saying the “right thing” and listening more skillfully isn’t possible to do or maintain until we learn more about this little circle down at the bottom—the space in between.

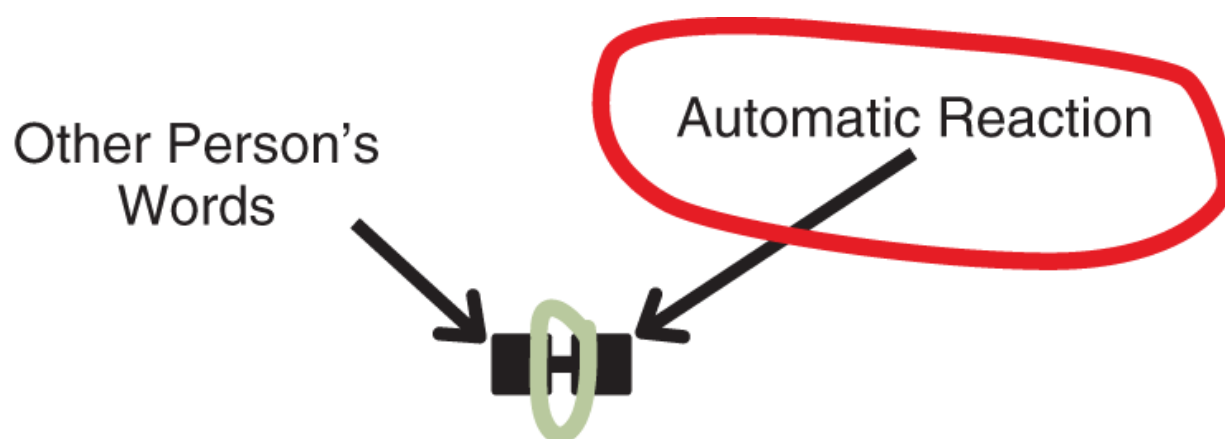


FIGURE I.1 Old focus of communication (big circle) vs. new focus of communication (little circle).

This little circle is the key to disrupting the speed at which heated moments begin to unravel. If we can master this moment and put our attention here, then we can handle whatever challenging conversation comes our way in a way that we respect and others admire.

What is this space in between? A pause.

You might be thinking, right, *Right, I've heard this before*, and it's because you likely have. It's easy advice that has been handed down from generation to generation, and it goes something like this, “All you have to do is pause before you speak.” How many times have you heard it said? And usually within a bulleted list on someone's PowerPoint or as a subheading with a dedicated paragraph within a book or as advice from a friend or parent. The suggestion is a good one, though it's normally glossed over and not given much attention, because it sounds so simple to do. Well, here's the newsflash: it's not simple at all. If we all were able to pause in these hard conversations, then we wouldn't be seeing so many adult temper tantrums in

the headlines. Pausing is not something we inherently know how to do or can do. It's also not something others teach us how to do, especially in heated conversations.

Until now.

This book is here to help you stay cool in tough situations by learning how to pause. A simple concept that is hard to implement without direction.

This book isn't based on theories; it's based on my own experience of learning how to show up differently in tough conversations. It took me a while to admit that in challenging conversations I would get passive-aggressive, dismissive, defensive, and give others the silent treatment. I would leave these moments feeling stressed, upset, knowing I was now going to have to repair the situation somehow. I read all the books, took tons of classes, went to retreats, had coaches, but it was one weekend seminar in New York when I had my aha moment. That weekend I was introduced to meditation and mindfulness, and what I figured out was how my reactivity began way before words ever left my mouth; my reactivity began in my body.

I started then playing around with mindfulness practices to regulate my body within a difficult and intense interaction to calm my reactivity. By doing this what I learned was how to carve out, extend, and make bigger that little circle from [Figure I.1](#). I was learning how to pause and expand my capacity for discomfort in uncomfortable conversations so I could interact skillfully within them.

When I figured this out I felt as if I'd unlocked some kind of superpower—a place within that I didn't know existed and where I had more control of the chaos and uncertainty I felt in those interactions. Suddenly, I wasn't reacting defensively or passive-aggressively anymore—instead, I was choosing my words more intentionally, which was changing my relationships and repairing broken ones. I loved the freedom that came with this new practice, and I wanted to share it. For over a decade now, I've been working with CEOs, company presidents, HR professionals, financial planners, managers, educators, parents, caregivers, therapists, executives, nonprofits, and coaches—showing them how to create this pause within strenuous conversations, giving them in-the-moment practices to not get caught up in the cyclone that intense discussions can become.

I've had experiences in the past working with pretty volatile bosses, and all the time I wondered what I could do to change the situation, or better yet, how to avoid the reactive outbursts; if I just spoke in this way or maybe didn't go on too long, then the anger wouldn't erupt, and I wouldn't go in to questioning my sense of self and value added to the team and company. I put a lot of pressure on myself to make meetings and one-on-one interactions easy and relaxed, though when I look back now, yes, I did have a responsibility for how I was speaking and reacting, but so too did the one in the leadership role. For years I figured out how to manage my bosses' yelling, passive-aggression, and dismissiveness, and it shouldn't have been my responsibility to do so.

Most of the people I work with want to do better for their teams, clients, families, and partners, and they know that difficult conversations are essential conversations for growth. They want to speak with calm, clarity, compassion, and confidence, and they want to cultivate a space of trust and understanding in critical situations. It's a tall order and a high standard to have, though possible with the practices in this book. Maybe you picked up this book because you want to feel more confident within stressful conversations or you want to make sure you're being an intentional and responsive leader that keeps communication fluid and accessible with those around you. Perhaps you're looking for new ways to build trust and credibility. Or better yet, you want to create more engagement, dialogue, discussion, and to reignite meetings and talks where differing ideas bring about clarity and innovation. Whatever the reason is that brought you to this book, know that I'm glad you're here, and I'm excited to share this superpower with you—it's life changing.