



TWO WAYS TO HANDLE THE SAME TRIGGER

Reacting vs. Responding

From across the table, both look like you said something back. What happens in the gap beforehand is what's different.

Reacting

- My body answers before my brain does — jaw tight, voice sharp, before I've decided anything.
- I say the first sentence that comes to mind, then spend the rest of the conversation managing what I just said.
- I answer what I think they meant, already worked up about it.
- Winning the exchange quietly becomes the goal.
- I bring up two other things that went wrong last month, because I'm not just reacting to this one thing anymore.
- My voice does something I didn't choose — louder, flatter, faster.
- I regret the tone before I regret the words.
- I apologize afterward for how I said it, not for what needed saying.
- The other person leaves managing my reaction instead of hearing the point.

Responding

- I feel the same jolt, but I let it move through me for a few seconds before I speak.
- I let a beat of silence sit there instead of filling it with the first thing that comes to mind.
- I ask "can you say more about that" before I answer anything.
- Solving the actual problem stays the goal, even when I'm irritated.
- I stay on what's actually in front of us today.
- My voice sounds close to how it does on a normal day, because I waited until it would.
- I can stand behind the tone a day later, not just the words.
- If I apologize afterward, it's for something specific, not a blanket "sorry I was harsh."
- The other person leaves having actually heard the point.

The gap between the trigger and the words is usually under five seconds. That's the entire distance between these two columns.