

Chapter 43

Strategic Action in Hot Moments

Lee Warren

Most of us, when hot moments occur, simply react. Our minds stop working. We revert to our oldest fallback behaviors, usually some version or other of fight or flight. Some of us lash out and say things that we later regret. Others retreat, check out, and take themselves and their ideas out of play. The objective, instead, is to be strategic — to get one's mind working again and to devise a response or an intervention that is effective.

Hot Moment Scenarios

- In a political science class, the teacher was discussing with students why a nation might go to war. All of the usual reasons surfaced early: to protect itself, to maintain borders, to provide safety to citizens. He asked a number of questions to take the discussion further, finally asking, “Well, what about genocide? What about the Holocaust? If we had known it was happening, would that have been a reason to go to war?” When no one answered, he called on his most vocal student, an African American woman. She said, “No.” “Why?” he asked. She answered, “I’m not sure it happened like they said it did, and if it did maybe they had their reasons.”

The teacher’s mind stopped; he could think of no response to this, and three years later, when I interviewed him, he was still uncertain how he might have responded. At the time, he retreated from the moment and addressed neither the issues nor the student.

- A choral director recently led a dress rehearsal of a very complicated piece of music that involved four pianos, six percussionists, four soloists, and an amateur chorus of 100. Things did not fall into place easily; the man was intent on a good or nearly perfect performance, and he became increasingly frustrated with the chorus. Not all mem-

bers were as well prepared as they should have been, and many were still stuck in the music, rather than being free enough to look up at the director.

The director got more and more frustrated. His mind stopped. He remained enmeshed in his feelings. Instead of getting some perspective on the moment and thinking strategically about how to pull the thing together, he ended up yelling at the chorus, frequently and at length.

The central task is to maintain some distance from the loaded situation, and by so doing to think more clearly in order to see how to use the moment to enhance the learning of the students or of the group.

These things are of course, much more easily said than done. This essay will suggest some techniques for achieving this goal, while also recognizing how difficult this process is and how long and through what painful experiences it takes to learn such techniques. As a bumper sticker I saw on a car parked outside a therapists' office read: "Oh no, not another learning opportunity!!" Opportunities to do this work lie all around us all the time, ready for the taking.¹

Tips for Being Strategic

1. Stop!!

When a hot moment arrives, and we realize that our mind has ceased functioning, the first thing to do is simply to stop. Pause for as long as you need to, in order to get up and running again. Breathe deeply, from the center, and get your breath moving again. When we are under stress, our breath becomes shallow, which leads in a circular fashion to increasing feelings of stress. So our objective here is to calm ourselves through deep breathing, and thus to get our minds functioning again.

¹Many of the ideas discussed here have come from my work with Professor Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, from Heifetz' first book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, and from the book he wrote with Marty Linsky, [(2002). *Leadership on the Line*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press]. Ideas and concepts derived from this work include: Holding Steady, Getting on the Balcony, Self vs. Role, The Song Beneath the Words, Allies and Confidants. I am also deeply indebted to the work on "Strategic Performance" that I do with Nancy Houfek, Head of Voice and Speech at the American Repertory Theater at Harvard University.

Once we are breathing deeply, we need to Hold Steady. To be still and at one with ourselves. To be centered. If we can hold ourselves steady, we have a shot at holding the group steady and thus enabling it to do some work. If, on the other hand, we seem to be flustered or off our center, the group will be unlikely to learn together from the experience.

2. Get up on the Balcony

In order to gain the distance necessary to be strategic, get up on the balcony and off the dance floor, and observe carefully. Most of the time we are on the dance floor, in the thick of things, dancing with our partners, moving with the music, bumping into people from time to time. And we can see very little while on the dance floor — just the few people who are near us. So we need to get up on the balcony, to see what the patterns are: who is dancing with whom, what are the groupings or factions, whether the music is working for everyone or only for a few, and who is not dancing.

If the teacher in the political science class had been able to get up on the balcony and out of the confusion of his own personal reaction to the student's remarks about the holocaust, he would have been more likely to have found a way to turn her remarks into an important learning experience for all the students. Likewise, if the choral director had been able to get up on the balcony and off the dance floor of his own emotions, he might have been able to devise a strategy for leading the group through the difficult music.

Once on the balcony, we need to listen for the song beneath the words: who is saying what, who gets to speak, and what is the subtext. Often students are unable to say things clearly, as they are just beginning to be able to articulate their thoughts and feelings. So listening carefully for what they are really saying can help us deal with the real issues, not with the clumsily stated issues. And of course, sometimes people in groups deliberately hide their true agenda. Listening for it can, again, help to develop an effective strategy. Who knows what the student in the political science class was really thinking, or how figuring that out might have led to a more productive follow-up conversation in the class?

Only when we are sure we know what is going on should we make a move, and even then we need to check carefully on our timing, our tone, and our word choice. Acting too fast, moving in without careful planning when things are hot, can often make things worse, whereas a carefully timed and worded intervention can often turn the situation around.

- A faculty member, who is known for barging in at faculty meetings and stating her views up front and then wondering why no one ever follows her lead, tried a new strategy recently.

Her department was meeting to decide who to hire for a joint appointment between their department and the women's studies program. Going into the meeting, her agenda was to see if there might be a way to get both of the top two candidates. But instead of speaking right up with her agenda, she stopped and she listened. What she heard was lots of bashing of the number two candidate, even though that person was a very strong candidate.

After some time, she stood up, walked to the door, and said, "I have to leave; students are waiting for me. But before I go, I have something to say. I notice that we have been bashing the number two person for some time now." And she stopped, after her simple, descriptive sentence. The group stopped and was astonished to recognize that this was true. And then she said, "And if we continue to do this, we might close doors that we would like to leave open in the future. For example, we might at some time wish to have both of these women on our faculty." At this plainly stated, non-aggressive, suggestion, the group made this idea its agenda item and discussed it for the next three hours, and for the next three months.

Her timing, her word choice, and her tone were perfectly chosen for this situation, and meant that her agenda indeed became the agenda of the group.

3. Don't Personalize!

Personalizing hinders us from seeing the situation clearly and thinking strategically about what to do. Yet most of us tend to personalize situations and we do this in several ways.

A. Self vs. Role

One of the ways we personalize is that we do not clearly enough distinguish self from role. So when someone attacks us in personal terms, we take it personally. But almost always, the attack is REALLY about us in a specific role and/or about the issues we represent. As the teacher, for example, we are the authority in the room and represent authority to students. Or we represent something else in our role to any particular student or group of students. So an attack is likely not about us as individuals, no matter how personal it sounds, but about us in role. Usually the attack is more about the attacker and his or her preoccupations than about us.

- I was once teaching a class with a famous professor, a man who was senior in rank to me. We taught the class together, both sitting in the

Teaching Inclusively

front of the room. About half way through the semester, it became evident to me that half the women in the room thought I walked on water, and that every word I said was a pearl. The other half thought I was the worst possible example of how women work with men, a devastating criticism.

After considerable thought, I realized that the women who liked what I said were women in their 30s and 40s, with considerable work experience, who were able to hear what I was saying. The women who thought I was terrible were young women in their early 20s, who had little or no work experience, and who were terrified of how they were going to interact with men in the work place.

So the reactions of these women to me had more to do with them, and who they were and at what life stage, than with me personally. There was certainly room for reflection in the criticism, but although it sounded personal, interpreting it in personal terms would have inhibited me in the classroom and would have prevented a discussion of the topic. Interpreting it as a role issue made it possible to discuss it openly and for all of us to learn from it.

Sometimes we are attacked because we represent a particular issue, faction, or perspective that the attacker does not like. He or she attacks personally and very effectively takes the attention of both the individual and of the group off the issue. Because the attack distracts the group, the issue is not dealt with, or the perspective is lost. Taking the attack personally keeps the focus on the individual rather than on the issues.

- A woman who was the Head of Environmental Affairs at the state level received a phone call one day from the leader of the state senate. He inexplicably started yelling at her, so loudly that people down the hall from him thought he was having a heart attack, so loudly she could not hold the phone to her ear. She had no idea why he was doing this, and afterwards consulted with others and tried to find allies, in vain. The Senate leader repeated this many times, and blocked her at every point. The only reason she could find for his actions was that she was a “new girl” and he was an “old boy” who did not want women in state government. Her hands were tied; she was unable to accomplish much in the following three years of her tenure.

Several years later, during a debriefing, she was asked what issues were on the table that might have made him so angry and so determined to block her way. She had never asked the question and had no answer. After about 20 minutes of questioning, she was aston-

ished to remember that there had been an issue: it had to do with park fees for handicapped people. The senate leader had a nephew with a handicap.

It would have been much easier to deal with that issue than to have taken it personally, attributed the problem to gender (about which she could do nothing), and be immobilized for the next three years. It is almost always easier to be strategic about issues than about the personal.

B. Psychologizing

A second way we personalize is when someone else behaves badly. When they are immoral, destructive, self-aggrandizing, and preventing the group from getting work done, we get caught up in judging their character. Often, we psychologize. We meet our friends at lunch or over coffee and analyze the personality of the person at length and with great pleasure; we conclude that the person is obsessive, or manic, or borderline, or had a lousy childhood. Or they are simply unethical human beings, bad people. We go on and on with the analysis, sometimes believing that we are being especially insightful or even kind in our understanding.

But psychologizing in this way, while lots of fun, is not useful. It does not advance the work we are doing, or move us towards our purpose. It is far more important to pay attention to the issues. Almost always, such people represent an issue, a faction, or a perspective we do not want to think about or acknowledge. By focusing on his or her character, we avoid the issue. We forget that it is *much* easier to deal with issues than with character. We cannot change another's psychology; we can think strategically about issues.

Sometimes in the classroom, when a student acts out or seems to have an agenda of his or her own, or makes an outrageous or off-topic comment, it is easy to get caught up thinking about the student's personality, rather than thinking about what issues he or she is raising that need to be aired in order to have a full range of perspectives on a topic, or in order to know how students are reacting to the course or the classroom dynamics.

- I once worked in an organization in which a woman came to work who just did not fit in. She never seemed to grasp the environment in which we were working and would consistently blunder, to the detriment of our department, which was already a little fragile in its hold on the institution. She would stay home on Tuesdays to write poetry. She did not pull her weight. She did not work well with her peers. We were a group where people brought an idea to the table,

Teaching Inclusively

everyone worked it over, and then the person who proposed the idea left with a better fleshed-out plan of action. This woman would bring her idea, we would all discuss it, and she would say, "You don't trust me." She was trouble.

We reacted by psychologizing about her. We diagnosed her psychological and her moral character. The situation escalated, to the point where one colleague changed the locks on her door. We scapegoated her. And finally, we drove her out.

In retrospect, I think she probably was not a good fit for the organization. And she was, I am sure, a borderline personality. But I am ashamed of our collective scapegoating behavior, and I believe that by focusing on her character, we avoided the issues that she represented. This was an organization where the rules for working and the rules for success were very unclear. What exactly was the job? How did you get the boss' approval? How was success defined? Was this a nine to five job, or a job that was defined by the task? How many tasks were expected, and how hard did you have to work?

These are serious questions, and this woman, by her behavior, represented these issues. We scapegoated her; consequently, we never dealt with the issues. The personal was much too juicy and much too seductive, and the issues were much too difficult. The result was that we practiced a common form of work avoidance.

C. Internalizing

A third way we personalize is by taking others' behavior personally. When someone else behaves badly, we react emotionally by internalizing their behavior. We get mad or depressed, or we let their behavior beat us down, and we give up. Here again we lose sight of our purpose and get locked into emotions that lead nowhere. The other's behavior has been successful at keeping us from our agenda.

- A professor who is the only woman in her department has a long history of reacting energetically to the bad behavior of some of her colleagues. When one of them does or says something she considers unfair or immoral, she explodes. She goes directly into fight mode, moves immediately to the extreme position, and threatens a trip to the dean at the drop of a hat. As a result, she has no allies in the department meetings, as it is not safe to ally with her publicly, although people do in private.

One day recently, she told me that now she "gets it." When someone behaves badly, she doesn't react at all. She notices their behavior

and begins immediately to think about how to achieve her purpose despite this behavior. She begins to think strategically: Can she go around him, over him, through him? How can she get the job done, knowing that this person is likely to continue to behave badly? Her dispassion allows her to move forward effectively.

- In an Afro Am class, close to the end of the semester, the group was discussing Louis Farrakhan. Near the end of the discussion, a Jewish woman said that she could see how Farrakhan appealed to many black men, but that she was certain he would not appeal to educated black men. In the class were six African American men. They turned on her, attacking her verbally. At the end of the class, she fled down the hall, in tears.

The teacher was an African American man. He could have taken the woman's comments personally — it would have been easy to do. Instead, he ran down the hall after the woman, and said to her, "Rachel, if you are going to get it about African American life in the 21st century, you are going to have to really listen to what those guys have to say and think about why they are saying it." And then he went back into the room, where the six men were still talking, and said, "Guys, if you are going to get it about life in the 21st century, you are going to have to really listen to what Rachel is saying, and think about why she is saying it."

By not taking Rachel's comments personally, this teacher managed to turn a very hot moment into a tremendous learning opportunity.

4. Prepare!!

One of the best ways to keep one's mind in action when a hot moment arrives is to prepare oneself beforehand — in several ways. It is when we are blindsided by the unexpected that our minds most often stop.

A. Predict

The most obvious form of preparation is to think ahead, to see what could possibly arise, given the topic at hand. Some topics easily lead to hot confrontations, and part of the preparation for the class can be thinking through what might come up and what one would do or say in the event. Some classrooms, regardless of the topic, are known to be more difficult for some students: the sciences are often unfriendly to women and minorities, for example, in part because of insensitivities of some of the young men in the room. A teacher intent upon keeping all students in the room, will foresee this and prepare strategies for dealing with it.

B. Know Yourself

One of the best, and least addressed, ways to prepare for teaching is to know yourself. For hot moments, it is important to know what pushes your buttons, what biases you have, and what kinds of things said or done can make your mind stop. Knowing these things allows you to devise strategies for handling hot moments in advance. Simply recognizing such a moment and your familiar reaction to it is a first step. The next step is to have strategies such as the following in mind in advance:

- Stop and take a breath
- Acknowledge the moment, name the elephant on the table
- Check that you have heard and/or understood correctly — restate, or ask the other to restate
- Model respectful listening and engagement
- Take the issue off the individual; make it a general one
- Ask students to get up on the balcony and think about what they have learned from the moment
- Use the moment as an opportunity to discuss the learning environment in the group
- Have partners to debrief with afterwards
- Defer — tell students you will deal with the issue, but deal with it later — in order to gather your wits and make a plan that will be effective

C. Know Your Purpose

In addition to knowing oneself, it is very important to have a clear idea of what your purpose is as you enter a classroom or a meeting — your purpose for the course overall and your purpose for that specific session. This is easier said than done but is critical to success in hot moments.

Most of us enter the classroom with a general sense of what we hope to accomplish, for example, a discussion about Napoleon's march on Moscow or about some aspect of micro-economics. But what specifically do we want students to learn, to walk away with at the end of the hour? What is the big takeaway?

Knowing your purpose, and keeping your eye on it, will enable you to turn the hot moment into a learning opportunity that is on target with the topic of the day. It will enable you to look for the part in the hot moment that reflects your overall game plan.

- The teacher of the student who said she did not think it was a good idea to go to war to prevent the Holocaust might, if he could have thought in the moment, have used her comment to launch a discussion exactly in line with his topic of why nations go to war. Should

we go to war for others when we have not taken care of our own business? Should we go to war to protect groups other than our own? Both these questions are at the heart of current foreign policy: think of the recent debates over action or non-action in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Iraq.

D. Know your Students

It is also critical to know your students, if you are to effectively manage them in hot moments and help them to deep learning. This means knowing both how the group works as a group and knowing the students individually. Knowing the group will help you know how to handle the group, what tone to take, what boundaries to draw, and what strategies might be more or less effective in the moment. Knowing students as individuals will help you know how best to help them learn from the moment. Failure to know your students can lead to a missed opportunity, or worse, to damage and misconceptions.

Some prepare their students for the hard places by addressing easier issues first, coaching them in skills for intergroup dialogue, and modeling such behaviors as respectful listening, holding steady, learning from the moment, asking questions, and not personalizing the issue. We rarely think that it is our job in the college classroom to teach social skills, but in fact that is one of the most important things that students do learn, mostly by watching the professor and learning how to debate and contribute and disagree and challenge productively. Coaching explicitly and consciously could only enhance this process. Our purpose here is to help students to have constructive, cross-racial dialogue.

E. Have Allies and Confidants

It is always important to have allies when we are heading into unknown or hot territory, people who can support us, give us advice, sympathize, tell us what we have done wrong or right without animus or judgment. This is especially true when working across race, class, or gender lines, when it can be life-saving to have people of the other group to help us understand and manage the situation in the most effective ways. We all need help getting out of our own heads and our own, by definition, limited perceptions, to see the larger picture and to understand what is really going on in any loaded situation. We all need help in thinking about how to handle the tough places. Doing this kind of work alone can be an invitation for disaster and martyrdom.

We also need confidants, people who are usually outside the workplace and who are on our team no matter what, who care more about us than about the issues at hand. They are the people we can vent with, cry with, to whom

Teaching Inclusively

we can say the most awful things about the situation, and who will tell us how wrong we have been or how wonderful we are, because they care about us.

Do not confuse allies with confidants. Allies are people who are with us on particular issues, and not with us on others. Allies are critically important, but it is also critically important to remember the limits of the alliance. Do not tell allies everything; use confidants for that purpose.

Conclusion

These suggestions are not easy to accomplish. They are very hard and, for many of us, take a lifetime of practice – many trials, many errors. It is important to remember that we do not have to be perfect when we approach the hard places; we never will be. Having some ideas of different ways of approaching mind-stopping moments, however, can help us begin to turn the corner toward effective and even, finally, pleasurable strategic responses to hot moments. This surely is the goal: to take away the terror many experience in the face of a hot moment, and to increase the chances of turning it into a learning opportunity.

Lee Warren is an associate director of the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University.

Reprint

Teaching Inclusively

*Resources for Course, Department &
Institutional Change in Higher Education*

Edited by Mathew L. Ouellett

Copyright © 2005 by New Forums Press, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Teaching inclusively : resources for course, department and institutional change in higher education / edited by Mathew L. Ouellett.

p. cm. — (New Forums faculty development series)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-58107-113-2

1. Multicultural education—United States. 2. College teaching—Social aspects—United States. 3. Education, Higher—United States—Curricula. I. Ouellett, Mathew L., 1957- II. Series.

LC1099.3.T436 2005

378.1'2—dc22

2005025136

This book may be ordered in bulk quantities at discount from New Forums Press, Inc., P.O. Box 876, Stillwater, OK 74076 [Federal I.D. No. 73 1123239]. Printed in the United States of America.

International Standard Book Number: 1-58107-113-2

Order at www.newforums.com