June 29, 2015

**Coping With Verbal Abuse**

**Academic politics are vicious, but that doesn’t mean you have to be**



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By Robert J. Sternberg

The saying "Academic politics are so vicious precisely because the stakes are so small" has been [attributed](http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/08/18/acad-politics) to many different people, including Henry Kissinger, Wallace Sayre, Jesse Unruh, Samuel Johnson, and Laurence J. Peter, among others. Whoever said it first had a point. When you choose a career in academe, you need to be prepared not only for rough-and-tumble politics, but also for the verbal abuse that goes with it.

That abuse comes in many different forms: book reviews, referee reports on journal submissions, evaluations of grant proposals, questions and comments during presentations, offhand comments by less-than-collegial colleagues, and on and on.

I learned early in my career what academe could be like: When I submitted my dissertation as a book, one of the two reviews I received was a 17-page, single-spaced critique attempting to be both professionally devastating and personally demeaning. The critique made it sound like my potential selection by the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the world’s stupidest person (or, perhaps, creature) would have been too kindly a fate for me. Later, during my years as a dean, provost, and president, I came to the conclusion that the No. 1 trait needed to be in administration was an extremely thick skin.

Some academics react to abuse by giving it right back: They become abusive themselves. As an academic and a psychologist, I see three profound disadvantages to that strategy. First, my research and that of others shows that when you react to abuse with more abuse, the conflict usually escalates. So if you thought to gain a winning hand through counter-abuse, that rarely works. Second, if the abusive person has any power over the target at all, the target who reacts in kind is likely to suffer even more. Reacting to abuse abusively can be a real career-ender, especially for people in less than powerful positions. Third, how much pride can you really take in sinking to the level of your abuser? Is that really who you are?

I have thought long and hard about how to cope personally with the stream of verbal abuse one can expect to encounter during the course of an academic career. What follows are some alternatives. Of greatest concern here is not what you say to the abuser, but rather with what you tell yourself. Telling off your abuser may feel temporarily satisfying, but the following approaches pay off in the long run.

**Ignore the abuse and, if possible, the abuser.** Do you really want to get sucked into a tit-for-tat with a known jerk? Often, it is better just to ignore the person if you possibly can. If you can’t, then try to respond rationally and at least ignore the abusive words or the tone in which they were spoken. You have little to gain by slinging mud in return because it will only be hurled back at you.

**Recognize that you are not the problem.** Some people are, unfortunately, equal-opportunity abusers. They will do it to you; they’ll do it to someone else. The way they act speaks poorly of them, not of you. And everyone around both of you will know it.

During my years as an assistant professor, my department had a faculty member who yelled a lot at people and even threw things. At first, I was amazed at how people tolerated him. Eventually, I realized that people had just written him off long ago. He was professionally respected because he was a good scholar, but he had lost the personal respect of almost everyone in the department.

**React with kindness and compassion.** Sometimes you can throw an abuser seriously off guard by reacting to a rant with kindness rather than aggression. Whether or not you believe in Christian theology, turning the other cheek can be a remarkably effective way of knocking the wind out of someone who is abusive.

That’s what I did with the scholar who wrote that scathing review of my first book. We actually became reasonably good colleagues, although my overtures certainly did not change the kind of person he was and still is today.

**It’s not always personal; sometimes it’s strictly business.** As a scholar, my views annoy and even enrage other scholars whose opinions are opposed to my own. They have written, and probably will continue to write, damning critiques of what they see as my fundamentally wrongheaded views.

I have come to realize, however, that their arguments, for the most part, are directed not at me as a person but at me as a proponent of ideas with which they disagree. In most cases, it’s not worth taking their criticism personally, because it’s not personal.

**Listen to what is said; ignore the way it is said.** I’m told that journal reviews in my field of psychology tend, at times, to be more savage than in many other fields. And I’ve gotten some pretty savage reviews of my journal submissions.

But it’s the rare critique that has absolutely nothing I can learn from. Even if the tone is acerbic, often there is some substance behind at least some of the criticisms. As I have gotten older, I have found myself, more and more, focusing on whatever useful substance is there in the remarks and ignoring the rest.

**View occasional abuse as just a cost of doing business.** Consider it a tax for being in a career you like or even love. As an administrator, I used to tell myself that it was just jolly if people were abusive toward me: That’s why I was being paid the big bucks.

Now, as a faculty member, I’m no longer paid the big bucks. But I’m in a field I love doing a job that pays me to have a good time doing teaching and research. So I put up with the occasional attack because that just comes with the territory. It’s like paying a tax for the privilege of being an academic.

**Consider verbal abuse as a sign you are being creative and doing your job right.** People who are creative defy the crowd — they refuse to see things the way that others do just because the others see them that way. Defying the crowd, in any field, antagonizes people. They don’t like it that you dare to think or act differently from the way they do. And they may feel that you deserve to be punished for your defiance. If you point out flaws in any kind of system, don’t expect participants in that system to be grateful. Rather, expect them to be angry and even to lash out.

That is true not only in academe, but in life. As Thomas Kuhn showed, for example, much of science is paradigmatic, and scientists who defy established paradigms tend to find themselves criticized and even belittled. If you are enraging others to the point of their verbally thrashing you, consider the possibility that their reactions show that you are doing something right. You are being creative, which is exactly what you presumably were hired for.

**View the culprit’s behavior as an opportunity to learn something useful about him or her.** We tend to think of verbal abusers as a problem for us. But they may present one bright spot: At least we know how they feel toward us and/or our work.

Much worse are the people who are nice to us, to our faces, and then stab us in back. So consider yourself lucky you know where the abuser stands rather than thinking he or she is your pal and then possibly giving ammunition to a hidden enemy.

**Look in the mirror and ask yourself whether you are guilty of the same bad behavior.** Sometimes we are quick to fault others for the very actions we commit ourselves. Allow any occasion on which you feel abused to be a reminder not to do unto others what is being done to you.

**Use the incident as a teachable moment to show the abuser a better way to handle anger.** If you are an academic, chances are you teach. Why not use this noxious moment as a way to teach the abuser how to be civil in a disagreement rather than degenerating into a scold? You can be a role model toward colleagues, including superiors, not just toward students.

No one approach is going to work every time in handling abusive people. But these strategies may mitigate the damage they can cause. It is within your power to either react in a way that leads you (and possibly the abuser) to walk away whole and possibly even learn from the situation, or let this incident hurt or possibly destroy you. I would hope the choice is clear.

Sure, academic politics are vicious … but so what? You can handle it.

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