

## Thick Skin and the Q-Tip

Eventually you will be criticized in the workplace. It may take the form of being screamed at, ridiculed, or sarcastically spoken to. Not all bosses critique in a positive, helpful manner all the time. When you face rude comments, you must show that you can handle it. Women are especially susceptible to taking it personally, getting offended, and sometimes crying. You worry and brood. You obsess about it. You begin to doubt yourself. Soon, you're an emotional wreck and think that you have ruined everything.

As a good worker and, especially, as a leader, you cannot get offended at every little remark. You may never survive the job. Your boss needs to know that you can take criticism. As someone who has been screamed at and called names, I had to develop a thick skin to survive in the military – at boot camp, at war, and at the office. I remember drill sergeants screaming in my face to see if I would break down or stand my ground. Being the daughter of a Marine, I grew up watching my father use this technique to see if his men were warriors or wimps. Therefore, when Drill Sergeants screamed at me, I stood tall, shoulders back, a stoic look on my face, and thought to myself, “You’re not even close to my Dad.” That became my private mantra.

It’s true in the workplace too. You must develop a thick skin. Men lambast other men and twenty minutes later, it’s over. They’re joking it up again. They have the thick skin not to take it personally. Let’s define thick skin: it is the ability to let things roll off your back and not take hurtful comments personally. Having a thick skin permits you to separate insults from productive criticism. It empowers you to improve your performance. Ninety-nine percent of the time, it isn’t personal. It may be feedback or it may be a boss who is letting off steam. I’ll address the 99% first and then the 1% nasty personal attack.

Strategies for a Thick Skin – choose a private mantra that works for you:

1. Q-Tip (special thanks to Mary Erlain, President, Peak Development Strategies who shared this with me): **Quit Thinking It’s Personal**. The criticism may be a reflection of your work or of the boss’s day. Don’t obsess but learn; and as you’re being yelled at: think Q-TIP. Some women even keep Q-tips taped to their computers or in their pockets to remind themselves: Quit thinking it’s personal.
2. “I’m ok.” Your boss may be having a bad day. Maybe her boss yelled at her. You don’t always know the whole story. Stay calm and remind yourself that you’re fine.
3. “This too shall pass.” Don’t waste time fretting or obsessing. Take the energy and put it into doing your job.
4. If someone is swearing at you (very unprofessional in the workplace) try thinking, “I’m an adult. I don’t have tantrums.”

5. If you find yourself obsessing over an incident, repeat to yourself, “Let it go. Let it go.”
6. If there is truth in the remarks, think, “Thank you, I’m learning.”
7. A fun mantra (and favorite of mine): “I’m a warrior not a wimp.’

These mantras help shape your demeanor to project confidence and professionalism. You will earn and deserve the reputation for having “courage under fire.”

Let’s not forget the One Percent who wants to destroy yourself confidence. I worked with (not for) a man who was a terrible manager who loved to go for the jugular of anyone who was not of equal rank. Every day and sometimes every hour, he lambasted someone. Fortunately, I had my thick skin on and when it was my turn (and that’s how I kept it in perspective), I would freeze my face into a non-committal look and think, “Gosh, this says so much about you and nothing about me.” One day, I googled him and saw that his father and older brother were huge successes internationally. I realized that much of his behavior stemmed from his own insecurity. Then, when he turned nasty, I got the bland look and thought (not said – that would have triggered worse behavior), “I’m sorry the only way you can feel good is to put others down –it’s your problem not mine. It’s your problem, not mine.” He used to complain to my boss about me but it only raised the opinion everyone had of me because I kept my cool. One day at a staff meeting, my boss asked if the guy was going to find fault with me again. I answered, “Yes, Sir! And if I knew what it was about, I would tell you now and we could get it over with!” Everyone laughed. We knew it wasn’t about me, it was about him.

Remember, when tempers flare and harsh words attack you, a Q-TIP can be your shield– Quit Taking It Personally.

## Defining a True Leader During a Crisis: How to be decisive

*“Indecision may or may not be my problem.”-- Jimmy Buffett*

I must admit that I love watching *The Cupcake Wars* while working out. It's a guilty pleasure. In *The Cupcake Wars*, the pairs of contestants face bizarre themes, strange ingredients and, after making past the first two rounds, team members unknown to them. The leader must direct her/his team in extremely short time periods in designing and delivering creative and tasty confections. It is a crisis, and it is a wonderful metaphor of crisis leadership. Unknowns and time crunch are ingredients to any crisis. Responding quickly, appropriately and with the results desired are essential in leading during a crisis.

When I reflect on Hurricane Sandy, I thought of the two different leadership styles showed. The Mayor of New York tried to go with business as usual, more concerned about powering the marathon than providing power to the people. The Governor of New Jersey embraced all support to support the people of his state. I sympathize with “the show must go on” attitude shown at first in NYC but, as leaders in crisis, we take care of the people first. Period.

What must a leader do to be successful during a crisis? First, you must create a positive team environment. Negative teams will bring negative results. Therefore, set the vision of “We are here to save lives, property, and business. We have the opportunity to save the (choose one or more: world, city, company, school, etc.). We can save (fill in the blank). We will save...!” Ensure your team members embrace the heroic mission.

The next step is the step that truly defines a leader during crisis. That step is to take decisive action – or as Nike so well put it – just do it! Many “leaders” freeze. I've witnessed “leaders” who panic because, “I don't have enough information, or I have too much information.” They are right. They have too much and too little information but that is no excuse to not move forward. Freezing is not an option. Decisiveness spells success. Being decisive doesn't mean being gung-ho. It means making firm, reasoned decisions that you have confidence in and that you stick with. It doesn't always mean making an instant decision, but it does mean making a decision in a timely manner.

How do you become a decisive leader? Here are some steps to becoming a decisive leader. These steps should be repeatedly periodically with shorter time periods and more difficult problems.

1. **Set Time Limit** – Force yourself to make decisions under tight ‘deadlines’. You don't need a lot of time to make sound decisions, you just *think* you do. See Malcolm Gladwell's “Blink” on split second decision making. The first time give yourself and the team an hour. As you repeat the process, shorten the time.

2. **Design the scenario** – Make the first scenario easy and realistic. Each time you repeat this process, go with a more difficult scenario. Work your way to worst case scenario.
3. **Practice, Practice, Practice** –Force yourself to make *fast* decisions. You will get better over time. Start with small decisions like, “What if there a shortage of (fill in the blank)?” Set a timer. Next time, escalate the incident. Schedule this **often**. Here’s how you can get started:
  - a. Define the situation.
  - b. Evaluate the situation.
  - c. Evaluate the options.
  - d. Consider the consequences.
4. **Think Out Loud** – grab some fresh paper. Clearly define the crisis at the top of the page, write down your options and assumptions, followed by any other thoughts or concerns you have. Just dump all your thoughts to the paper as they enter your mind. Do not edit, just write it all down. Don’t worry if your thoughts are unclear or do not flow, just keep going. Now, take the crisis to the team. Have them do the same on their own. Then do Step 4.
5. **Conduct a Tabletop Exercise** – Bring everyone together and within a define time, solve the crisis. A tabletop exercise simulates an emergency situation in an informal, stress-free environment. The participants—usually people on a decision-making level—gather around a table to discuss general problems and procedures in the context of an emergency scenario. The focus is on training and familiarization with roles, procedures, or responsibilities. Gaps and overlaps in response can be identified.

Increase in decisiveness equates to increase in productivity. Recent research has found that firm decisions make you more productive. When you make a decision you can't reverse, you do a better job. You obviously can't know exactly what choices you'll be faced with in your life. But you can prepare as best as possible for what to do in a variety of situations. Just do it!

The added bonus is that when you have a plan in mind, you have a greater chance of survival and success.