

# WHY YOU NEED

# THE POWER OF THE PAUSE



*By Richard Huver*

Boy, you are having one hell of a day... in fact, it's been quite a week! You're stressed out, overworked, with deadlines that have already passed, and more work piling up. Suddenly, an e-mail pops up on your computer and before you even finish reading it, your blood pressure has spiked. Without thinking, you type up a nasty response and hit send. Your reaction to the e-mail was immediate, unconscious, reactive - and negative.



Later that day, or perhaps after you receive an escalated response to your email, you reread what you wrote. And you think, well, maybe I wouldn't word it *quite* the same way now. What happened? Why the immediate, negative reaction in the heat of the moment? And was there anything you could have done to stop this from happening?

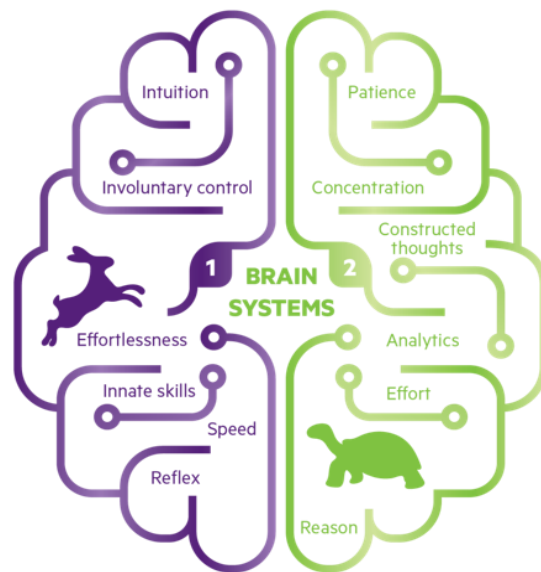
Believe it or not, there was a moment, a split second, between your action of reading the e-mail and your reaction that led you to type up a nasty response. It was so fast, you probably didn't even notice. But it was there. That split second was your opportunity to grab control of the situation. It was in that moment you could have exercised - the power of the pause. If you can learn to harness control of that split second, you will unlock the potential to decrease your stress, increase your productivity, and save your emotional

energy for better things. More importantly, you might de-escalate a situation before it escalates.

This may all sound nice in theory you say, but not that easy. I understand. But are there situations you look back on now that, in retrospect, you would have handled differently? Of course there are. I've been there, we've all been there. Which is why learning to use the power of the pause during the heat of the moment can be a very powerful tool for you, both professionally and personally.

## System 1 vs. System 2

Take heart. Your reaction to that e-mail was, in some respects, not your fault. You can blame your System 1 brain. Neuroscientists believe we have two parts of our brains that function differently, generally referred to as System 1 and System 2. System 1 is fast, instinctive, automatic and emotional. System 1 can solve the problem  $2 + 2$  or drive a car on an empty road without "thinking." By contrast, System 2 is slower, more deliberative and calculating. How much is  $9 \times 12$  minus 16? Parking your car into a tight space? These require your System 2 brain.



At least 95% of our decision making is subconscious, pre-rational and emotional and is made by our System 1 brain. As such, not only are the decisions made in the blink of an eye, but they can be prone to errors. If we force ourselves to slow down and use our System 2 brain, we usually produce more reliable results that are less prone to error, particularly in these heat-of-the-moment situations. Why? Because our response will be more cerebral, more deliberative and less emotional.

Let's face it. We are required to react to things all day long. Our kids are acting up. Someone just cut us off on the freeway. There is new drama at the office. Your opponent says or does something that threatens to blow up the mediation. We are being bombarded from all sides, all the time, with things that require an immediate, instantaneous, **now** response. Some situations are truly a crisis and a snap decision. But many are not.

Unfortunately, our System 1 brain often takes over, unconsciously reaching conclusions and making decisions before we even have time to think. Why does this happen?

## Fight or Flight

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From an evolutionary standpoint, we were built to respond to certain stimuli immediately. 100,000 years ago, early humans either recognized danger and reacted quickly - usually by running away - or were killed. The fight-or-flight response that developed in our brains is still buried deep in an area called the medulla oblongata. It is part of our automatic nervous system responsible

for things we do without thinking, like breathing or swallowing. But it also kicks in when danger is present. The medulla secretes stress hormones called cortisol, which in turn causes our organs to prepare for a fight or flight.

Meanwhile, another part of our brain called the Amygdala takes in visual or auditory stimuli and often responds immediately based on ingrained memories, past experiences and/or genetics. The Amygdala is believed to be responsible for implicit biases – conclusions we unconsciously reach about people or situations based on those previous patterns, experiences and memories. The brain's automatic System 1 causes hyper-fast responses, which can lead to erroneous conclusions and bad decisions. I have experienced these moments during my career as a trial attorney, and I have seen them play out as a mediator.

## The Power of the Pause

Does the power of the pause really work? Let me give you an example from a recent business mediation. The issues in the case were complex and there were many moving parts during the lengthy negotiations. Ultimately, after a full-day mediation, the parties reached a consensus settlement agreement. Although it was late on a Friday night, one of the attorneys proposed completing a full settlement agreement. Unfortunately, when the multi-page document was presented to opposing counsel, it became evident there was disagreement regarding some of the terms and conditions. When the attorneys got together to discuss the issues, things quickly began to deteriorate. Emotions started boiling over, voices raised and the entire settlement seemed about to unravel.

In that moment, I stepped in and suggested they pause. I congratulated them for their hard work during a long day to reach an agreement. I suggested perhaps a full-blown settlement agreement was trying for too much after such a long day. Fortunately, in the heat of that moment, the attorneys paused and agreed to save the full settlement agreement for the next week. Had the attorneys not exercised the power of the pause during this tense moment, the entire settlement could have gone up in smoke.

So, how do you harness that split second between an action and your reaction? It starts with understanding that your System 1 brain will take over and respond immediately in stressful situations. You have to pause before that automatic reaction takes over.



Try this. Stop reading this article. Look down at your keyboard, take a deep breath, close your eyes, and try to clear your mind for a few seconds. Go ahead, just try and really let go.

Did you feel it? Was there a fleeting moment when you thought about nothing, when your brain stopped thinking? Maybe your heart slowed down a beat, the tension in your neck lessened, your shoulders dipped down slightly. That tiny moment of “nothing” is where the power of the pause exists.

Now go back to the e-mail that sent your blood pressure through the roof. Instead of responding immediately, pause. Or if it really bothered you, type up your response right away but leave it as a draft on your computer until later in the day, or even the next morning. When you reread it, you will likely change what you reactively wrote.

There are other heat-of-the-moment situations when pausing before reacting or responding would lead to better decisions, a more collaborative response, and less stress. As a mediator, I can point to specific moments during mediations where someone paused before reacting which changed the entire course of the process for the better. Likewise, I have seen more than a few situations where a party or their attorney, or both, would have benefited from the power of the pause. Instead, they escalated the situation or packed up and walked out. Collaboration and compromise come from taking a step back and resisting the urge to respond in kind. It is often better to let the heat of the moment dissipate, talk with me, or talk with your client. Resist the tit-for-tat temptation. Measured responses often times are just what are needed to get the case resolved.

## Tolerance and Compassion For Others

There is something else you might consider in this power of the pause discussion. I learned this during an 8-week course in mindfulness-based stress reduction. Try to become a more tolerant, compassionate person in this world. Take the guy who cut you off on the freeway. You immediately assume he is a jerk. Maybe he is. Or maybe he is really late to pick up his daughter. Or he is headed to the hospital because his wife was just in an accident. Or he is just having a really, really bad day and didn't see your car. The person who sent you the nasty e-mail? Perhaps they are being hostile. Or maybe they just got yelled at by their boss and are venting. Or they misinterpreted an earlier message from you. The point is, there are many explanations for why people do things that are not all sinister, evil or mean spirited. By exercising the power of the pause before you react to these situations, you save yourself the added stress that can come from your reaction. Perhaps you avoid the embarrassment of learning your reaction was unwarranted. Or you decide to let the event go because it's just not worth the hassle.

I realize this is not easy and sometimes, firing off a nasty response or blaring your horn makes you feel better. But perhaps now more than ever, as the world seemingly gets crazier and crazier, with people more reactionary and less reflective, anything that helps reduce our stress is a good thing.

So remember, the next time you are confronted with a heat-of-the-moment situation, before you react, pause. Between the situation you are confronting and your reaction is a moment that is yours to control.

### Richard Huver

Successful mediations require someone who understands legal and practical issues, who appreciates the nuances of the process, and who listens to and acknowledges the myriad of interests and personalities at play. Through his 30 years of litigation experience and leadership roles, Richard developed the skills and expertise necessary to serve as a successful mediator for your case. As a mediator, Richard has handled cases in a variety of fields and specialties, including business, real estate, employment, and personal injury. From the simple to the complex, and from the cooperative to the contentious, Richard has the experience, the temperament and the skills that are needed to help parties resolve their disputes in an expeditious and professional manner.