

WATER OFF A DUCK'S BACK: HELP CLIENTS TO DEAL WITH VERBAL PROVOCATION

Having identified the common 'crimes' of provocation and potential relapse triggers, how can you help your clients to deal with them? Jon Lavelle offers cunning linguistics.

Now that you have identified verbal provocation from others as such (see page 19), you and your clients can face it with linguistic tools such as those on this page.

SUBJECTIVE SLURS...

Provocateur: "He's such a jerk".

Response 1: "He's been *acting* like a jerk, has he?"

This reply does at least three things, and all of them in only eight words, as explained below:

- it puts the behaviour into the past ("he's *been* acting), opening up the possibility that the person in question has now stopped doing this
- it directs attention to the behaviour and so away from the personal insult
- it questions the provocateur's evidence or opinion by turning the response into a question.

Now here's the same provocation but with a different response.

Provocateur: "He's such a jerk."

Response 2: "So he's been acting in a way that you don't *like*, has he?"

This reply is stronger than the first, and we can make three new observations:

- it completely removes the derogatory insult (does not repeat "jerk"); this weakens the provocateur's statement through "re-phrasing"
- it unexpectedly shifts pressure on to the speaker as it implies that they have the problem
- it removes 'value judgment' from the behaviour – behaving in a way the speaker does not like does not mean that it is good or bad.

... AND MEANINGLESS LABELS.

Provocateur: "That's rubbish!"

Response 1: "What do you mean by 'rubbish' – can you be more specific?"

Response 2: "What exactly is 'rubbish' about it?" These replies also achieve three things, as they:

- show that you are not prepared to accept broad-brush value judgments at face value
- challenge the speaker to substantiate their opinion with tangible facts and evidence
- force them to be specific about what they



Provocateur: "Right! Who hasn't taken a few pens home before now?"

USING EXAGGERATED OR VALUE-LADEN DESCRIPTIONS.

Provocateur: "He's a bad man."

Response: "Really? You mean like Hitler, Harold Shipman or Saddam Hussein?"

Provocateur: "The personnel director's been patted by the CEO."

Response: "What? He hit her?"

You could have used the earlier responses, challenging hyperbole. An often more effective approach is to take the exaggerated label at face value *literally*, and throw it back. It is important to realise that by reacting in this way you are 'just having a bit of fun'. It is best done with further exaggeration yourself and a hint of a smile, to signal that you know they are distorting the situation grossly.

DIRECT, OPEN CRITICISM.

Provocateur: "You're late!"

Response: "You're right, I've been delayed by a few minutes."

Provocateur 2: "Storming out of the meeting like that was totally unacceptable."

Response: "I was frustrated by lack of progress."

In each of these situations, the responses:

- redirect the focus from a negative judgment to a less emotive, factual concept; you are no longer talking about monumental matters
- by refusing to argue, make excuses or fight back (which could make things worse), the provocateur's attack is diffused
- the brevity of your response signals the end of that particular interchange
- you imply that you have been inconvenienced, rather than being negligent or nonprofessional.

In all cases on this page, you have refused to rise to the bait and side-stepped criticism.

Book details with more tools to help you and your clients can be found on page 19.

Image: Smilewithbjul

mean by "rubbish", which might then enable you to challenge their subjective judgment in a more objective manner.

Of course, you might hear what exactly constitutes "rubbish. But you've achieved your objective and clarified something tangible. If you then want to dispute facts, you could present counter-evidence. You are grounded in reality.

And here's a third response to choose from:

Response 3: "What's *not* rubbish about it?"

This reply also does at least three things:

- it does not argue – but implies neutrality as a minimum, and disagreement by implication
- dramatically redirects attention to aspects which are good
- challenges the provocateur to be balanced and reasonable; if they cannot find something good in something, it exposes their bias and calls into question their judgment in other areas.

USING THE PAST TO JUSTIFY THE PRESENT.

Provocateur: "He's not to be trusted."

Response: "Why do you say that?"

Provocateur: "Well, he's been caught stealing."

Response: "Really, when was that?"

Provocateur: "Some time ago, before you joined."

Response: "Hang on, I've been here three years now – has he been stealing things recently?"

Provocateur: "Not that I've heard, but..."

Response: "And what exactly did he steal?"

Provocateur: "Oh, usual things, stationery."

Response: "In that case, half the company would be locked up, me included!"