



# Why Pausing is Such an Important Leadership Skill, and How To Do It

by **LISA KOHN**

As an Executive Coach, I get to work with many powerful, successful leaders, and many of them have a habit that's getting in their way.

They're reacting too quickly, and not reacting thoughtfully.

Their colleagues will say:

"I ask him a question, and his immediate response is emotional and defensive."

"I can hear her yelling in her office."

"I wish he'd read his emails before he sends them. The tone. It's off-putting."

We all have too much going on and too much to do, and that overwhelm and need for constant action seems to be causing an epidemic of hot-blooded responses that are getting in the way.

*We need to pause.*

*We need to pause* and think through how we want to respond. We need to reflect on the bigger picture—what might matter to the other person, what their perspectives might be, what stories about them (and the situation) we might be making up,

what is our ultimate goal and what is the best way to get there. Taking a moment, or a few days, to consider a different way to view the issue at hand can help us respond more calmly and productively.

*We need to pause* and take a deep breath, to let ourselves calm down if we've been triggered. I've very rarely seen a knee-jerk reaction that has helped a situation or remedied a problem. When our buttons have been pushed—when we've shot into anger or fear or any other negative emotion—we need time to compose ourselves.

Jill Bolte Taylor, in her book *My Stroke of Insight*, writes about the ninety-second rule: that when we are provoked, our adrenaline rush kicks in and we have no control over our actions and reactions... for ninety seconds. Only ninety seconds. After that, we can take a breath and choose what we want to do and how we want to respond. We therefore need to pause for at least ninety seconds to get past a habit of knee-jerk reactions.

So how do we build this pause into our life and work? How have my clients successfully learned to do this? The method is simple, but potentially challenging:



- Become aware that you, at least at times, react too quickly.
  - Decide that you're going to learn to pause—for ninety seconds, five minutes, a day, a week.
    - Build a support network to lean on and remind you to practice this new behavior.
  - Practice this new behavior, especially when you're most emotional or triggered (except in the rare cases of true crises).
    - Practice this new behavior some more.
      - Notice and reward your successes (and your attempts, even if they don't succeed).
        - Keep at it.

I've learned to (often) do this myself—to step away when I've most wanted to step in, to breathe when I've most wanted to shout or scream. I've witnessed others build those muscles—not responding to an inappropriate email but instead taking time to calm down, and then calling the other party instead of responding via email and successfully talking things through.

I've heard the feedback of changed behavior, the “wow, now when I approach him with something, I can see an initial reaction, a pause and then a well-thought out response that has helped us solve the issue.”

Many of us need to pause more often before we react too harshly, and all of us can learn to do it. One breath at a time. **RL**



**Lisa Kohn** is an accomplished leadership consultant, executive coach, author, and keynote speaker with a strong business background and a creative approach. She has over 20 years of experience in direct consulting, coaching, and speaking with Fortune 500 clients in areas of leadership, communication, managing change, and interpersonal and team dynamics, as well as life balance and fulfillment.

Lisa successfully partners with organizations across a broad range of industries. She has consulted with leaders in companies such as Verizon, World Wrestling Entertainment, Citigroup, ACLU, Viacom, and Comcast. Lisa brings a unique perspective to her clients that emphasizes the importance of thoughtful, intentional leadership, and transforms the way organizations develop and manage their people and the way leaders fulfill their roles.