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Want to Win an Argument? Science Says Stop Doing This 1 Thing

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Things don't always go smoothly in life, and when you encounter a bump (<http://www.inc.com/les-mckeown/bump-in-the-road.html?cid=search>), the temptation to yell at others (<http://www.inc.com/david-chang/how-momofuku-founder-david-chang-learned-to-stop-yelling-and-start-leading.html?cid=search>) can explode. Don't do it--a raised voice (<http://www.inc.com/the-muse/how-to-strategy-fix-mend-work-relationship-after-you-snap-yell-lash-out.html?cid=search>) is one of the biggest swords you can drive into the stomach of your own company or general goals! Here's what makes yelling so destructive and self-sabotaging.

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How yelling can be a benefit

From the evolutionary perspective, raising your voice is prewired in the limbic system (<https://webpace.ship.edu/cgboer/limbicsystem.html>) and amygdala of the brain as part of the survival instinct (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/what-would-aristotle-do/201508/can-screaming-or-yelling-be-bad-your-relationship>). It's a basic way of trying to assert dominance and handle a perceived threat. This is why people yell in fistfights or at the strange dog in the yard that's freaking them out. When these types of situations arise, your fight-or-flight stress response engages and adrenaline rushes through your body as a protective mechanism to get you through.

Thinking your way out of control

But guess what. You can engage your limbic system with reasoning and evaluation (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/what-would-aristotle-do/201508/can-screaming-or-yelling-be-reasonable>). You can react to external events, too. This is what most people deal with in the office. For example, you might think to yourself, "How could John and Jane leave me to do all the work on this report by myself? They're such rotten, stupid people!" Or maybe John or Jane says something offensive to you and you think "How dare they! They've got no right to talk to me that way!" You essentially work yourself up. The fight-or-flight response gets the green light and your defensive behaviors, including yelling, are all systems go.

And guess how the person you yell at reacts in their brain. Yep. You're now a threat. Their limbic system engages, too, and they either freeze or start yelling right back.

Bye-bye, rational thought

Yelling would be bad enough if everything yelled were completely true and rational. But once the stress response engages, the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for executive functions like decision making and planning, starts to shut down (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/camelswithhammers/2013/04/the-neuroscience-of-how-personal-attacks-shut-down-critical-thinking/>). The emotion centers of the limbic system take over, and instead of really thinking critically, you're driven by what you feel. Again, this is meant to protect you--you'd be toast if you thought through a charging lion. But in an everyday argument, it makes it incredibly difficult to really process what the other person is saying in an objective way. In essence, ***you stop being able to hear each other or come up with appropriate responses, and the hurt that comes with the yelling sticks as a deeper, more significant memory.***

The icing on the unfortunate cupcake is that it takes at least 20 minutes (<https://blogs.psychcentral.com/anger/2016/06/how-long-does-the-fight-or-flight-reaction-last/>) for the chemicals released during the stress response--for example, cortisol--to leave the body. In a busy day, that means that arguments potentially can disrupt entire meetings or that there's a delay in productivity. You have a relatively good chunk of time before you can talk calmly again in person, over the phone or through other technologies, and you're at risk for saying and doing things you might regret later on.

Putting the brakes on an aggressive mouth

Given how all this works, it almost goes without saying that yelling doesn't accomplish much and is ineffective as a form of employee discipline. To avoid falling into the yelling trap,

- **Mentally acknowledge how you are feeling** because of what the other person has said or done, or because of your general circumstances (ever yell at someone who didn't deserve it because they were just "there" and you needed to vent?).
- **Verbally acknowledge that you see how the other person is feeling**, providing validation and empathy.
- **Offer some warning before talking about potentially triggering issues** where you can. For example, you might clarify in an email that you'd like to discuss some performance issues or a big change in policy *before* meeting about it.
- **Schedule your most difficult discussions during parts of the day when you normally are energized and in a decent mood.**
- **Intentionally lower your voice** so your listener has to focus on your words.
- **Come up with a mantra or phrase to keep yourself from going down a path of negative, defensive thoughts.** For instance, you might think, "My goal isn't to fight, it's to x", "They're trainees who still need my guidance," or "Their yelling is a signal that they feel threatened, and it's *my* job to show them I'm not a threat."
- **Admit you're emotionally hot and tell others you need a brief break before continuing.** Be positive in your request to stop, such as "I know we can work this out if I have a minute to breathe and think."

All this said, we're all individual. And some of us are wired to react faster and more strongly than others. But it is because of this individuality that we get exposed to growth-fueling, differing points of view. And it's this individuality that makes someone valuable to a team or community. If you consciously can keep that concept at the fore even when you disagree, it's much easier to stay respectful and make sure your mouth builds others up.

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