

The
TRUTH

about



SCANDAL

The Everyday Guide to
Navigating Business Crises

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Chapter 6

The Truth about Haters

Our world is plagued with haters. Allegations of police brutality, racial injustice, and wrongful deaths run rampant. Given this emotionally charged environment, dissent is bound to occur. Recently, on a social media feed, I witnessed one firsthand.

In reference to an article about a college hosting a “no-whites-allowed pool party,” one user wrote, “*Maybe they’d feel even more comfortable if they had their own drinking fountains and lunch counters . . .*”

To which his friend replied:

“We may have widely different views, but your comment above should go down as tasteless, insulting,

and frankly—irresponsible. I'm disgusted you'd be so flippant about America's troubled past in the civil rights era. Your racism is showing."

These are the exact kind of conversations I am so inclined to engage in. However, I rarely do. I still remember the first time I thought my diplomatic gifts could neutralize a heated situation. I was a teenager caught in the middle of a brawl between a friend of mine and a stranger in a back alley of Ottumwa, Iowa. Both young men were reckless, fierce, and hell-bent on destruction. I tried to intervene with reason, empathy, and humor, but the violence escalated.

This incident ranks as one of my worst life experiences. Luckily, everyone survived. But I was forever changed. I knew for certain that I never wanted to be in the middle of that kind of hate-filled conflict again. Not only because of the trauma that came with it, but also because I realized that I should have saved my breath instead of trying to fight a battle I couldn't win.

It's the same in business and on social media. We often find ourselves trying to fight when the chances of us winning—of changing a person's mind or inspiring a positive outlook—are slim to none. The truth about haters, unlike those who try to sabotage us, is that most of them have nothing to gain. They're simply out to get us.

I saw this with an up-and-coming young woman who presented at a business conference in the Twin Cities. During her talk, she made reference to an insult she had received after being rewarded a substantial, highly coveted grant. The demeaning comment went something like this: “Nowadays, all it takes to get promoted is a short skirt and bright red lipstick.”

When Haters Attack Your Character

While this was disheartening to hear, it's not the first time spiteful words have been used in a professional context. For me, it happened in 1999, not long after starting my first corporate job. I had just had the pleasure of enduring my first-ever performance review. My manager (we'll call him Tim) had already accepted a new position within the company but was pulled back temporarily to cofacilitate my review with his replacement. I don't remember the overall rating Tim gave me, nor the whopping salary increase I'm sure I *didn't* receive, but I'll never forget what he said. Near the end of the tag-team critique, he summed up my abilities and contributions this way: “Melissa, you're pushy, aggressive, and overbearing.”

Because I had never heard these words used to describe me, I was shocked. However, I did my best to maintain my

composure—and then turned the tables. “Can you give me an example of a time when you’ve seen me being pushy, aggressive, or overbearing? I just want to make sure I understand how these characteristics are affecting my performance.”

“No,” he replied, “it’s just a general observation.”

Call it intuition (or youthful stubbornness), but I decided right then that his inability to provide a concrete example meant that he just didn’t like me. He wasn’t trying to help; he was being mean.

It wasn’t possible for his hater, troll-like behavior to be self-serving because he had already left the department. Our professional interactions were over, and no one was holding him responsible for my actions anymore. All he wanted to do was hurt me. This beautiful realization gave me the freedom to neutralize his otherwise piercing comments and take them in stride. So I told him, “Let me know if you see this behavior in the future. That way I’ll be able to assess my actions and make job-related improvements.” And that concluded my review.

When Haters Vandalize

A more aggressive incident happened to a CEO client of mine, Rick, when his company’s property was vandalized—not

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once but twice in the same day. I was about to leave for a scheduled meeting with Rick when I received a text from his CFO, Jeanne. Jeanne was distraught and looking for feedback from me. Here's what she wrote:

“Last night, during second shift, someone jammed up the air conditioning. It broke, and it was so hot that the whole entire plant had to be shut down until it was fixed. It was a nightmare. The second shift supervisor reported it to Rick, and he spoke to all employees about it during the shift change. I thought Rick did a great job of addressing the issue, but within two hours, it happened again! I'm at a complete loss. Please help!”

I knew exactly why it had happened again, and I told Jeanne to meet me in Rick's office so I could explain. Once we were all together, I asked Rick to tell me what he'd said to employees during the meeting. Here's what he said:

“If anyone has a problem with me or the company, all you have to do is come and talk to me. It's not necessary to vandalize company property. This isn't cool. I'm here, and I'm always willing to listen. You don't have to do this. It's a giant waste of my time and everybody else's time, so knock it off.”

Just as I'd suspected. Rick had faltered in his communications approach. When he addressed all employees, he narrowed in on the wrong audience, speaking directly to the anonymous offender. Big mistake.

You see, the truth about haters is they're not your primary audience. For starters, you're not likely to change a troll's mind. They're often set in their ways, and no matter what you do or say, they're going to be against you. Vandalism is by definition the willful destruction or defacement of property for no reason other than to do something malicious.

Trolls and haters deserve grace and mercy like everyone else, but not at the expense of your reputation. It is quite common for a leader to speak to an anonymous offender in a large group setting. After all, how else are you going to get a message to them? The trouble is, you're ignoring the majority of people who would never consider defacing company property and sending an unwieldy message to them by mistake. Plus, anyone who might have been on the fence could easily be tipped into vandalism after such a public scolding, which is probably what happened.

So I told Rick, in the future, to always speak to the vast majority of employees who value company property.

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And, of course, cast everyone in as favorable a light as possible. Say:

“I have news to share about an incident that occurred last night on second shift. Someone tampered with the air conditioning, rendering it unusable and causing production to stop temporarily.

“I recognize that nearly every single one of you in this room has a great work ethic and strong values and always treats company property just as you would your own property. I want to thank you for that. I trust this is a one-time event. I will be monitoring the area more closely and, if necessary, will increase security efforts. Because what’s most important to me is that every one of you has a safe and comfortable work environment.”

This message helps elevate offenders to a level of ethics shared by colleagues, lowers the chances of repeat offenses, prevents anyone who may be on the fence from toppling over, and reinforces the desired behaviors of nonoffenders.

I told Jeanne and Rick that unless they knew who the offender was and could have a private conversation, they needed to speak to the majority of their audience, who

weren't involved. They were astonished but immediately saw how the message went astray. Rick agreed to weave these power phrases into his future messages, and the vandalism eventually stopped.

When Haters Take to Yelp

Just as the vandal wasn't Rick's primary audience, neither are haters on Yelp or other crowdsourced reviews yours. When one of my clients called me about a negative review her company had received, I told her that the response I'd craft would be written mainly for her satisfied clients and employees, not only for the one unsatisfied person who wrote the review.

Over the summer, she'd worked with a temporary agency to bring on additional staff to help with an influx of projects. One such temp didn't have a favorable experience, and he voiced it online. Here's what he wrote: "Worst place I've ever worked with. The leader that ran [the project] was completely unprofessional and unreasonable in many ways. Mathew."

The bottom line in business is that we need people to be in agreement with us. If they're not in agreement with us about our personal integrity or our company

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brand, they're not inspired, working hard, promoting our products, or keeping customers happy. That's why it's important to address employee concerns as soon as possible. Unfortunately, when concerns are shared publicly, they're not always well intended.

However, others are watching you very closely, and how you treat a displaced employee is how they believe you'll treat them under similar circumstances. So always respond—at least once—to public reviews, addressing the author but, more importantly, addressing the rest of your audience. Here's how I did that for my client's message to Mathew:

“Hi Mathew, my name is Mary Smith, and I am the CEO of [company]. I appreciate your feedback. My team and I are always interested in how to improve our company. I am happy to talk with you about your experiences while working for us through a temporary agency. You can reach me directly anytime at [email]. Thank you.”

Now, had Mathew continued to vent about his experience unfavorably online, I would have written another message for Mary to take the conversation offline and instruct her to stop replying if it continued to escalate. We can't let troll behavior incite us. Your time is valuable,

and once you have addressed the issue for the majority of your audience watching, you can disengage.

Protect Yourself from Haters

Unless a global communication transformation occurs, most of us can expect to encounter haters or trolls in the future. Accepting this painful fact of life is the first step to being prepared to successfully meet it head-on. Still, there are steps we can take to protect ourselves in abusive situations.

- **Never give anyone permission to mistreat you.** Don't allow yourself to be victimized in the name of niceness, and certainly not in the name of perception. Walk away, get off the call, or end the email chain as quickly as possible. By disengaging from an out-of-control situation, you demonstrate professionalism and self-respect.
- **Always stay focused on the positive.** Refuse to engage in mean-spirited hate talk. Save your energy for the things in your life and business that deserve attention.
- **Shake off those feelings of guilt.** You can't solve someone else's problems. It's their

choice whether they want to get help for their issues or continue mistreating others. Don't hold yourself accountable for their dysfunctional behavior.

- **Take the bite out of their bark.** If someone discredits or condemns you, mentally flip their slight into an accolade. In other words, take what was said and translate it into a decisively positive thought. If they say you're a loser, tell yourself you just won an Olympic gold medal.
- **Offer a disarming comeback.** Have a handful of power phrases ready to go. Savvy professionals use this image-saving tactic to exude confidence under pressure. When the accusations fly, simply reply, "I wouldn't say that," "Here's what I can tell you," or "Not exactly—let me explain."
- **Don't stoop to their level.** Responding to slurs with more slurs can only result in an ugly confrontation. Instead, say, "Thanks for sharing your insights with me," and walk away.

Whether you're a CEO, individual contributor, or recent college grad, you can positively influence perceptions, maintain control of any conversation, and keep your emotions in check, even when encountering the antics of a hater on a power trip.

Before You Act . . .

The best defense is a good offense, right? Start by crafting some power phrases that can help you exit bad conversations gracefully. For example, "I prefer to think positively about this issue," or "I'd be happy to talk about this when you're in a mood to listen." Remember, you can tell the truth, be considerate, and be objective even when you're dealing with a hater or troll.

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Thanks for reading,

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