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Policing your tone is about building buy-in, not selling out

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When you're a certified Moral Courage Mentor, you teach your co-workers to engage productively about polarizing issues. That means equipping them with vital communication skills such as moderating one's tone. But not everyone's delighted to learn that tone matters.

Take Emily, who attended my workshop, *How To Be Heard (Even By People Who Disagree With You)*. In an email to me after the workshop, she wrote, "Irshad, you emphasized that we're more likely to get a fair hearing from our "Other" if we leave them feeling respected than if we get in their face and demand to be listened to. But aren't you tone policing?"

Emily makes "tone policing" sound like a bad thing! She's hardly alone. Many inclusion advocates find the idea of policing one's tone to be oppressive, and I understand why. It's unfair that people who come from historically marginalized communities so often get dismissed for being "too emotional" — angry, aggressive, loud.

As a supporter of free expression, I defend anybody's right to take the tone they choose. How we communicate is as much a part of free expression as what we communicate. So I say with respect and affection: Flip out if you want to. In this part of the world, that's your constitutional right.

But in that case, don't expect a positive outcome. Like it or not, your tone and mine massively affects whether our messages will be heard.

Chris Voss, a former top negotiator with the FBI, tells MSNBC that adopting a civil tone "is a Jedi mind trick." That's because "your tone of voice impacts the other person's neurocircuitry and actually causes a chemical change in their brain." He cites the example of a late-night radio DJ who typically speaks softly and slowly in order to help the listener decompress from those hectic waking hours. The DJ's tone is intentionally hypnotic.

When Voss served with the FBI, he specialized in convincing kidnappers to return their captives. Which is how he learned the subtle power of tone. Make no mistake, though, Voss knows that we humans become easily frustrated with our Other, especially if we're discussing topics that we deeply care about. Voss also appreciates that his advice — adopt a gentle and deliberate tone to calm everybody down — isn't easy to swallow.

Still, it's necessary for making progress. He hammers home the point: "When you can just taste how good it's going to feel to say something in a particular tone of voice, it's wrong. Because you're going to love it and the other side is going to feel slapped in the face, which guarantees that they will not collaborate with you."



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Now let me offer some sweeter news: Tone isn't an either/or proposition. Nobody's saying that either you monitor your tone in all of your conversations or prepare to go down in flames. First of all, every discussion doesn't have to be a debate. There's no need to "win" all the time, so don't worry about checking your tone every minute of every day. As long as you don't care about influencing the other person, let it all hang out.

Moreover, even when you do care about influencing your Other, you can still take a break from the conversation. You can privately turn to your friends and caustically unload how annoyed you are with your Other. Preserving our mental health sometimes requires us to scream at the top of lungs. By all means, lean on your best pals to “get” you when you need to vent. Once you’ve let off steam, return to your Other and pick up the conversation -- constructively.

In other words, you can use a both/and lens, rather than an either/or one, to decide which tone to adopt and when.

All of this assumes that you want to make progress on the issue at hand. Not everybody does. Some of us just want to feel self-righteous. That’s a legitimate choice, but then don’t entirely blame the other side for failing to understand the issue from your perspective. Be sure to blame your own communication style, too.

Change-makers should be asking ourselves this question: Am I committed to moving the needle or am I simply in this to feel superior? If we only want to make a statement, then defund the tone police and let ‘er rip. But if we also want to make an impact, we now know what to do — and why.



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