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**Navigating Triggering Events: Critical  
Skills for Facilitating Difficult Dialogues**

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## DIVERSITY PRACTITIONER TOOLS

### Navigating Triggering Events: Critical Skills for Facilitating Difficult Dialogues

Kathy Obear



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Triggering events might not, in and of themselves, pose a problem in a workshop. Facilitators can effectively navigate triggering events by using their emotions and insights as a resource for intervening on behalf of themselves and the participants. Nonetheless, how facilitators typically respond to triggers can impact their ability to effectively appraise, diagnose and respond during difficult dialogues.<sup>3</sup> It is imperative that facilitators effectively manage themselves when they are triggered so that they both model the skills and attitudes they are teaching in the session, as well as uphold the principle of "do no harm."

Facilitating dialogues about issues of diversity, inclusion and equity can be challenging and stressful work. It involves exploring areas that are not typically addressed in traditional learning environments. Whether conscious of it or not, facilitators and participants bring most, if not all, of who they are to the learning environment, including their fears, biases, stereotypes, memories of past traumas and current life experiences.<sup>1</sup>

As a result many facilitators report being "hooked" by the comments and actions of participants and feel "triggered" emotions, including anger, fear, embarrassment, pain and sadness. Many experts in the field use the term "trigger" to describe the "instantaneous response to stimuli without accompanying conscious thought."<sup>2</sup>

During a "triggering event" facilitators experience an intense, often unexpected, emotional reaction to an external or internal stimulus and are often surprised by how the intensity of their emotions is disproportionate to the original stimulus. They can become disoriented or "de-skilled" and may react automatically out of their feelings rather than responding with their full range of intervention techniques.

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In this article I present seven steps of the Triggering Event Cycle and some critical skills for navigating triggering events. The goal of this article is to identify practical self-management and facilitation strategies that allow effective navigation of triggering events during workshops, especially those that explore issues of diversity and inclusion.

## The Triggering Event Cycle

Diversity practitioners and facilitators report feeling less satisfied with the impact of their behavior when they react unconsciously to triggering events by engaging in aggressive arguments, using sarcastic or belittling comments, acting defensively, interrupting participants, ignoring the situation, "telling" participants what they did wrong and shutting down. The model, Triggering Event Cycle, provides a conceptual framework to understand the phenomenon of triggering events. It can help facilitators be conscious and intentional as they choose how to respond when they feel triggered and is useful in diagnosing and interrupting a triggered reaction. It can also re-establish a sense of emotional equilibrium in order to thoughtfully choose an effective response in the moment.

Triggering reactions seem to occur almost simultaneously in a "split second" and appear to be cyclical in nature. This finding is consistent with research in the literature on group dynamics<sup>4</sup> about how people make meaning of events and the "ABC's" of Rational Emotive Therapy,<sup>5</sup> Albert Ellis' framework that describes the interactions among an activating event and a person's thoughts, beliefs, feelings and resulting actions. This pattern of reactions is outlined below.

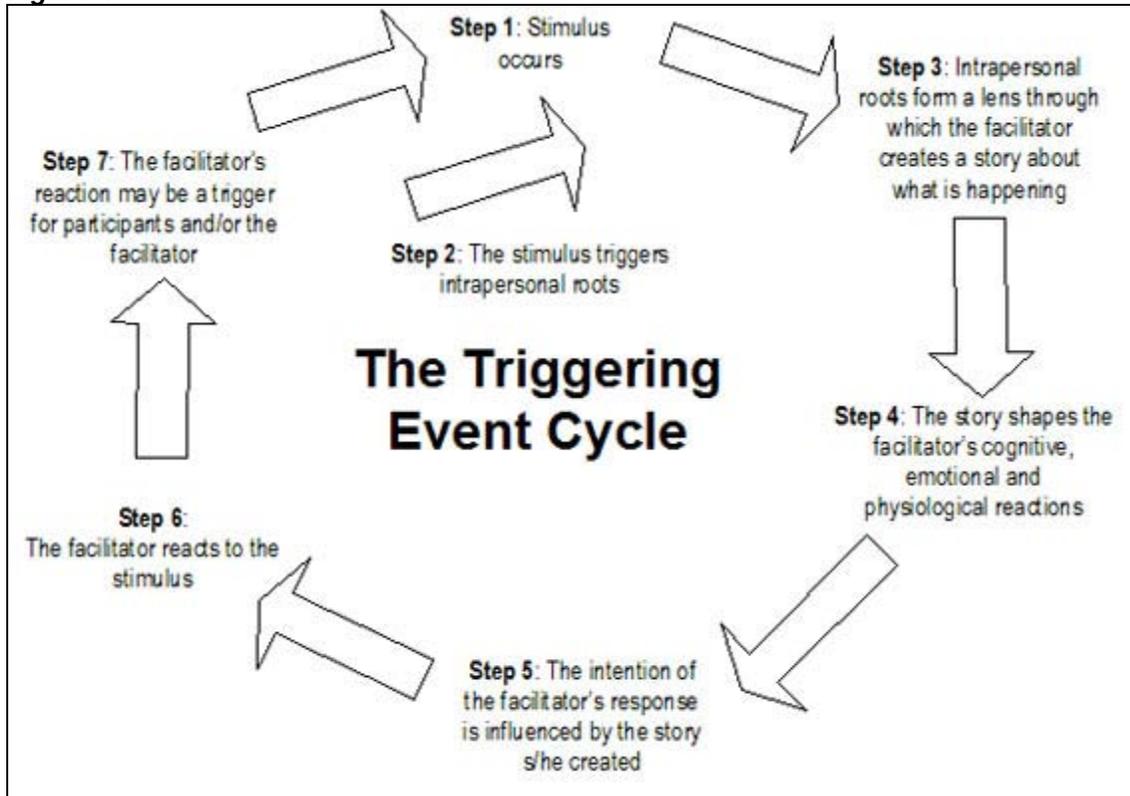
Seven Steps of the Triggering Cycle	
Step 1	Stimulus occurs.
Step 2	The stimulus "triggers" an intrapersonal "root" (a memory, past trauma or experience, fear, prejudice).
Step 3	These intrapersonal issues form a lens through which a facilitator creates a "story" about what is happening.
Step 4	The story a facilitator creates shapes the cognitive, emotional and physiological reactions s/he experiences.
Step 5	The intention of a facilitator's response is influenced by the story s/he creates.
Step 6	The facilitator reacts to the stimulus.
Step 7	The facilitator's reaction may be a trigger for participants and/or another facilitator.

In the following sections each step will be described and strategies suggested for facilitators to navigate triggering events during dialogues about issues of diversity and inclusion. Included is Figure 1, which graphically illustrates the process.

***STEP 1 – The Triggering Event Cycle begins with a triggering event.*** Diversity practitioners report that they primarily feel triggered by the comments and actions of participants responding from various dominant group members. Common triggers are offensive remarks by dominant group members — often white, male heterosexuals — who portray themselves as "victims" of "reverse discrimination" or refuse to "own" their privilege, arrogance, domination of "airtime," bullying or controlling behavior and challenge to the competence or credibility of the facilitator.

Facilitators may or may not be aware that they feel triggered. It is critical that facilitators increase their awareness of their common triggers so they can both anticipate triggering events and recognize when they occur.<sup>6</sup> Once facilitators realize they feel triggered, they can implement self-management tools to moderate their emotional reactions in order to thoughtfully choose an effective response. In addition, they can use an activity to give themselves a "time out" to re-center, including taking a break, assigning a journaling task or having participants pair up to talk about their reactions.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 1



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**STEP 2 — Triggered reactions are often "rooted" in unexplored or unresolved intrapersonal issues.** Facilitators are often unaware that an event has restimulated their intrapersonal issues. Triggering events are often fueled by one or more of the following internal "roots:"

- current life issues and dynamics (fatigue, illness, crises, stressors)
- unresolved or unhealed past issues, traumas and "wounds"
- fear and anxiety (I'm incompetent, I'll lose credibility, I'll make a mistake, people will be hurt if I mismanage this situation)
- needs (for control or approval; to be right or seen as competent; to be liked), and/or
- prejudices and assumptions.

These reactivated intrapersonal issues can impact facilitators at every subsequent step in the Cycle, including how they select and attend to data, how they make meaning and interpret the situation, what emotions they experience and how they respond.

A centered and clear facilitator is the primary tool for navigating triggers, yet many diversity practitioners have not explored the intrapsychic roots which fuel their ineffective reactions during triggering events. Facilitators who examine the roots of their triggers and participate in personal healing work report experiencing fewer triggering events and greater skill and confidence when navigating those they encounter. Exploring the roots of a triggering event can help facilitators negotiate their emotions in the moment as well as identify opportunities for further personal growth and healing.

**Step 3 — Facilitators make meaning of triggering events through the "lenses" of their restimulated intrapersonal roots.** This step is often unconscious and facilitators may

not yet realize they are triggered. The following personal example illustrates how facilitators create a "story" about a triggering event based upon their reactivated intrapersonal issues.

*I was facilitating a diversity training session with a lead trainer who was an older male colleague. I had previously made several suggestions that he had not incorporated into the design. When he once again did not use my suggestion, I felt angry and dismissed. I felt invisible and very small. I thought he was being sexist, arrogant, self-centered and domineering. I was so angry I just shut down and had trouble partnering with him for the rest of the session. As I look back, I realize that the intensity of my reaction was out of proportion to the moment. I was re-triggered into painful memories of when my father and other men had ignored or dismissed me. If I had been less triggered I might have discussed the impact I was experiencing with my colleague. By shutting down I missed an opportunity to have an honest dialogue with him and possibly create a more effective design for the session.*

It is critical that facilitators understand how their current life issues, unconscious feelings and past experiences can shade and drive their perceptions, appraisals and interventions, and result in inappropriate and counterproductive reactions.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, facilitators need to develop the ability to first recognize the "story" they have created based on their intrapersonal issues and then shift their appraisal and interpretation of the trigger.<sup>9</sup> Facilitators report that using self-talk to re-write their story increases their ability to effectively navigate triggering events. Self-talk to shift appraisals about participants include: "They're doing the best they can;" "They're scared and just need some more skills and knowledge;" and "What's triggering them? What are their roots? What are they afraid of?"

Self-statements that help shift stories about the facilitator's ability to manage the situation include: "I've negotiated tough situations before," "I can handle this..." and "Trust the process...everything happens for a reason." Finally, facilitators can shift their appraisal by exploring the roots of their trigger: "Why am I so triggered? Who or what does this person remind me of? What unresolved issues might be fueling my reaction?"

***Step 4 — The story facilitators create about a situation influences their cognitive, emotional and physiological reactions.*** If facilitators interpret the silence of dominant group members as resistance, then their reactive self-talk may include: "They are so typical... so arrogant, privileged and clueless... These are 'our future leaders'... what a joke! I'm so tired of all these white people who don't get it..." As a result they may feel angry, judgmental, tense and "ready to fight."

Conversely, if facilitators assume that the dominant group members are quiet because they are feeling afraid and incompetent, then they may experience very different self-talk, including "Maybe they're scared and unskilled... I know what that feels like for myself... I wonder what I can do to help them feel safer to speak up?" In this case, facilitators might feel compassion and a softening of the heart. Shifting appraisals using cognitive self-statements will most likely de-escalate triggered emotions and mitigate any physiological reactions.

Facilitators need to identify the common emotional, physical and cognitive reactions they experience during triggering events. If they are aware of these "early warning signals" they may be more likely to notice they are triggered before they react automatically out of their feelings.

***Step 5 — Whether conscious of this step or not, the intentions of facilitator responses are influenced by the stories they create.*** A facilitator's intentions impact how he or she

responds during triggering events.<sup>10</sup> Diversity practitioners identify a range of intentions when they feel less satisfied with their response, including wanting to intimidate, put down or embarrass the participant, wanting to be liked, hoping to skim over and avoid any conflict and trying to change the participant or prove them wrong.

If facilitators recognize they are triggered and identify their negative intentions before they react, they can shift their intention to align with learning goals. Educators that were satisfied with how they responded during triggering events identified the following intentions for their interventions:

- engage in respectful dialogue;
- meet the participants "where they are;"
- use the triggering event as a teachable moment;
- create safety for the expression of feelings and differing viewpoints; and
- model effective strategies to use when triggered.

Shifting their intention will most likely help facilitators better manage their emotions and choose a more effective intervention strategy.

***Step 6 – Facilitators report that when they are deeply triggered, they react in ways that undermine learning goals and possibly harm participants.*** If facilitators use the Triggering Event Cycle to diagnose which step they are experiencing and implement effective self-management tools, they can choose a response that engages participants, embraces resistance and contributes to the learning process.

The following strategies were identified by facilitators as useful ways to navigate triggering events. Facilitators can:

- use self-disclosure to name their trigger and describe the dynamics they track in the moment;
- share their feelings and test to see if other participants are feeling triggered, as well as;
- "engage the resistance" and move into deeper dialogue by asking the participant questions to gain further understanding or open up the dialogue to the rest of the group by inviting them to respond to the participant's comment.

Another powerful intervention is to "relate in" and make a connection with the participant(s) whose behavior is the source of the trigger. The following is a personal example of how to relate to the participant before sharing a differing perspective.

*I triggered myself in a diversity session when a heterosexual participant said something like, "I believe homosexuality is immoral and a sin!" I took a moment to center and asked myself how I was just like this person and when I have felt similarly. Then I said, "I relate. I received very similar messages growing up," and then asked the group for a show of hands, "Who else relates?" And then I continued, "I struggled for years to make peace with those messages. I respect your right to your views and also believe we can find some common ground as we talk about how people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual feel discriminated against and targeted in this organization and society. For me, the conversation is about how to create an inclusive, respectful environment where all people have the same opportunity to develop and contribute, and no one has to experience negative treatment or discrimination."*

Facilitators who have explored their own privileged group memberships are more likely to

anticipate triggering comments by members of dominant groups and effectively use their personal feelings and experiences to connect with participants.

Facilitators develop greater capacity to effectively engage the resistance of members of privileged groups when they have explored the depth of privilege and bias they have as a member of one or more dominant groups. For example, the more personal work a white lesbian does to identify and own her white privilege and racial biases, the more compassion she will have when responding to heterosexuals who make homophobic comments. As a result, the intervention may be more effective in building a connection with participants and deepening understanding and commitment to change.

***Step 7 – When facilitators react unconsciously out of triggered emotions, their actions may become a trigger for participants***, whose reactions may become another trigger for the facilitator... and the Cycle continues. One helpful tool for facilitators who feel triggered by a participant's comments or behavior is to stop and ask themselves, "Did I do something first that may have triggered this person's reaction?" The following personal example illustrates this tool.

*In a session I noticed I felt triggered after a participant directed a pointed, sarcastic comment to me with very intense energy. I responded, "I notice I'm feeling triggered, and I sense you are, too... Did I say or do something that triggered you?" She said she was offended by something I had said a few minutes before. As I reflected on her comments I realized I had felt triggered earlier and agreed that my comment was inappropriate. I apologized for the insensitivity of my remarks. I then asked to hear more about the impact of my behavior. I told her I would spend time exploring any intrapersonal issues that were fueling my comment and work to change my behavior in the future. I then asked if she were open to hearing about the impact of her comment on me, and we continued the dialogue by exploring her intent and the possible roots of her trigger.*

Facilitators need to be prepared to explore the possibility that their comments or actions have triggered participants and, if so, to demonstrate effective recovery skills to acknowledge the participant's perspective, apologize for any negative impact and commit to responding differently in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Feeling triggered by the comments and actions of participants, especially members of dominant groups, is a common phenomenon for facilitators of workshops exploring issues of diversity and inclusion. Using the Triggering Event Cycle can provide a diagnostic framework for navigating triggering events during difficult dialogues. When facilitators recognize that they feel triggered early in the process they can use self-management tools to moderate their emotional reactions and then more thoughtfully choose effective responses which further learning goals and model the behaviors they are teaching in their sessions.

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