

## **6 Steps for Dealing with Your Button Pusher**

From the book *Who's Pushing Your Buttons*

By Dr. John Townsend

### **1. Tone**

Tone is highly important, as you can negate the words you are saying with the way you sound. It makes sense. You can pretty much assume that when you tell your button-pusher that you would like to meet and talk, she will be aware that you think there is a problem. The very act of asking for a meeting – and I do believe that you should, as opposed to doing this on the fly – conveys import and seriousness. So her guard is likely to be up. She may already be anticipating that you don't like something about her, and she may know already what you want to talk about. So the tone you begin and conduct the conversation with must serve the purpose of conveying you are for her and the relationship.

The best tone to have is one that is warm. Warmth conveys safety and care, and that stands the best chance of keeping your button-pusher from becoming even more wary or defensive than she already is. Remember that in a sandbox fight, there needs to be an adult present to keep some safety and order. If you can't be the grownup, don't depend on the button-pusher to be either. Get into the adult role, then call for the talk.

### **2. Speak from experience**

When you talk to your button-pusher, speak from your experience and life. Talk from the heart. Use "I" statements as much as possible. Stay with what you feel, think, and perceive.

There is a tendency we have to speak "at" the person, to use all-or-nothing language, and to speak *ex cathedra*, as if our reality is the final authority. These can cause formidable obstacles to your person's willingness to hear what you want him to change. Read these two statements to see the contrast:

*You are angry with me all the time, and you need to stop. It seems to me that you are angry with me pretty often, and it is difficult for me to be close to you.*

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### **3. Affirm the good**

It is probably best to begin the talk with taking the initiative to affirm, or validate the reality of, what is good in your button-pusher and in the relationship itself.

An affirmation can be simply a recitation from you of some of the things you like, appreciate, and want to see more of in him. This is particularly important, as many difficult people do not perceive confrontation as being loving, helpful, or "for" them in any way, shape, or form.

Their experience with confrontation may be from an abusive parent. Or they may never have

received confrontation from anyone, so they have no skills to understand or use it. So, because of their own inexperience with the values and blessings of feedback and their conclusions about their own “rightness,” they tend to identify confrontation as hatred, persecution, or condemnation. That is why, when you affirm, you make it easier for them to feel safe and able to metabolize what you want to say later. They can listen from a loved position rather than from a guarded one.

#### **4. Hear him out**

It sounds ironic, but the conversation stands a better chance of you making your point if you will, early in the talk, *shut up and listen!* I am not trying to sound unkind, but the reason for this is that everyone has their own point of view already running around in their heads. Think about the last time someone confronted you about an issue. Unless you are a very good and non-defensive listener, you were probably forming the words to respond to them *while they were still talking*. You probably weren't really attending to every nuance they were saying. So it is likely that your responsive words had more to do with your internal conversation than addressing the concern of the person confronting you.

Now, think empathically about the button-pusher for a minute. He is likely to do a lot of self-justifying, blaming, and excusing anyway; that is part of his ownership problem. So this trait compounds the tendency to not listen to a confrontation, block the person out, and start forming an excuse or a counterattack. All the more reason to hear him out first.

Hearing out your button-pusher at the beginning of the conversation helps to clear out his internal conversation so that there is more room and space in his mind for your words. It helps him feel that you care about his point of view and are not just there to blast him. And it is just the right thing to do. Everyone needs his day in court, his time to protest or show his side of things.

#### **5. Listen empathically**

Do not make the mistake of correcting his perception of you here. That does not further your mission; in fact, it can lose ground for you. Be still and understand his opinion. You are not agreeing; you are listening. And, if he has some valid points about your contribution to the problem, agree, apologize, and let him know you will change. Say something like this: “I think you are right, that I nag and don't let go of things with you. I can see how that makes matters worse. I'm sorry for that, and I will work on that.”

However, *don't hear him out forever*. Some button-pushers get into their own protest, and it can take on a life of its own. Their internal world is filled with themselves as the victim and others as constantly not treating them well. They can go round and round with this, with no resolution. They simply don't have the structure to stop it. So, when you think you have “gotten it,” at least the basics, and he hasn't wound down, say something like this:

“OK, I think I get your end of it, at least what is primary: You do get angry and withdrawn sometimes, because the job is hard, but you think that I am overreacting and it's not as bad as I say. And I make things worse when I nag and don't get off your back. Do I have the general gist of it?”

If he says you don't get it, then go through the process again until both of you agree, *not on the reality*, but on the button-pusher's perception. If you find this isn't working, get some training in listening skills from someone. Learning to paraphrase another's experience is a well-known and

valuable tool to have.

Also, be aware of any tendencies you might have during the hearing-out phase to resent that he gets to be understood, and not you. This isn't about playing fair, or even mutuality at this point. You are intentionally delaying some of your own desires for a higher purpose, and that is increasing the odds that he will attend to your requests for change. Don't cut off your nose to spite your face. Extend, hear, give grace, and wait.

#### **6. State the problem**

Make it direct and simple. Don't beat around the bush, but don't be unloving either. It is about clarity and simplicity so that he can understand it as well as possible. You want to state what it is your person is doing and how it affects you and others.

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