

You, you,
you!

The Glamour challenge

YOU CAN WIN A FACE-OFF WITH A BULLY

How to Talk to an Intimidator

Battered? Bulldozed? Utterly beaten by an intimidating person in your life? **Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton** and **Sheila Heen**, authors of *Difficult Conversations*, tell you how to counteract a bully's magic powers so you'll never have to kowtow to intimidation again.

you've prepped for your annual review so rigorously that you could give the U.S. Marine Corps a lesson in readiness. You've carefully documented your progress; you've even anticipated some of your boss' criticisms and thought of cleverways to counter them. You know you deserve a promotion and a raise, and you *won't* be lowballed.

But once you're face-to-face with your boss, your icy resolve undergoes a rapid thaw. Maybe it's her clipped manner. Maybe it's her imposing mahogany desk. Maybe it's her unilateral power over your immediate professional future. Something about your supervisor transforms you in a few moments from the confident captain of your career destiny to a going now here grunt. In the harsh light of her smug superiority, your carefully planned points and defenses sound suspiciously like whining, even to you. After 10 minutes, you leave her office defeated, with a measly salary increase and the feeling that you have the words *not worthy* tattooed to your furrowed

forehead. You haven't just lost face—you've lost confidence. So much for sticking up for yourself.

And it's not just powerful people who can make a person feel cowed; even random encounters with unkind strangers can be intimidating. As instructors at the Harvard Law School Negotiation Project, we've spent over a decade teaching and counseling business executives, educators, attorneys and world leaders on how to handle difficult conversations, and we haven't met one person—no matter how accomplished—who couldn't be intimidated in some situations. Whether it's a badtempered boyfriend or the jerk who acts entitled to first place in the ATM line, an intimidator can fluster even the calmest, coolest and most capable among us.

That's because an intimidator seems devilishly skilled at identifying and playing on your insecurities, even when she doesn't know she's doing it. After you've been burned by a tough guy, you berate yourself: If only somehow you'd been more assertive or competent or clever, you'd have been able to fight back and win. But you don't need Dorothy Parker's wit

or Madonna's moxie to battle an intimidator. We've come up with three strategies you can use to neutralize an imposing personality, and all you need to work them is a little self-

knowledge. With practice, you'll walk away from these encounters not just unbeaten, but unbeatable.

1 Reject the victim role.

Charlotte,* a 27-year-old marketing associate at a Seattle advertising agency, has to deal on a daily basis with a bulldozer of a boss. "Jack used to be a Detroit cop," Charlotte explains. "Now he manages his employees with the same tactics he used to intimidate suspects. At staff meetings, he goes around the table interrogating us about our accounts and why we haven't done whatever he thinks should have been done." Jack's attack-dog attitude was turning Charlotte's dream job into daily torture. Moreover, she was usually too scared to discuss any problems with him, making it harder for her to do her job effectively. What she *really* wanted to know was why Jack felt the need to belittle everybody with his badboy boardroom tactics. Especially her.

Charlotte was making a natural, but confidence-crippling mistake. You've probably made your share of questionable business and personal moves, but you know you don't intend to annoy, offend or upstage others. Still, when you're feeling unfairly treated, you often assume—as Charlotte did—that the other person is trying to abuse you. It's hard to resist. Assuming the worst intentions in others probably gives you some self-righteous satisfaction ("My landlord's just a vile cretin—only a pathetic loser would haggle over the cost of clearing my drain"). But the problem is, assuming that the intimidation is intentional makes you a victim ("He's totally screwing me"), which leaves you paralyzed ("I can't even communicate with such a lowlife") and at his mercy ("Oh, I'll just hire a plumber and pay for it out of my own pocket").

You're much better off assuming an intimidator's motives are benign before you face him down. That's how Charlotte finally got the nerve to approach her boss Jack; as long as she believed he *meant* to threaten her,



Geri Halliwell's anti-intimidation move: smile and greet

There's nobody—no matter how accomplished—who doesn't become intimidated in some situations.

she was petrified into passivity. Before she could take action, she had to assume the best and look at the situation from his point of view. "I realized that with his police background, his brand of blunt directness probably seemed like a more efficient—even respectful—way of communicating. I still didn't like it, but I didn't feel so terrified of him anymore, and that made it easier for me to ask him to lighten up. I finally took him aside one day and said, "I'm not sure if you realize this, but when you raise your voice in status meetings, I can't always think straight to give you the information you need or to ask the questions I need to ask. Do you think there's a better way for us to communicate?" Jack did back off, but here's the real beauty of Charlotte's strategy: Even before she confronted Jack, her new perspective on his conference-table conduct made her

feel less threatened and attacked by him—which made it easier for her to give him the rapid response he expected in meetings. And knowing that her job performance was improving gave her added confidence to approach Jack with her complaint. Intimidator defused.

2

Get a handle on your weaknesses and your strengths.

More often than not, it's your own self-image that stops you from standing up to an intimidator. Say you're at a movie and the woman in front of you is planning her weekend—loudly—on her cellular phone, *during* the film. You ask her in a polite whisper to be quiet but she just glares at you threateningly. There's no way you're going head-to-head with her. I'm not the kind of person who makes a stink in movie theaters and bothers everyone, you think. So you sit back, say nothing more and suffer in silence. Well, here's a news flash: She's not intimidating you; *you're* intimidating you. You don't want to take any risks that could threaten your image of yourself as a friendly person who handles every conflict with saintly civility and never annoys others—even when they're annoying you.

But standing up to a rude loudmouth doesn't make you a jerk. In fact, no single incident or conflict defines what kind of person you are, unless you let it. So when you're hesitant to play the heavy, do a reality check. It's not likely that one aggressive move will brand you a bad person, especially if you take the high road. For example, with the woman in the movie theater, you could try to help her see your perspective by saying, "Could you please continue

your conversation in the lobby? It's difficult for me to hear the film when you're talking." You might be rattled by the confrontation, but you'll be right—and *you'll surely be* supported by fellow *silent* film lovers.

Even more distressing than a showdown that makes you question who you *are* is an incident that brings out your insecurities about who you're *not*. Margaret, a 33-year-old producer for a Cincinnati business television show, was recently shamed into submission by a subordinate, a reporter, in front of her whole staff. "I hired Joe precisely because he had a hard-news background—something I lacked," Margaret explains. "But the first time we disagreed on how to cover a story, he was really aggressive and insistent about his point of view. And I felt completely paralyzed. I'm the boss, but somehow he had all the authority. I couldn't even articulate my point of view, let alone fight for it."

Margaret knew she'd lose control of her job if she let Joe intimidate her again, so she reality-checked her response to him. How did he get the upper hand so easily? "Sure, I was insecure about my lack of journalistic credentials," Margaret explains. "But I knew that my background as a producer was just as important to making a good show. Now, when he and I disagree, I just say, "I value your input, especially since I don't have experience in that area. But my own experience tells me something different." He's more respectful when I acknowledge his expertise." Understanding your own assets, then giving credit where credit is due, is a strategy no bully can beat.

3 Opt out of the blame game.

Some intimidators are masters at shifting blame; regardless of the situation, every problem, every glitch, every act of God is your fault. The graphic designer who's late with the slides for your presentation blames you for not staying on top of his work; you have trouble fighting back because, technically, the buck stops with you, even though he's still at fault for not meeting the deadline. How can you give this blame-thrower a taste of his own table-turning, instead of being battered by him?

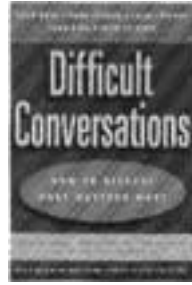
Well, you can't—not if you want to get those slides in time, or whatever it is you need from your intimidator. You'll get better and faster results if you abort the fault-finding mission entirely. He's accusing you, which makes you want to throw the blame back on him. Either you screwed up, or he did. But life is never that simple. It's better to deprive the blamer of ammunition by leaving blame behind. Then you can take control of the intimidating moment and steer the conversation the way you want it to go.

That's how Patty, a 37-year-old New York City financial consultant, finally managed to stand up to her 55 highly recommended but fearsome fertility specialist. "I consider myself a tough person," Patty says. "My clients—men running Fortune 500 companies—give me no trouble at all. But my doctor, who's supposed to be helping me, is so impatient and dismissive that I can't even talk to her. When my fertility drugs didn't work, she blamed *me* for taking them wrong and not following her instructions. And my first instinct was to blame *her* for not explaining things right in the first place place." Patty was panicked: Fertility

treatment was too stressful to start over with a new specialist, yet she felt totally intimidated by the one she had. But rather than arguing about who was more at fault, Patty shifted her focus to solving the problem—defusing her doctor's defensiveness with a preemptive admission of her own contribution. "I told her, 'I probably should have asked you more questions, but I was afraid you would think I was just getting hysterical because my biological clock was ticking. From now on, I won't hesitate to ask if I'm not sure what to do with my medication. And if you could be patient and explain things as clearly as possible, that would help me.'" Because Patty didn't put her on the defensive, her doctor volunteered that she should have been more communicative and sensitive to Patty's anxieties.

Of course, some intimidators love to play the blame game and may continue to be defensive. But the more you focus on resolution, the stronger you'll feel in the face of any unfair accusation—and the faster you'll find a productive solution.

Whatever you do when facing off with a thug, do *something*. If you try to let his tough talk roll off your back, a practiced intimidator will trample you into a doormat. Our strategies for fighting back might not give you the short-term thrill of an I-won-the-battle-of-wills victory dance, but they will help you neutralize a variety of meanies.



Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen are the authors of Difficult Conversations (to be published this month by Viking), from which this article is adapted.