

By Invitation

How to respond to threats with more than fight or flight

It's human to pursue fight or flight when faced with physical threats, but non-physical threats – like those to our reputation – require more than that.



David Chan

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Something is a threat when it is intimidating, and comes from individuals who we believe intend to harm us.

A threat is physical when the intended injury is bodily harm or damage to property, as is the case in the threat of terrorism or violent crime.

In our personal and work lives, we may have to deal with non-physical threats too. They often occur in a dispute, where claims and counter-claims escalate into offending remarks and direct demands, with one party perceiving that the other is making a threat.

Take, for example, the dispute among the Lee siblings over the late founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's family house at 38, Oxley Road. Each side claimed to be on the receiving end of threats allegedly made by the other.

Whether we believe them or not – and some claims may not be verifiable – their perceptions or claims of threats added fuel to an already-heated dispute.

The dispute was especially heated given the characters involved – eldest child Lee Hsien Loong is the Singapore Prime Minister and sister Lee Wei Ling and brother Lee Hsien Yang are successful in their own right. There is also the context in which it evolved, the national implications of the allegations, the attention it attracted and the public resources it has consumed.

For most of us, the scale of our private disputes will not be as high-stakes or dramatic. But we can empathise with how it feels when faced with a threat in a dispute.

Most people react strongly to physical threats. But even when threats are non-physical, they can be experienced as very intimidating, when they threaten



our social, mental and emotional well-being – when we feel they may ruin our reputation, dishonour our dignity, reduce our rights or deny us the recourse that we deserve.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

Psychology research shows that when faced with a threat – physical or non-physical – we experience a physiological and psychological state that prepares us for “fight or flight”.

This is a state of heightened alertness and energy. It is an automatic first human reaction that prepares us, physically and mentally, to take on the threat and fight it, or retreat and run away from it.

Being braced to act prepares us, but we still need to make the personal decision to fight or flee, or react in some other ways.

How does one decide which

action to take? The answer can be very different between physical and non-physical threats.

A threat is more real if we know what harm the impending attack intends to cause, and if we can anticipate how it may hurt us.

The threat is intimidating if we think there is imminent danger. How likely will the attack actually occur? What is the extent of the harm? Is the attack about to happen?

In short, we take threats seriously when we consider them specific, substantive and severe, and believe they may soon translate into actual attacks.

When a threat is imminent, the immediate concern should be to prioritise and protect the well-being of the target of the threat – which can be a person, group or organisation.

We also should safeguard the well-being of innocent others who

may suffer collateral damage.

PHYSICAL THREATS AND TERRORISM

One real physical threat Singapore faces is that of terrorism, which has the capacity to cause harm to people and society. This has become clearer given the recent detention of radicalised Singaporeans and foreigners living here.

Intellectually, Singaporeans understand the SGSecure tagline “Not if, but when”.

Practically, though, we need to know what to do in a terrorist situation, and not be complacent in thinking that we will not personally encounter a terrorist incident. Or think that we will just deal with it when it happens.

Otherwise, in an extreme threat situation, we may “freeze” instead of “fight or flight” – standing there in fear and doing nothing. In a terrorist incident, to freeze is

usually a worse choice than to fight or take flight.

In a physically threatening situation, such as hearing sounds of gunshots or explosions, or witnessing an attacker hurting people using a vehicle or knife, the normal human response is “flight” and not “fight”. So our security agencies' message to “run, hide, tell” makes good sense.

But in some situations, it is impossible or impractical to run or hide. Thus, the authorities in some countries are also advising people to fight for survival of self and others as a last resort, because doing nothing will not stop the attacker. Fighting the attacker can also potentially stop or minimise the harm to casualties while waiting for the police to arrive.

People who are physically fit or trained in self-defence are more likely to fight. But an ordinary person can also fight back and make a positive difference. For example, some authorities have suggested that one “swarm tactic” is for several people around to act collectively by throwing things at the attacker to stun or delay him from attacking, while others may try to restrain and stop the attacker.

The physical threat of terrorism is real and present. We need to be prepared and heed the advice of our security agencies. It will increase our chances of responding effectively to save lives.

NON-PHYSICAL THREATS AND DISPUTES

Physical threats have clear malevolent intentions. In contrast, the intention of many non-physical threats can vary widely.

In fact, sometimes the intimidation – not to mention its intention – may not even be apparent to the person making the threat.

For example, in a dispute, someone may make a verbal threat out of anger rather than a real intention to cause injury. Or a person may see his demand as a logical reaction to protect and pursue his legitimate interests, while it is perceived as a threat by the receiving end.

Instead of shedding light on issues that matter, such emotions and perceptions in heated disputes provide fertile ground for misunderstandings, which multiply readily. Unintended threats then morph into actual intimidation. As both parties reciprocate an adverse action with another, it creates a negative spiral that gets out of control and proportion.

When individuals are in a dispute, they have a confirmatory bias to see assertions and requests as personal intimidation and threats. Fear, anger and suspicion take over. They become less likely to interpret information and events objectively.

Even an agreement on what the facts are is sometimes impossible, especially if each party believes that they have done everything right and all the fault lies in the other party.

How then to respond effectively to non-physical threats? The answer is to keep in check our tendency to pursue “fight or flight”. To do this, I suggest the following three Rs.

• Reflect

Control the impulse to immediately fight back or reciprocate with our own threat. Confrontation worsens

the situation when everyone is consumed with emotions and not thinking rationally.

Never react in a patronising or provocative manner – it will only intensify the dispute. Treat others with dignity and respect, and they will become more reasonable, and more likely to focus on the positives than magnify the negatives.

Be sincere and mean what we say, in and outside the dispute. Disparaging and complaining about the other party will not address the substantive issues that matter.

So, refrain from acting impulsively. Be composed, not confrontational. It helps to be calm, cordial and consistent.

• Reflect

See things from the other person's perspective. Reflect on how things have come to this situation where threats have to be made.

We tend to interpret things to fit our beliefs and position. So gather information from multiple sources and try to be objective. Consult others who have expertise, but also those who can be trusted to tell the truth.

Identify and acknowledge the mistakes we may have made. If we cannot find any, even in a heated and prolonged dispute, then perhaps we need to be more honestly humble.

• Resolve

Stop posturing and do less political strategising. Take concrete actions to reduce the damage, repair the relationship and resolve the issues, even if it is difficult to reconcile completely and restore things to what they were before the dispute.

Focus on common and complementary interests, even if disagreements remain. This often involves being gracious and generous in spirit, without compromising truth and integrity.

Bearing a grudge is maladaptive. Being vindictive hurts ourselves too, not just others. So learn to let go. Forgiveness is often a strength and not a weakness. This is less about being saintly magnanimous, but more about being adaptive in a principled and pragmatic way.

WHAT IT ALL MEANS

For physical threats such as terrorist incidents, we need to respond with fight or flight, and not freeze.

But for non-physical threats, fight and flight are often not good options. This is true especially in disputes arising from different views, perceptions of unfair treatment or unreasonable demands, things taken out of context or misrepresentations of our position.

Put in another way, it is not always a matter of deciding between retaliate and retreat. The effective way to respond to many non-physical threats is to refrain, reflect and resolve. And do so objectively, responsibly and constructively. Whether threats are real or illusory, our reactions to them matter much to the outcome and its impact. Everyone should be sensitive and sensible.

Above all, see what is at stake. Do not under- or over-react. Different threats require different acts.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer is director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute and professor of psychology at the Singapore Management University.