

HOW THE MOST COMMON COPING STRATEGY BACKFIRES (PLUS HOW TO FIX IT)

Don't let overcompensation steal your credit!

Maybe the moons of Saturn have aligned. Maybe a warthog saw his shadow. Maybe the chicken flew at midnight. Everywhere I look, I've been seeing one particular safety behavior—a coping strategy that makes us feel better in the moment, but often backfires.

It's called *overcompensation*.

At the grocery store the other day, the man in front of me was super-duper nice to the checkout clerk: Thank you SO much! I really appreciate it. This is AWESOME. You have an amazing day, okay? coupled with a big grin.



A client of mine told me she put 5 hours of prep work into a half hour meeting and rehearsed her presentation 27 times.

I did it myself: at a get-together with some parents from my kids' school, I realized I was trying a little too hard to be super-friendly and super-agreeable.

Overcompensation is being ...

OVERLY-NICE.
OVERLY-GENEROUS.
OVERLY-FRIENDLY.
OVER-PREPARED.
OVER-EXPLAINING.
OVER-REHEARSED.
OVERDRESSED.

But when we overdo it, two things happen:



First, the overcompensation gets the credit for keeping us safe. If we prep for 5 hours and we don't make a fool out of ourselves at the meeting, all that prep work gets the credit rather than our skills and knowledge.

When we over-do anything, our over-the-top-coping gets the credit for us not getting judged or rejected, *but really we were safe all along.*

Second, overcompensation often backfires. Being overly friendly can come off as fake or insincere. Being overly generous makes the receiver feel awkward. Over-explaining comes off as a lecture.

When we over-do things, our over-the-top-coping *sets us apart from others even when our intention is to be liked and accepted.*

Does this mean we have to do a 180? To not care what others think and go through life not giving an f? Should the guy at the supermarket have ignored the cashier and thrown the receipt in his face? Should my client have skipped the prep work and winged her presentation? No, not at all.

The answer isn't to flip the script. Instead: roll it back a little.

Instead of being overly nice, simply be nice.

Instead of overpreparing, simply be prepared.

The guy at the supermarket might express his genuine friendliness appreciation rather than pumping it up to over-the-top technicolor. He'll realize he doesn't need to overdo it to have a friendly interaction, plus he won't risk coming off as slimy.

For me, at the parent get-together, I can connect and get to know people by being friendly and agreeable. I don't have to push so hard or risk coming off as disingenuous in the process.

The takehome?

Stay nice. Stay generous. Stay friendly. Heck, these days, being nice is downright revolutionary. We all need more civility and consideration and smiles. But we don't need overcompensation to get the credit. The credit is all yours!





The Eight Levels of Disclosure

LEVEL 1: GREETINGS:

Self-explanatory. Everyone keeps walking.

- “Hi, how are you, fine.”
- “TGIF!”

LEVEL 2: SMALL TALK:

An exchange or two about traffic, the weather, your local sports team, or other benign topics. No personal questions.

- “It's really coming down out there, but we need it.”
- “Did you get stuck in that huge backup at exit 50?”
- “How 'bout them Red Sox?”

LEVEL 3: UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTABLE QUESTIONS:

A little more personal than small talk; specifically asks about your conversation partner rather than other things.

- “Where'd you get those great shoes?”
- “Anything fun planned this weekend?”
- “Going anywhere this summer?”

LEVEL 4: UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTABLE NON-PERSONAL DISCLOSURES:

Gives your conversation partner a direction and a topic; reveals a little about you and your life.

- “Of course the universe decides to rain on the day I ride my bike to work.”
- “That new taqueria around the corner is amazing--you have to try the carnitas. Except the guacamole is weird--I think they put yogurt in it.”
- “I saw my ophthalmologist for an appointment this morning and she said she just bought a self-driving car--I didn't realize those were even on the market yet.”

LEVEL 5: UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTABLE PERSONAL DISCLOSURES:

Also gives your conversation partner a direction and a topic; reveals more about you and your life.

- “I was in a costume store the other day and I had no idea what half the kids' costumes were. The guy who worked there told me they were Fortnite characters. I feel so old.”
- “I took my niece to the aquarium on Saturday and was mesmerized by the penguins. I could have stared at them for an hour.”
- “I went to Costco on Sunday afternoon and it was so crazy that when I got home, I had to lie down.”

LEVEL 6: PRIVATE PERSONAL DISCLOSURES:

Small-v vulnerable; shows you trust your conversation partner; brings conversation to a more intimate level.

- “I'm having trouble with my 8-year old talking back--I've tried everything and I'm not sure what to do next.”
- “I have to give a presentation in twenty minutes and I feel like I'm going to throw up. I'm gonna go lock myself in a bathroom stall and breathe for a few minutes.”
- “Argh, I'm so mad at our boss--listen to what she said to me!”

LEVEL 7: VULNERABLE PRIVATE PERSONAL DISCLOSURES

Capital-V vulnerable; demonstrates deep trust and openness.

- “I think I need to quit drinking.”
- “I thought losing 50 pounds last year would magically solve all my problems, but I still feel lousy.”
- “I really like you.”

LEVEL 8: DEEPEST DISCLOSURES

For our closest relationships.

- “I've never said this to anyone before, but...”
- “I love you more than I've ever loved anyone.”

