Don't feed the trolls

> While our first instinct is always to defend ourselves and fight back, I've found silence to be the most effective tool when it comes to managing trolls online.

What I got wrong in the past

If someone is unkind, critical or just downright rude to or about us, it's human nature to want to stick up for ourselves and this used to be my response too. I didn't come across this situation much until I started working in social media and then, when I was the voice of a more corporate account with a far wider reach, I suddenly found that every now and then I'd run into keyboard warriors who would either belittle me, my employers or the people who wrote for us.

Naturally, I tried to respond to these incoming messages, to try to change points of view or share wider context. These words in turn would often be skewed or quoted out of context. It was a bit of a lose-lose situation.

The lesson and the teacher

This was a lesson that came via a teacher who followed both my personal accounts and the ones I was running for my employer. Krishnan shared some advice that really helped me. He was looking from the outside in and could see things far more clearly than I could while deeply entrenched in my interactions, good and bad, every day. He pointed out to me a couple of key things:

first, that bullies are always looking to provoke a reaction, and second, that I had a far larger network than the bullies.

With this in mind, he suggested that instead of responding and adding fuel to the fire, I simply allowed the comments to quietly die. Like many bullies, these online trolls would soon get bored if they didn't get the reaction they were looking for. What's more, by not responding, I'd be ensuring that their unkindness was seen by only a few (their network) rather than by many (my network).

It was difficult advice to follow because it went against every natural instinct I had, but it worked an absolute treat and 'do not feed the trolls' is an adage I've lived by for many years now.

What I do now

I continue not to feed the trolls and have learned to make liberal use of block and mute functions. If people are spoiling for a fight, they've picked the wrong person. Again and again, I've been amazed how people just slink away if you don't give them the satisfaction of a reaction.

One thing I did get wrong once was to share a comment that someone had made to me on LinkedIn that had left me reeling and baffled. I tweeted a screenshot not because I wanted anyone to respond to the comment but because I wanted to check whether anyone could elaborate on this point of view, or help me understand whether I should be doing things differently or better.

Within minutes, my lovely network were piling in on this man on LinkedIn. In their kind defence of me, they were pretty unkind to him. As soon as I realized what was happening, I deleted the tweet and published another asking people not to comment on LinkedIn. The context entirely escapes me now, but I do remember feeling guilty for how this onslaught must have made the commentor feel. I've never since shared these kinds of comments because trolls are people too and I often find myself wondering

about how someone must be feeling in order to make such comments in the first place.

Looking ahead

There is definitely no troll-feeding in my future. The one thing that is changing is the way I'd like to use my presence online. I've lived a pretty uncontroversial life online for many years because I find conflict difficult and have always been wary about expressing an opinion on topics where I know there are strong and polarized feelings. However, there are some big topics that I do have strong opinions on, and opinions that are backed by scientific evidence and where the contrary opinion has the real potential to do harm to children and young people. I no longer feel that in order to have a calm and quiet life I can keep quiet. I need to be braver in using my voice, but in doing so, I need to think really carefully about how to manage the feedback I get because no matter how good I get at ignoring malicious, unsubstantiated words, it's not easy and may feel harder if there is more of it to contend with.

⬇ THINGS YOU COULD TRY ▬▬▬▬▬

Here are some things you could try if you'd like to apply this lesson to your own life:

1. **Simply don't respond** – if someone is spoiling for a fight, just ignore them.

2. **If you must respond, write it, save it, then send it** – never respond in the heat of the moment. Either wait for some time to elapse and write your response when you are feeling calmer, or write your response and save it in draft and reread and edit it before sending it. Slowing down interactions like this will take some of the heat from the flames, compared to a quick-fire back and forth, and will give you time to ensure

that your response is considered and reasonable and not open to misinterpretation.

3. **Work out your anger by writing and ripping** – it can be hard not to respond to really horrible things said to us even if we know that it's the best course of action. Often, we have so much anger and rage bubbling up inside us that it needs an outlet. My favourite thing to do in this situation is to write a response, with good old-fashioned pen and paper, getting out everything I need to say. And then I tear it into tiny, tiny, tiny shreds before continuing with my day. It works wonders.