



Conversational kung-fu: channeling negative energy through a positive outlook

Kung-Fu has been described as the study of energy redirection. One of the core tenets of this ancient Chinese martial art focuses on channeling the aggression of one's opponent into positive energy used as a defense or counter-attack. Watching a Kung-Fu master execute a form (or a series of maneuvers) is like listening to a symphony composed on the spot; it is true poetry in motion (check out [this video](#)). Students of Kung-Fu call our personal energy *Chi* (pronounced "chee") – an internal force that can be directed and focused to achieve power and control over an aggressor. I believe this idea of *Chi* is very relevant when we think about conversations among our teams every day. The gurus call it *Karma* and know that the energy we release, expressed through our communication, can have a positive, uplifting impact over one another or it can be a detrimental, destructive force to those around us; it all depends on our outlook.

Let me illustrate... Have you ever experienced the "negativity pile-on?" I have seen them way too often. The negativity pile-on can take on many forms and occurs in many personal and professional settings. Let's say you are pitching a new idea at a weekly staff meeting. You have worked on this idea for weeks and are excited to bring the group your new innovation. You flawlessly present your work, get through your presentation hitting every major point and you open the meeting up for questions from your colleagues.

The first person speaks up and says:

“Don’t you think this is a bit overkill? Can’t we just get by with what we have?” ***PUNCH***

The second person chimes in:

“The numbers don’t seem to add up here. Did you run this by Frank in Accounting?” ***KICK***

The third person adds:

“Is this really a priority at this point in the fiscal year?” ***TAKE-DOWN***

And on...and on... Suddenly you are a defendant at a Congressional inquiry rather than a staff meeting of your peers. Hostile and aggressive audiences are a fact of life and are one form of a negativity pile-on we all encounter. However, all is not lost. You can prepare for this aggression by channeling the negativity and neutralizing it with positive energy.

It may look something like this:

*****PUNCH*****

“Don’t you think this is a bit overkill? Can’t we just get by with what we have?”

“Great question. ***DISARM That was definitely the first option we looked at; do nothing and get by with what we currently have. ***VALIDATION*** But actually there is greater danger in staying on the path we are on. Let me take you back to slide 7. Based on our analysis, it puts us at risk if we don’t take action this next quarter... ***COUNTERPOINT***”***

*****KICK*****

“The numbers don’t seem to add up here. Did you run this by Frank in Accounting?”

*“You’re right that the numbers are high; especially given this is a new capability for us. *****VALIDATION***** I worked with Frank as well as the Finance team to run a proforma estimate of the total cost of these recommendations. *****ADDRESSES THE CONCERN***** The team has validated the model and they do believe this is the right way to go *****REINFORCE***** but I definitely understand your reaction on the cost. I had the same thought as I looked at it at first. *****EMPATHY*****”*

*****TAKE-DOWN*****

“Is this really a priority at this point in the fiscal year?”

*“I definitely hear your concern on timing. *****UNDERSTANDING***** We are late in the fiscal year, budget is thin and revenue numbers are not even in yet. *****VALIDATION***** But, I do believe there is real benefit in moving on this opportunity now. The vendors have cut us a substantial price break in exchange for some joint-marketing commitments and this will put us at least six months ahead of our competition in terms of offering this service to our customers. If we wait, we will have lost this opportunity. Now is the ideal time to take action from our end. *****COUNTERPOINT*****”*

Negative comments in a meeting, board room or team setting can take us by surprise but they should not let it de-rail us. Sometimes the highest ranking official in the room sets the tone for all questions to follow. If he or she asks a question that indicates support and approval, all questions that follow will be positive, and the opposite is also true for negative, critical comments. The trick is: counter the negative energy with a positive outlook. Disarming the other party with positive statements like “great question,” “that’s an excellent point,” or “yes, I definitely understand” helps to validate that what they are feeling is OK. Once

the person is validated and feels understood, you can make your counterpoint in a way that addresses the concern in a factual manner. Now, of course don't make anything up. If you don't know the answer or the person exposed a hole in your logic, thank the person for pointing it out and commit to following up on problem.

Another place we see the negativity pile-on is a team room setting. Often we work in teams for long periods of time to solve tough problems. Blame lack of sleep, long hours, lack of exercise or what you ate for lunch, but sometimes the tone and energy in the room goes south... What once was a team firing on all cylinders is now runaway train heading off the cliff.

You may hear things like:

"This is crazy, no one will even look at this stuff; why do I have to work all night to get it to Jimmy before the morning?" ***SLAP***

"I'm just going to send this off to my manager, Mary, and let her deal with it." ***JAB***

"I think Jane is being totally unfair; this isn't what I signed up for when I joined the project." ***UPPERCUT***

Now don't get me wrong, sometimes you just need to vent...and venting is healthy. An empathetic ear of a colleague or team member is pure therapy. Good leaders know when to just listen to their team. But there is a line that, when crossed, changes the tone and energy of the group from productive to destructive. When that line is crossed, you have a decision to make: pile-on and add to the mounting negative energy or redirect the group's *Chi* and inspire the team to think and act differently.

The scenario may go something like this:

*****SLAP*****

“This is crazy, no one will even look at this stuff; why do I have to work all night to get it to Jimmy before the morning?”

*“I hear you; it’s been a long day. *****DISARM***** Long week actually! We’ve been here for 12 hours and probably have 2-3 more hours to go. *****VALIDATION***** Why don’t we take a 15-minute coffee break and come back to this with a clear head. I’ll help you compile the numbers while you focus on the format and narrative of the report. That should speed things along. How does that sound? *****POSITIVE SOLUTION*****”*

*****JAB*****

“I’m just going to send this off to my manager, Mary, and let her deal with it.”

*“Mary definitely has a high bar for quality. *****VALIDATION***** Do you mind if I take a quick look at it? I’ve worked with Mary for a couple of years and have an eye for what she looks for in a memo. I can give you some pointers and we can send the memo together from both of us if you like. *****POSITIVE SOLUTION*****”*

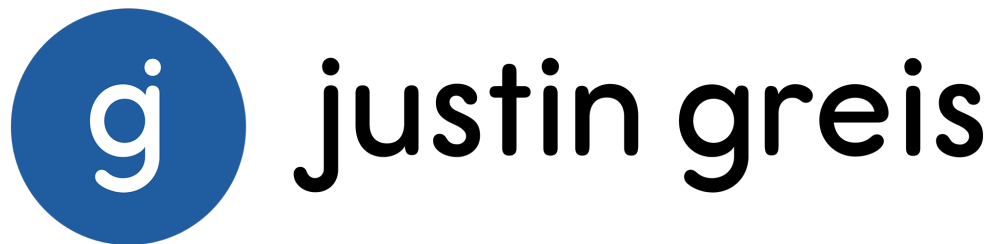
*****UPPERCUT*****

“I think Jane is being totally unfair; this isn’t what I signed up for when I joined the project.”

*“I understand how you feel. *****VALIDATION***** I’m also working in new territory and doing my best to pick up the nuances of this project. *****SYMPATHY***** What do you think we can both do to make the most of our time on this project? *****EMPATHETIC, SOLUTION ORIENTED QUESTION*****”*

All responses have one common thread; a positive outlook, an outlook that takes the group *Chi* and directs it towards a productive outcome. You don't even need to have the solution in every case. The third *****UPPERCUT***** example simply engages the other person in a productive dialog about how to improve the situation for them both.

The negativity pile-on is dangerous trap we must all watch out for, but you don't have to fall prey to it. A positive outlook can make the difference between success and failure of a team. Do what Kung-Fu masters have been doing for centuries: use your *Chi* to redirect the flow of negative aggression and turn it into positive energy. Practice *Conversational Kung-Fu*.



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(nice to meet you)

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