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Crisis Communication Using the S.T.A.I.R. Way

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Guiding Questions

1. Why do people react in ways that may result in an angry situation (creating a potential crisis for your school system)?

2. How can a person accurately assess the degree of volatility in angry situations (getting an accurate read)?

3. What strategies are best to apply in order to manage your image in the midst of a crisis situation (constructing the best message)?

Experience with Crises?

Identify an experience you have had that required you to respond verbally or in writing to a crisis situation.

What Causes People to Become Angry?

According to William Glasser, M.D. (*Choice Theory,* 1998), the difference between what a person wants and what a person has creates anxiety. The larger the gap, the greater the anxiety. When anxiety gets high enough people can react angrily.
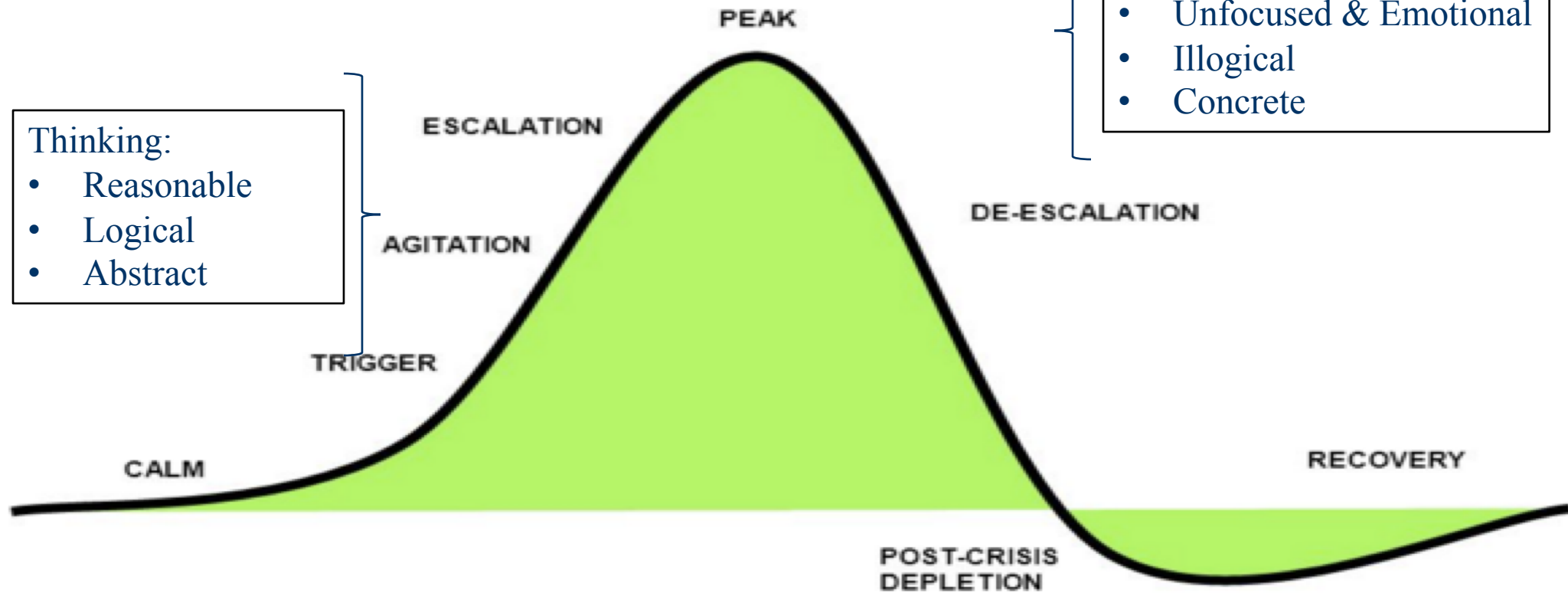
This gap is created when basic needs go unmet.

What Causes People to Become Angry?

Glasser (1998) identifies five basic needs:

1. The Need to Survive
2. The Need to Love & Belong
3. The Need for Power
4. The Need for Freedom
5. The Need for Fun

THE ESCALATION CYCLE

Thinking:
- Reasonable
- Logical
- Abstract

Thinking:
- Unfocused & Emotional
- Illogical
- Concrete

PEAK

ESCALATION

DE-ESCALATION

AGITATION

TRIGGER

CALM

RECOVERY

POST-CRISIS DEPLETION

Adapted from the IRIS Center: http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/

Part I: Important Research

Three important bodies of research are worth highlighting when desiring to de-escalate others:

1. Image Repair Theory
2. Attribution Theory (due to time, coverage of this theory is limited)
3. Impression Management

Communication* and the Bigger Picture

Words I Use
7%

Vocal Element:
How I Talk
38%

Non Verbal Element:
How I Look
55%
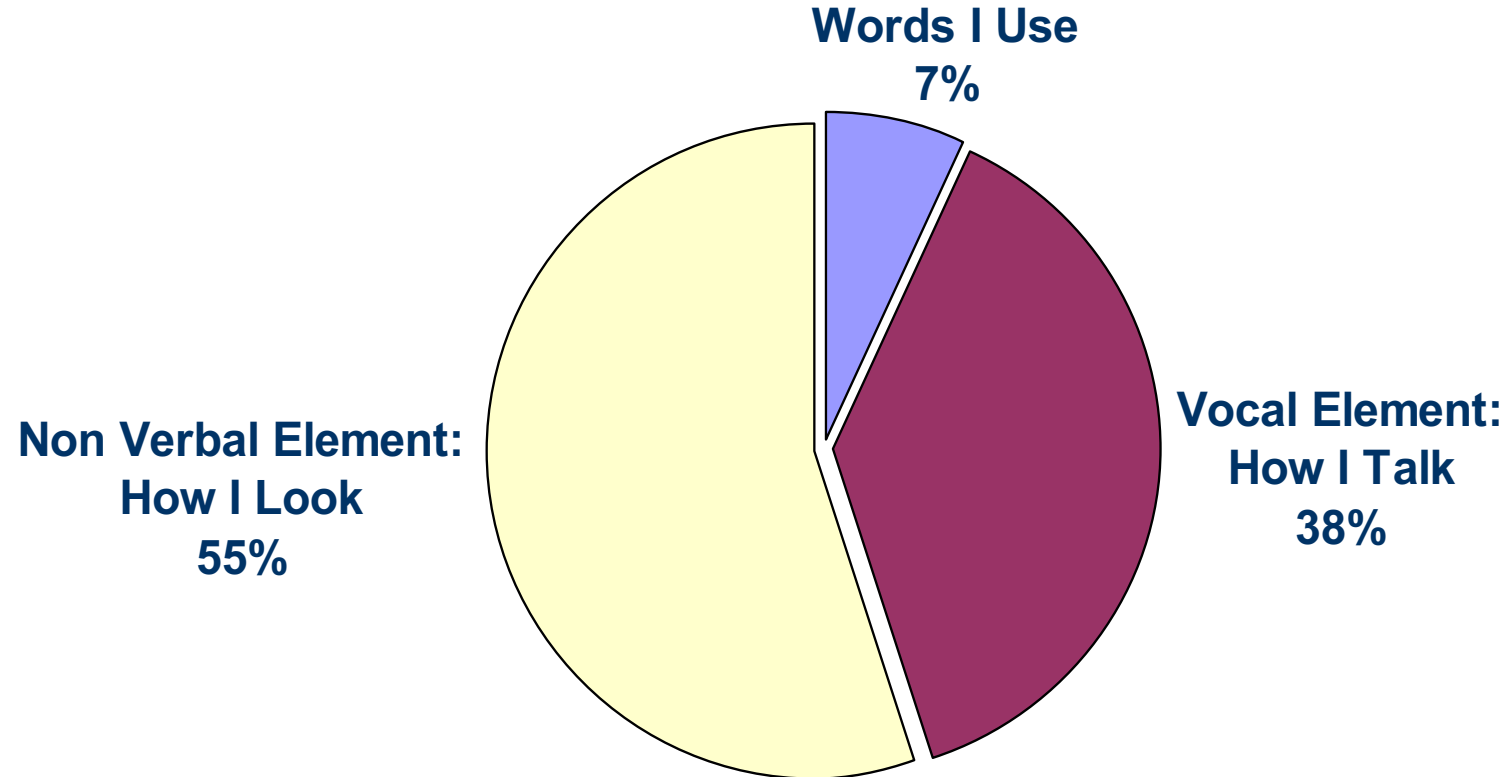
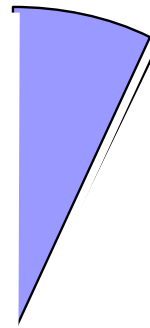*Mehrabian, Albert (1972). Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions & Attitudes

Today's Focus

It is important to note that while the strategies discussed today may effectively de-escalate crises and manage image, how you speak and the way you look when speaking can and do significantly impact the overall effectiveness of your message.

Words I Use
7%

Image Repair Theory

William Benoit (*Accounts, Excuses, & Apologies,* 1995) argued that when an incident occurs that affects how others perceive you (your image), your credibility with that audience is damaged.

Regaining credibility is necessary in order to regain your persuasive ability.

Image Repair Theory

In his theory, Benoit identified strategies that, when used properly, could serve to rebuild or repair a person's image or credibility before a target audience.

His strategies were compiled from the professional literature on account-work, excuse-making, and apologia.

Image Repair Strategies

Denial
- Simple Denial
- Shifting the Blame

Evading Responsibility
- Provocation
- Defeasibility
- Accident
- Good Intention

Reducing Offensiveness
- Bolstering
- Minimization
- Differentiation
- Transcendence
- Compensation

Corrective Action

Mortification

Image Repair Theory: Denial

Simple Denial: It's not our fault.

Blame Shifting: It's someone else's fault.

Image Repair Theory: Evading Responsibility

Provocation: You were provoked. Or also, your options were limited by factors outside your control.

Defeasibility: You made the best decision at the time with the information you had. Or, if you knew then what you know now another decision would have been made.

Image Repair Theory: Evading Responsibility

Accident: **The negative thing occurred accidentally. It was an "oops." You didn't mean it.**

Good Intention: **You meant better. What was intended was something no one disagrees with.**

Image Repair Theory: Reducing Offensiveness

Bolstering: **Shift focus to something worth supporting. Or also, prop up something universally valuable.** "We appreciate the work of our first responders."

Minimization: **Reduce the importance of it.** "Replacing the 'sick-leave-pool' with short-term disability does not diminish the benefits to employees as much as you think it would."

Image Repair Theory: Reducing Offensiveness

Differentiation: **It could be worse.** "Fortunately the financial impact of the state legislature's decision won't impact us nearly as bad as it will smaller districts."

Transcendence: **Rise above to a common value.** "We have to delay decreasing class size in order to focus those dollars on much-needed salary enhancements."

Image Repair Theory: Reducing Offensiveness

Compensation: **Let me make it up to you.** "We are working closely with the families impacted to ensure their needs are fully met in the transition."

Image Repair Theory: Corrective Action

This means you'll correct the mistake so that the injurious event will not likely occur in the future.

Example: "We are making several changes to ensure families will be provided for while we comply with the new law."

Image Repair Theory: Mortification

This means you're sorry and regretful that the negative event happened.

Example: "Ultimately, I am responsible for this unfortunate event. I am terribly sorry that my decision has impacted our community in this way."

Part II: A Situational Approach

We will examine a situational theory for strategy selection that de-escalates volatile situations. This theory—known as S.T.A.I.R. Theory– stands for a "Situationally Targeted Approach to Image Repair"

What Determines Crisis Severity?

According to Schlenker (1980), TWO factors, determine crisis severity. Both influence severity independently of each other.

1. The level or degree of responsibility attributed to the actor.

2. The level or degree of undesirability the event has in relation to the audience. *This is also known as the perceived negativity associated with the event.*

Two Dimensions of Crisis Severity

STRONG LEVEL
UNDESIRABILITY

WEAK LEVEL
UNDESIRABILITY

LOW LEVEL
RESPONSIBILITY

HIGH LEVEL
RESPONSIBILITY

Two Dimensions of Crisis Severity
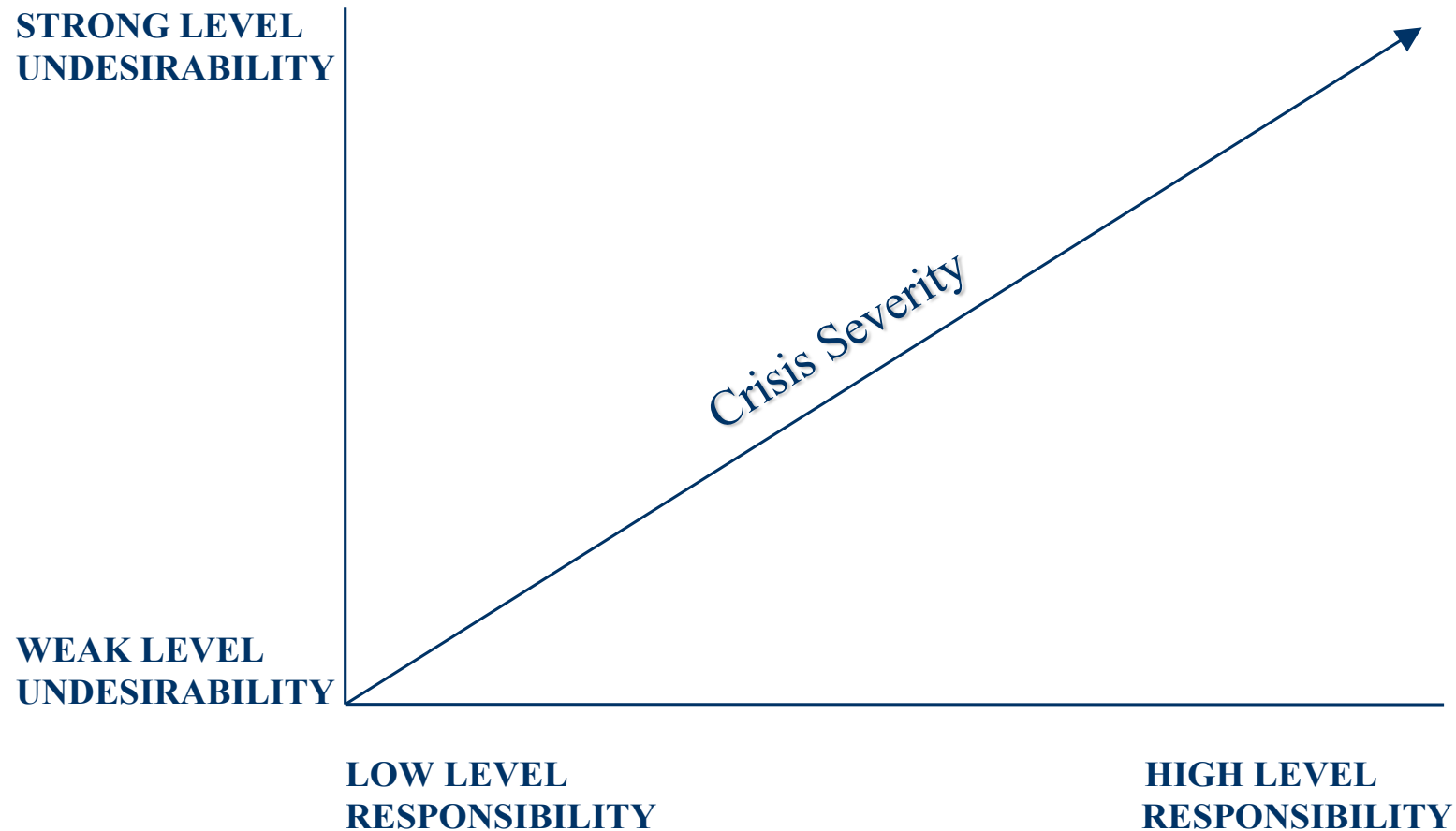
Choosing Strategies *Prescriptively*

Higgins and Snyder (1989, p. 79) said that there are two major categories of strategies:

1. Linkage Strategies. These are designed to weaken "any perceived connection the [individual] may have to the bad act."

2. Valence Strategies. These seek to downplay the negativity associated with acts for which responsibility is unavoidable.

The S.T.A.I.R. Way to Image Repair
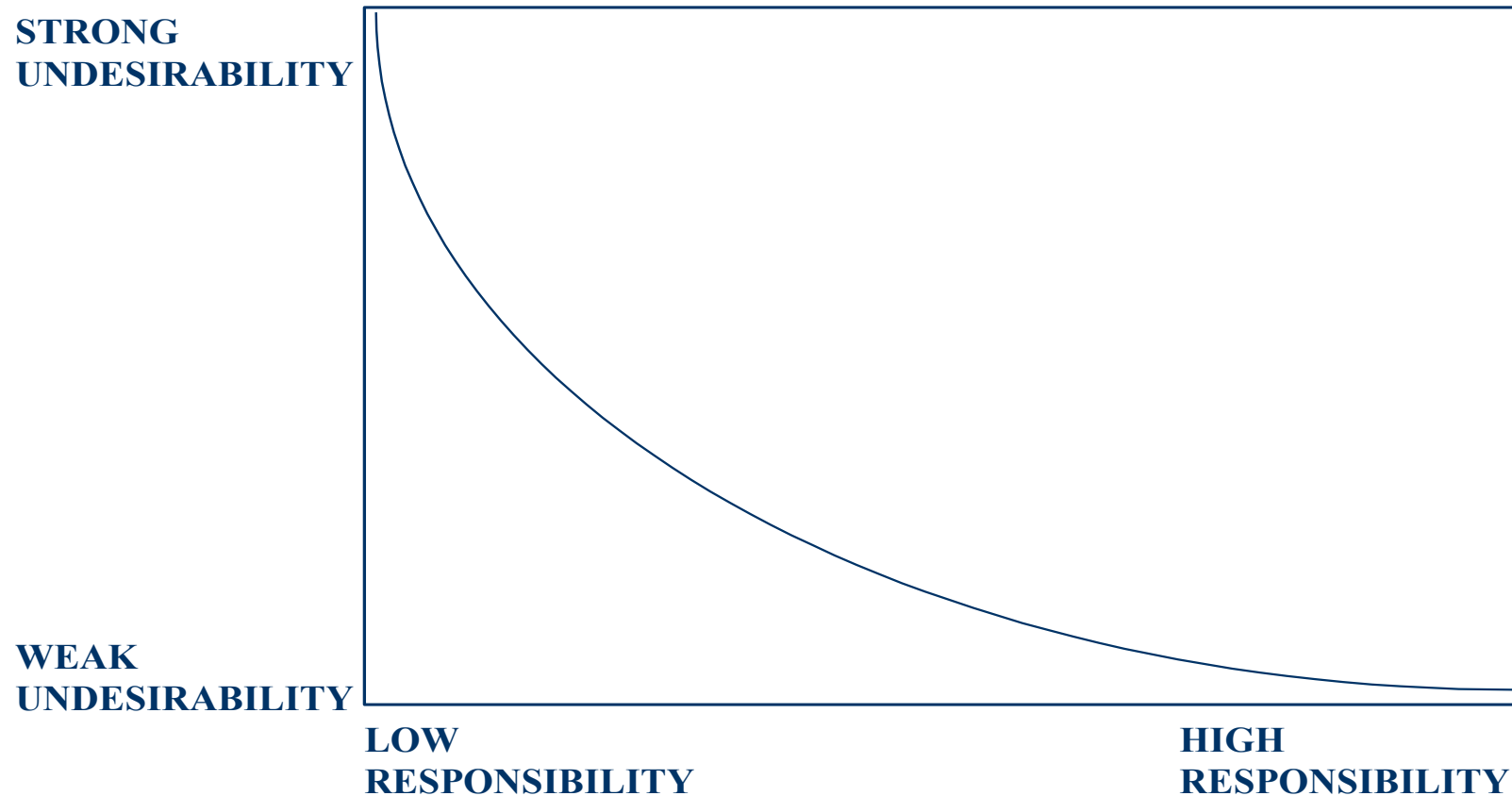
**STRONG
UNDESIRABILITY**
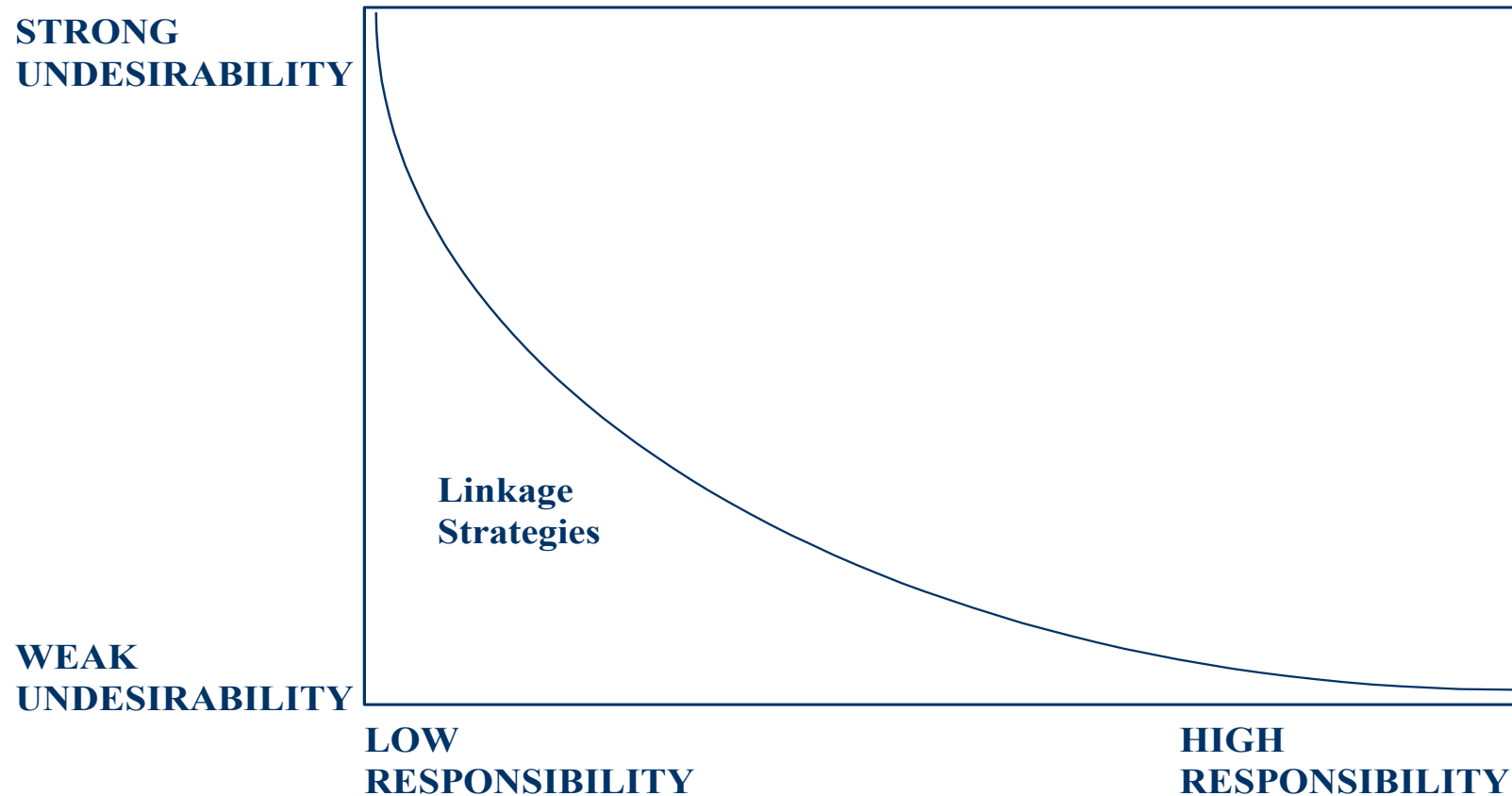
**WEAK
UNDESIRABILITY**
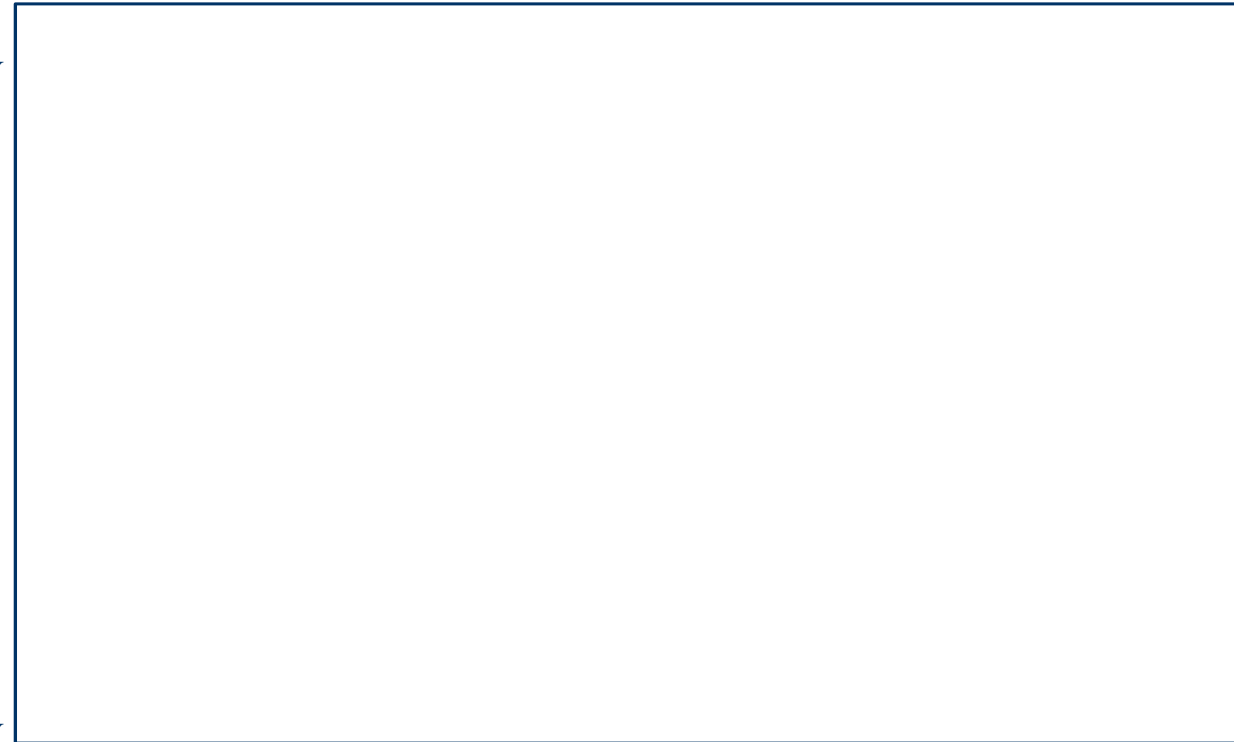
**LOW
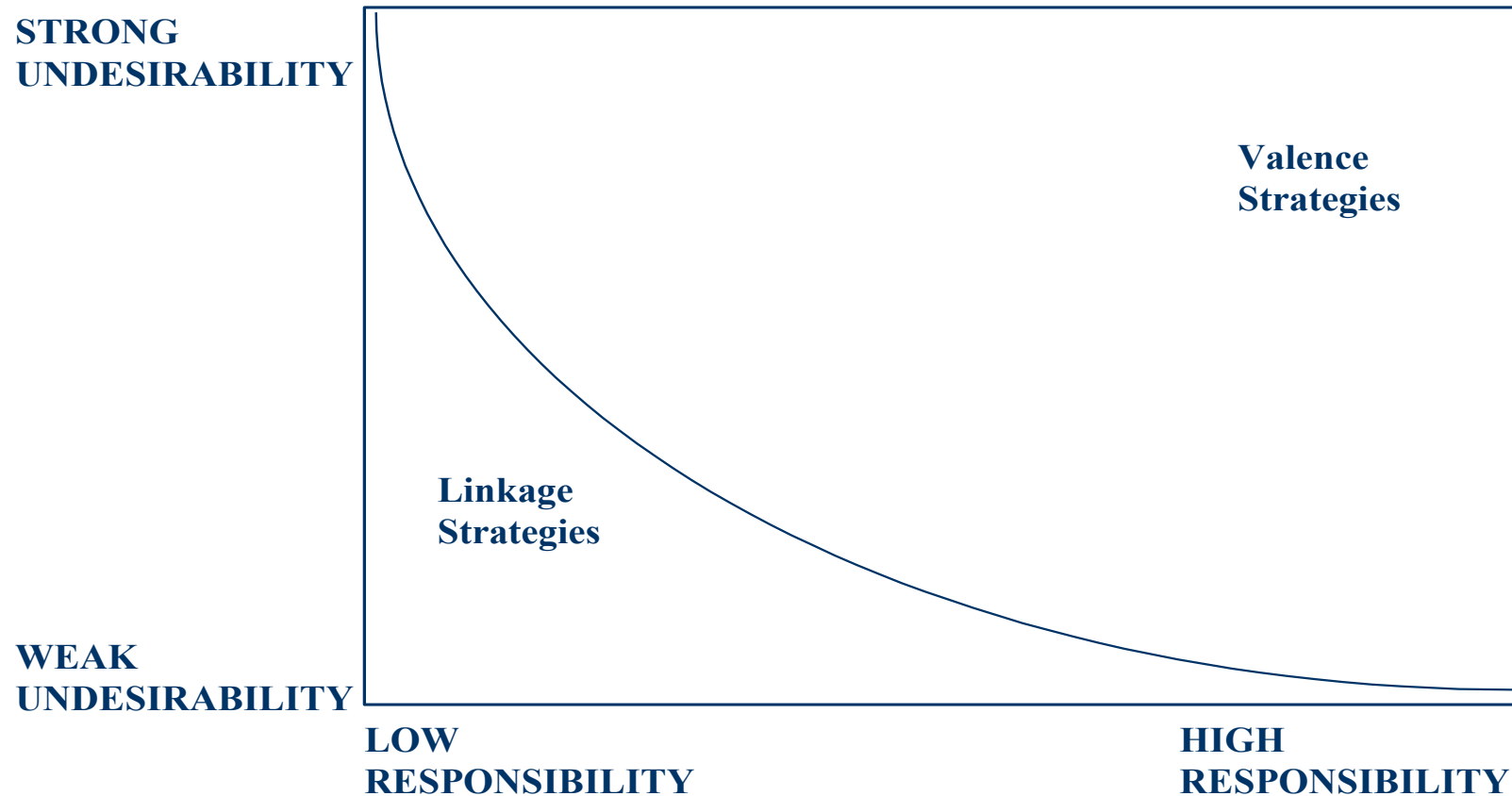RESPONSIBILITY**

**HIGH
RESPONSIBILITY**

The S.T.A.I.R. Way to Image Repair

The S.T.A.I.R. Way to Image Repair

The S.T.A.I.R. Way to Image Repair
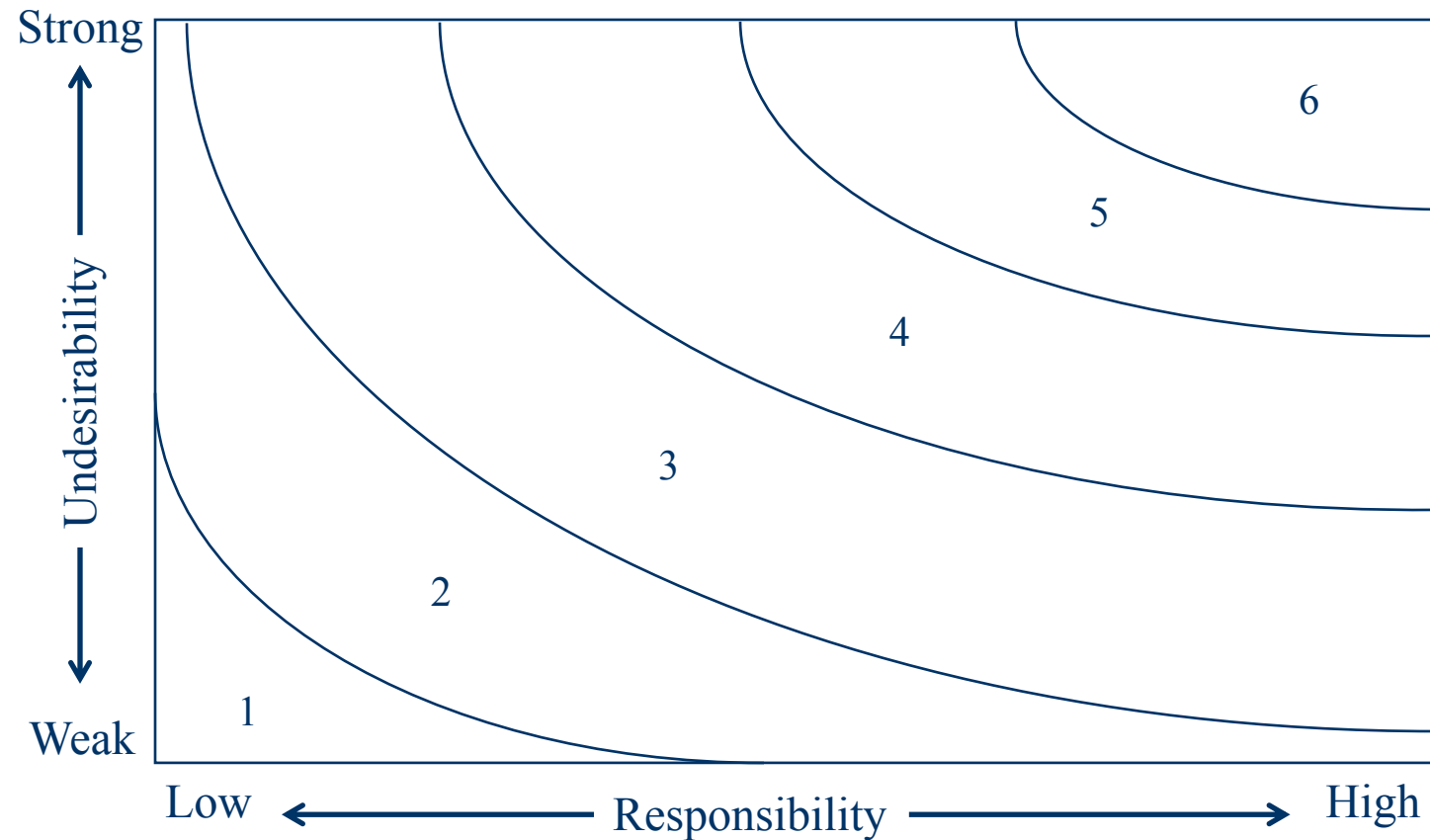
Image Repair Strategies

| Linkage Strategies	Valence Strategies
Denial	Bolstering
Blame Shifting	Minimization
Provocation	Differentiation
Defeasibility	Transcendence
Accident	Compensation
Good Intentions	Corrective Action
	Mortification

The S.T.A.I.R. Way to Image Repair

The S.T.A.I.R. Way to Image Repair

Linkage:
1. Denial, Blame Shifting
2. Defeasibility, Provocation,
   Accident, Good Intention

Valence:
3. Minimize, Differentiate
4. Bolster, Transcend
5. Correct, Compensate
6. Mortification
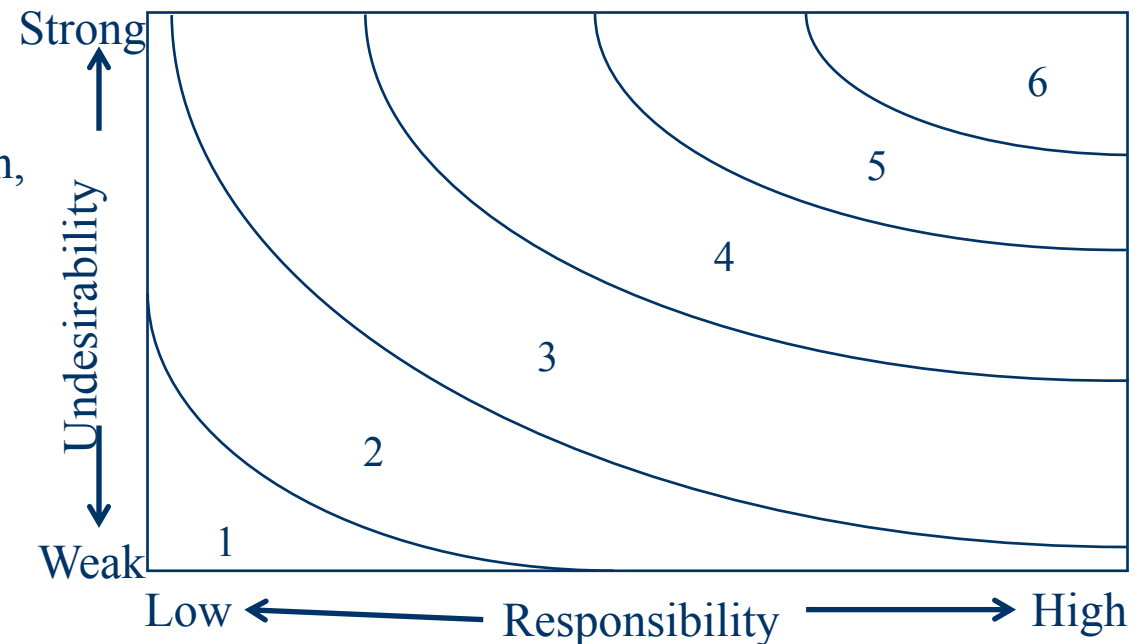
Part III: Practice Opportunities

By applying the S.T.A.I.R. theory to different scenarios, you can gain confidence using this approach.

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COMMUNICATING WITH ANGRY EMPLOYEES & OTHER STAKEHOLDERS USING THE S.T.A.I.R. WAY

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