

A Cancel Culture Primer and Survival Guide

Advice from a Member of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

Cancel culture promotes ostracizing or excluding (“cancelling”) targeted persons from social, professional, creative and commercial status and activity. Its cohorts engage in accusatory complaints, vehement protests, and public shaming. It frequently aims at boycotting and character assassination against those deemed to have spoken, written or acted incorrectly by the measures of its dogmas.

Among practices cancel culture shares with recognized cults are manipulation of its often vulnerable and impressionable recruits, dedicated shunning of outsiders and defectors, and insistence on unquestioning group think. *A central issue of its ethics is that of proper authority, especially considering that its advocates typically attempt to co-opt legitimate power in their efforts to coerce or prevent individual expression.*

Cancel culture’s *close alignment with identity politics* complicates coping with its attacks. It is crucial to understand that *cancel culture’s staunchest adherents do not approach others primarily as individuals, but instead as representatives of ethnic, gender-linked or other politically defined groups*, and that it generally divides people into the allegedly “oppressed,” who must at all times receive preferential treatment, and their supposed “oppressors,” whom it seeks to remove from political and social engagement.

Targeted persons then, may be regarded by cancel culture agents as disposable avatars of enemy factions. Anyone who does not understand this point will be at a disadvantage when attempting to communicate with cancel culture proxies, who use what is essentially coded vocabulary in narrowly ideological, and even apparently counter-rational, ways.

Fear of cancellation causes members of academic and other communities to be reluctant to speak their minds. They thereby (unwittingly) collude with cancel culture through self-censoring. *These effects undermine the central purposes of education and democratic public discourse.*

A linked issue for careful consideration is the effect on society as a whole when excellence and aspiration are stifled. (What might be the effects on society of cancel culture in the STEM fields?)

Cancel culture participants may believe they are working appropriately in support of values such as:

- “diversity” (not of ideas, but of sanctioned identity groups)
- “tolerance” (for identity-based in-groups, but not for outsiders)
- “inclusivity” (of identity-based “protected” groups for such purposes as hiring quotas)
- “compassion” (toward “victimized” identity groups)
- “equity” (meaning equality of outcome, not of opportunity)
- “safety” (from words and ideas not conforming to authorized ideologies, as if from a contaminant)

- “non-violence” (meaning that disagreement with ideological positions, or use of “politically incorrect” terms, is reacted to as if such remarks (contagiously) harmed in-group members)
- “affirmation (as opposed to ‘denial’) of existence” (meaning that members of “protected” groups must be treated affirmatively regardless of merit and never “offended” or “triggered”)

If you, or anyone you know, should become a cancel culture target:

1. *You (the target) have probably done nothing wrong.* The most likely “trigger” (catalyst) would be a statement that members of an ideological group object to. It is critical to understand that connected attacks, though personalized as weapons in an immediate situation, are rarely fundamentally personal at all, since they are collectively based. Hence, in most cases the targeted person should not reasonably experience guilt.
2. *You are in good company.* At least hundreds of successful professionals have been ostracized, *some specifically for demonstrating integrity and objectivity, by citing neutrally demonstrable facts.*
3. *Don’t apologize when you believe you have done nothing wrong.* Following your conscience and exercising legal rights are not wrong actions. And your intentions matter, both legally and morally. Moreover, *if you give any credence to an unfounded attack*, by conceding as improper anything you do not really believe should have been done differently, *you further empower cancel culture to harm you and others.*
4. *Choose your words in the wake of an attack with utmost care*, even in expressing regret about an unintended outcome. *An expression of regret that a misunderstanding may have caused offense is likely to be exploited as if it were an apology for wrongdoing.* If in good conscience you decide to apologize, address yourself to trustworthy witnesses as well as to complainants, document or record your words, be sure to stress your original intentions, clarify with absolute precision what it is that you are apologizing for, and brace yourself for additional reactive condemnation.
5. *Stand firm. Be truthful and professional.* Hold your ground courageously, for everyone’s sake. And realize that while bullies may affect you in the short term, they can only damage your character and your self-respect if you capitulate to their dishonesty. You are much more likely to survive an attack successfully by refusing to give in to inappropriate demands, until your persecutors inevitably move on to a new target.
6. Point to the cancel-culture values of tolerance, empathy, and safety as they apply to the targeted person. *You may be able to turn the tables, by using cancel culture’s own stated values, to insist on constructive dialogue.* Offer reassurance that you are dedicated to a fair outcome, based on commitment to the truth, but that you will not cooperate with violations of standard morality. The target of criticism, as a human being, must be treated compassionately.

The core drawback of this strategy is conflict between your resolve to treat every individual with fairness and your opponents’ likely unwillingness or inability to regard their target in any way

except as a disposable out-group avatar and an obstacle to “social justice.” For this reason, your use of key terms, as they are conventionally (not ideologically) understood must be made clear. Since many cancel culture activists are idealistic young people, naively following directives they do not fully understand, you may have better success in carefully aimed application of cancel culture’s own principled sounding terms, when interacting one on one, and in small groups, than during more public exchanges.

7. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt notes that *appeals to reason during or after attacks are often treated by cancel culture proponents as “violence.”* Therefore, clarify the definition of violence as a “behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something,” or at minimum as overtly aggressive behavior bent on intimidation.

8. *Join and build support networks among reasonable colleagues, and others, no matter what your political or philosophical differences.* The point is that people of good conscience, who are committed to freedom of expression, demonstrate solidarity.

9. *Foster objectivity, forgiveness, gratitude and kindness. Resist and undermine bitterness and anger.*

10. *Improve your listening skills.* Stress that you are listening respectfully to the complainant’s concerns, but that that person must extend the same courtesy to you and others.

11. *Individualize interactions to maximize empathy.* Try asking the person lodging a complaint about their most positive experience of the targeted person.

12. *Insist that the complainant address the misunderstanding or disagreement and not the person.*

13. *Stress the importance of intention, which is a legal basis in our society.* For example, criminal intent, as demonstrated in premeditation, determines whether a homicide is an instance of first-degree murder. Since this is a core rule in the broader culture, *the importance of intention cannot be eliminated or trivialized. Neither can other such elements of justice as the presumption of innocence and the right of the accused to confront accusers or to secure impartial judgement.*

Final observations:

Cancel culture leaders typically train their proteges to reject reason, as if it were a weapon intended only to protect “white privilege.” Activists have been taught to dismiss any unwelcome point of argument, especially by someone they see as part of a “privileged” group. Since empathy and compassion are presumed values of cancel culture, you may decide to avoid citing “reason” or “logic,” as such, and instead stress compassion and common sense. For example, instead of saying that “rational argument has established that uncivil behavior damages understanding,” you might offer that, “as everyone knows, mutual compassion and empathy lead to better understanding and progress.”

Unfortunately, since hardcore cancel culture sponsors (sometimes employing mobs) will shout down attempts at consensus building, not every encounter can end well. *Use good sense in protecting your own and others' physical safety.* Know that significant subjection to (even exclusively verbal) aggression may have real health consequences. If necessary, do not hesitate to withdraw from an interaction, or as a last resort, to call security.

Cancel culture members proclaim the validity of almost any reaction to "triggers" by social "victims," even in some cases violence against someone whose only "offense" is membership in a group viewed as adversarial. The theoretical excuse for this contention is that the experience of "victimized" perpetrators always differs from and supersedes that of the "privileged." *The belief that any reaction to "triggering" is permissible also encompasses the notion that no amount of underprivilege, if suffered by a white person, matters. There is no prevailing against this relentlessly racist thesis because it dismisses the possibility of win-win scenarios and the importance of situational variance, as well as the value of individual persons. Such a zero-sum world view is identical to that of psychopaths. It is unquestionably pathological and authentically dangerous.* Since sustained, repeated or strident incivility, let alone physical violence, can harm anyone regardless of group membership, *this malevolent stance must be consistently and actively rejected.*

We can *combat cancel culture*, whose adherents are often angry and resentful in basic attitude, by treating others humanely and in ways that promote self-respect. Random acts of kindness can be helpful. As well, take some time every day to engage in something uplifting and health-promoting. Do your best as a supportive colleague and neighbor. Take pride in every courageous effort to become part of the solution.