

# Cancel Culture Survival and Success Strategies

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## Background Information

If you have endured a bruising encounter with cancel culture, likely as not it was unsought. Although a common beginning to such conflicts is a politically driven complaint lodged against a professional by a client or student, an exchange on social media gone sour is just as familiar a scenario. But whether you have entered a potentially controversial debate by choice, or whether you were just minding your own business when a flood of viciously defamatory class evaluations landed on your desk, once you have entered the chaos, you may welcome some strategic navigational support. Even if, so far, you have only been an appalled observer of attacks on others, you may be wondering about ways to stem the potential tide. Many cancel culture strikes fizzle out on their own if targets have the resources to outlast the tormentors. Other clashes are sufficiently serious to threaten careers or provoke legal action. The list of strategies offered here is meant to survey the overall landscape and to give you a starting point for managing your cancel culture situation, whatever the particulars.

It is crucial to understand that adherents of cancel culture approach their targets as disposable avatars of rival factions, rather than as discrete human beings. And it can be disorienting to experience the intense condemnation and draconian ideological insistence of cancel culture aggression. Targeted individuals may need to guard against suffering a “gaslighting” effect, that would lead them to question their own considered perceptions. Along these lines it is important to keep in mind that extremists among identity politics proponents largely driving cancel culture show elements in common with cult leaders, especially in terms of their absolute insistence on groupthink, no matter how irrational their tenets may be.

Cancel culture adepts have their own bullet-point playbook. They will respond aggressively to any symbolic act that threatens their status or erodes the impression that they are in control. In other words, behind the social-justice veneer lies the brutal logic of power and ego. Tactics include bombardment of every organization associated with their targets, demanding censure, discipline, disowning, firing, or expulsion.

Cancel-culture censoring typically involves vocabulary misleadingly applied as ideological jargon. Examples include:

- “diversity” (not of ideas, but of sanctioned groups)
- “inclusivity” (of identity-based “protected” groups)
- “compassion” (toward “victimized” groups)
- “equity” (forced equality of outcome, as opposed to equality of opportunity)
- “safety” (from ideologically unapproved words and ideas, as if from contaminants)
- “violence” (Deviation from ideological positions treated as if it (contagiously) harmed in-group members)

Cancel culture attacks, though often carried out against individuals, are rarely fundamentally personal, since they are ideologically (collectively) based. It can be useful to know this in order to remain calm and focused in the heat of confrontations. Cancel culture proponents are often resentful, cynical or despairing. Therefore, it can be helpful to foster objectivity, forgiveness, gratitude, and kindness, as well as to resist and undermine bitterness, as much as possible, whether or not you are currently involved in a confrontation.

## Measures for avoiding or undermining attacks in advance. . .

1. Make dedicated habits of treating others humanely, and of fostering success and self-respect among those who do not believe in their own individual capabilities or self-worth.

2. Be honest in grading and other evaluation. Generously recognize the positive in student or collegial efforts, and stress that corrections or suggestions are made only to facilitate improvement.
3. Inspire others to feel comfortable expressing their opinions during classes and professional meetings, and do not accept antagonistic reactions. Ideas are debatable. People should be treated civilly.
4. Clarify and emphasize that objectively describing ideas is not the same as promoting them. Real education, independent thought and wisdom require substantial, broadly-based and balanced knowledge, presented in fair context.
5. Support dissent and peaceful protest as legal rights. But remember that the purpose of a university is the broadening of the mind through exposure to a wide array of disciplines and ideas.
6. Improve your listening skills. Stress that you are listening respectfully, but that interlocutors must do likewise.
7. Reduce the number of campus enclaves for social grievance groups. Promote skills for successful problem solving, as an antidote to passive negativity.
8. Consider Dorian Abbot's observation that "call out culture" can parallel a game of trophy hunting, in which the higher the status of a targeted person (say, a full professor versus an adjunct) the more satisfaction the attackers feel if they perceive a victory (career damage for instance) against that person. This can include a competition of one-upmanship, in which accusers try to hyperbolically outdo one another in the course of their virtue signaling "outrage."
9. Create a network of people in your workplace and field among reasonable people, and in the broader community, even if you differ politically or philosophically. Find out whether there are unions or other groups responsible for protecting your rights, and what they can do to help in the event of an attack. Explore, join and support organizations such as the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), Heterodox Academy, the National Association of Scholars (NAS), and the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS).
10. Pick your battles, for instance if an altercation can act as proxy for some larger principle—and which you think you have a reasonable chance of winning. One litmus test is whether your opponent has already hurt and angered others, since that can positively affect your chances of support, even from those who share the attacker's views. By the same token, know when to step back from a losing exchange.

11. Understand that your good will attempts to promote useful dialogue are not at fault if an interaction goes wrong. The refusal of your opponent to engage in constructive dialogue, especially if it is aimed at compromise, is a core feature of identity politics, possibly related to the post-modernist denial of logocentrism (logic). This belief (or anti-belief) holds that honestly logical dialogue is impossible, and that only power competitions exist in human relationships. This is a pathologically cynical, zero-sum game that often cannot be won in the short term.
12. Establish a resource easily referenced and accessed that can underscore your credibility, your good character and/or the relevant facts. It might be a blog post, a published article, a podcast, or social media posts. Point people toward it where necessary, including your own professional contacts and potential allies. Keep it confident in tone, and make it short, crisp, and compelling so that it gets widely circulated.
13. Point out the consequences of such beliefs as those of Critical Race Theory, and insist that those who present themselves as virtuous need to be thoughtful about the likely ripple effects of what they are doing.
14. Refresh and deepen your knowledge of American, Canadian and other Western history, as well as philosophical and religious thought. This can help ground you, and can prepare you for successful argumentation where needed and possible, related to political correctness and the real meaning of virtue. Be aware of the tenets of politically correct positions. For instance, explore Hillsdale College's free online courses on civil rights history, philosophy and ethics, and the United States Constitution.
15. Reach out publicly or privately in support of others undergoing cancel culture ordeals. Even a quick email can be well appreciated, especially if the target is experiencing isolation on their home front.
16. Model courage by publicly refusing to go along with attacks against others, and by civilly but accurately identifying bullying behavior, as well as by telling the truth when someone is defamed.

### **Dealing with active cancel culture attacks**

17. Remain unwavering that if you (or another target) have acted in good conscience, you have done nothing wrong, and should not reasonably experience guilt.
18. Do not apologize when you know you have done nothing wrong. If you give credence to an unfounded attack, by conceding as improper anything you do not really believe should have been done differently, even by walking back an inadvertently unfortunate choice of words, you further empower cancel culture to harm you and others.

19. Stand firm, and speak courageously. Although cancel culture assaults can be devastating, you are more likely to survive one successfully by refusing to give in to inappropriate demands, until your persecutors inevitably move on to a new target.
20. Fight sanctions against you through the appropriate channels. However, focusing your efforts on your own actions, even if they are the subject of spurious accusations, is generally a mistake. Doing so changes the subject from the real underlying issues to your own supposed failings. Instead, thank complainants for illustrating the improper application of a normally held moral principle, or of a law, a statute, a regulation or other broad cultural norm.
21. Stress compassion and common sense, and yet be aware that cancel culture leaders train their proteges to reject explicitly rational argumentation, as if it were a tactic intended only to protect unjust “privilege.” Consider your interlocutors’ perspective and emphasize their more acceptable stated values, even though other ideals, such as patriotism or honoring accomplishments of the past are also important. Stress the idea that real morality is normally about lifting people up and striving toward the best in us, and not about tearing things down.
22. Don’t overwhelm an adversary with facts and figures. Be judicious in choosing key examples if details are important to your stance in a confrontation. You may choose primarily to tell stories to illustrate points, in order to build interest.
23. When appropriate, individualize interactions to maximize empathy. Try asking the person lodging a complaint about their most positive experience of a targeted individual. If the circumstances are conducive, organize a one-on-one or small group conversation between accuser(s) and target(s), with the pre-agreed goal of calmly reached fair resolution.
24. Insist that criticism be addressed toward misunderstanding or disagreement, and not toward personal character.
25. As a core societal standard, the importance of intention cannot be eliminated or trivialized. Neither can other such elements of normalized Western justice as the presumption of innocence, and the right of the accused to confront accusers or to secure impartial judgement.
26. Model honesty with civility, but implacably refuse to protect people from words, ideas, and facts.
27. Draw on the power of humor. Fear is what keeps the silent majority from speaking up, and laughter can provide an antidote. Most cancelers take themselves too seriously. A sanctimonious or fanatical spirit can be defeated by spotlighting its real essence, and lowering the social tension. As Dorian Abbot has

observed, if you deliberately choose to treat cancel culture episodes as games, it can help to keep things in perspective, and can also help you stay calm and in strategic control of your own actions.

28. Use cancel culture arrogance and overconfidence to your advantage. For instance, if bullies resort to calling out every person who has followed you on social media, observers may judge the behavior as crossing a line. So be forthright about cancel culture overreach.
29. Consider using the courts, when necessary. They invoke principles of due process, and they look askance at show trials. They also tend to be less politically skewed than universities, tech firms, and human-resources departments. Even the threat of a lawsuit can be enough to stop the cancelers. Whether you end up suing or not, *always* keep records, as the situation develops, on the assumption that you may need documents to prove your case.
30. Don't antagonize; educate. Even neutral onlookers who find cancel-culture brutality repellent may dismiss the phenomenon as afflicting just a few unlucky souls—acceptable collateral damage, as they see it, in the battle against patriarchy, white privilege, and so forth. Point doubters to resources such as The National Association of Scholars' database of cancellations, the Canceled People website, or *Quillette's* Panics and Persecutions.
31. Since hardcore cancel culture proxies have been known to agitate violently against consensus building, use good sense in protecting your own and others' physical safety.
32. You may be able to turn the tables, by judiciously using cancel culture's own stated values, such as "tolerance" and "inclusivity." Offer reassurance that you are dedicated to fair outcomes, based on commitment to the truth, but that you will not cooperate with violations of standard morality, such as vengefulness or cruelty.
33. Without resorting to name calling, overkill or dishonesty, consider judiciously turning various cancel culture practices against the perpetrators. Cancelers may not stop until they fear they could suffer the kinds of consequences that they seek to impose on others. Even companies that posture heavily in favor of social justice don't want to be stained by the behavior of mob leaders, and may respond appropriately to such actions as filing letters of protest, or posting firm but fair complaints on social media. Remember that there is a world of ethical difference between attempts to ban or otherwise punish people for their views, and acting decisively to defeat bullying.
34. Hold the moral high ground. Model decency and compassion toward your attackers, some of whom may be naive young people who do not fully understand the implications of what they are doing. Try as hard as you can to approach them with good will. Never descend to the level of insults, taunts, and *ad hominem* attacks, no matter how strong the temptation. Let the cancelers do it, and the onlookers will judge accordingly. Demonstrate civility throughout challenging interactions, *yet temper politeness with self-respectful assertiveness.*

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#### Resources Consulted or Cited:

Dorian Abbot, Associate Professor of Geophysical Sciences at the University of Chicago’s presentation on Diversity, Inclusion and Equity Initiatives: [\(14\) SAFS Abbot DIE presentation - YouTube](#)

Hillsdale College free online courses. [Hillsdale College Online Courses](#)