

Hey Buzz Off!... I am Not Defensive!

Jim Tamm & Ron Luyet

Defensiveness is a poison pill to good relationships. Remaining non-defensive is the single most important thing you can do to increase your effectiveness when working to turn conflict into collaboration.

Defensiveness, ultimately, is not about protecting ourselves from other people. People get defensive because they don't want to experience uncomfortable feelings within themselves. Getting defensive will temporarily block the feelings that they don't want to experience. The prescription for dealing with your own defensiveness, therefore, is to let yourself experience those feelings, as uncomfortable as they may be.

While defensiveness is based on fear, it is also biologically based and usually charged with energy,



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so defensiveness can sometimes be detected from physiological cues. These may include more rapid breathing, an increase in pulse rate, or feeling too hot or too cold. Defensiveness is difficult to deal with because defenses operate independently of our conscious thinking process, and they only offer temporary relief. Since they are a way to avoid uncomfortable feelings they only work as long as the individual is engaging in distorted thinking.

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Individual defenses emerged from each person's personal history. They helped people cope with the stress of growing up in a world where they had little control over their lives. A problem, however, is that defense mechanisms can assume a life of their own and unduly control adult lives without our awareness. People may continue to behave in ways that might have been useful in their childhood but are no longer helpful as adults. When our defenses take over our adult lives, we don't have defenses... they have us, and they distort our reality.

Reducing Your Defensiveness

Becoming aware of when you are getting defensive is the first step. Because the whole point of defensive behavior is to help us avoid feeling something

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we don't want to feel, we can often recognize our defensive behavior before we are aware of the underlying feelings we are trying to avoid. We can notice our defensive behavior and work backwards. For example, the thought process might go like this:

I notice that I'm getting sarcastic as I talk with my brother. I also know that getting sarcastic is one of the warning signs that I'm getting defensive. So that tells me I'm probably defensive now for some reason. I'd better try to tune in to what I'm feeling right now so I can better understand why I'm getting defensive.

It can be helpful to name your defensive behaviors to help you spot them quicker. Our workshop participants over the years have come up with unique descriptions such as: Sudden drop in IQ, Playing "poor me", High energy in the body, Withdrawal into deadly silence, Flooding with information, Trivializing with humor, Selective deafness, Wanting the last word, and many others. In our book *Radical Collaboration* we have a checklist of 50 early warning signs of defensiveness.

Once you pick your top two or three warning signs, i.e., the ones that you see in yourself most often, they will become your early warning system that you are getting defensive. When you see yourself engaging in those behaviors you know you are starting to get defensive, and that you should take action before you make things worse.

What To Do When You Are Getting Defensive

Here are five action steps that can help:

1. **Take responsibility for yourself.** Acknowledging to yourself that you are becoming defensive is a great first step. If it feels appropriate and safe, you may want to take it a step further and also acknowledge it to the people you are with, ask-

ing for their help. Of course it may not always be appropriate to ask for that help, but if you are dealing with people that you trust, it not only offsets the damage caused by the defensiveness, it can actually create greater intimacy and a stronger relationship.

2. **Slow down.** Slowing down your physiology can help. Take a break, take a walk, go to the restroom and splash some cool water in your face, or reschedule the rest of the meeting for another time. Simply taking a couple deep breaths without making a big deal about it to anyone else can also be a calming and centering experience.

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3. **Confront your negative self-talk.** Self-talk is the chatter that goes on inside your head. Negative chatter, e.g. "I can't do this", "I'm going to look like an idiot", etc. will only make things worse. Confront this negative and consciously turn it possible, e.g. "I know this is difficult but I can get through this", "I can take care of myself", etc. Being consciously aware of positive affirmations can reduce the power of unconscious negative thoughts.
4. **Detach from ineffective behavior.** If you know that your pattern when you get defensive is to flood others with information, consciously let go of that behavior and try to remain quiet, or maybe ask a question. If your defensive behavior is to withdraw into silence, consciously detach from that behavior and maybe describe your

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feeling to the other person so they have a better idea about what is going on with you.

5. **Start over.** This is a recovery model, not a model of perfection. So, when your early warning signs of defensiveness tell you that you're getting defensive, take some appropriate action to minimize the damage, and then start over. You will usually be better served by letting it go and focusing on the future rather than by blaming yourself for your defensiveness in the past.

For more help with reducing your defensiveness over the long term, take a look at our book Radical Collaboration. ■