



HOW TO WORK WITH DEFENSIVE PEOPLE

Keith Casebolt

People who feel attacked and criticized tend to act defensively. Often their reaction has little to do with you. They might feel chronically insignificant, incompetent, or unlikeable. Through that lens, all feedback is taken as critical.

Dealing with people in this state is difficult. Rather than working on work, you end up working on people. Creating a work culture that dramatically reduces defensive behavior is the ultimate goal, but even then there will still be difficult situations to navigate.

You, naturally, want to cry “Unfair! They shouldn’t be acting this way!” Here you are, struggling to prob-

lem-solve rather than blame and what you get back is the opposite.

Unfortunately, there is no magic pill for this, but there are ways to improve the chances of problem solving rather than being derailed by useless arguing and defending. Following are some strategies for calming interactions.

BEFORE

We’ll start with the preparation.

- The first strategy is to show up on their radar as harmless. Check your intentions. Are you feeling critical or impatient? If so, why? Is it the other person, or just the situation and how you feel about it? The key point here is to be aware of your

starting point, rather than act it out on them. When your unstated upset leaks out via body language, tone, etc., it nearly guarantees that a threatened person will react poorly.

- If you are having trouble empathizing with the other person and why s/he seems so threatened, ask yourself what s/he’s afraid of. You don’t need to psychoanalyze the person, just review what you know and “shop” there. See if you can for just a moment put yourself in the person’s skin and experience what s/he might be feeling. This often helps reduce the tendency to take

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the person's behavior towards you personally, reducing the likelihood that you will become defensive.

- Are you willing to take into account the other person's preference about how much s/he wants to be included, what level of control or influence s/he wants, and how transparent and open s/he wants relationships to be? There's a big difference between reflexively contorting oneself in order to avoid a blow-up and taking others' preferences into account. One is avoidance of confrontation and is characterized by care-taking and people pleasing; the other is a sober assessment of the other's preferences and making adjustments you are willing to make to help the relationship work.

An unconscious boss tactic is often to ask (defensive employees hear "summon") an employee to your office. By the time s/he shows up, s/he is pretty anxious. S/he doesn't know what you are thinking. Therefore you might tell the person (ahead of time) what you want to talk about. Rather than "Please come see me in my office," it would be "I want to problem-solve about our no-show rate. Can you come see me at 10:30?"

- Have the long game in mind. How do you want this relationship to go over time? Remember that we are all continually training others how to treat us. How will you do that? Being clear on the goal helps reduce your reactivity in any particular interaction.

DURING

What can you do during the conversation to avoid being tangled in a defensive argument?

- Anxiety is contagious. So is calmness. If you are feeling anxious, it is best to acknowledge it upfront rather

than managing and pretending. This approach is called "First Truth First." It looks like this: "I'm anxious about talking with you about this. I don't want to come across as critical, and I don't want to damage our relationship. So I just wanted to say that first..." Being vulnerable on the front end tends to be disarming. You are not acting the way the person is expecting you to act, and what you are saying doesn't feel like incoming fire. This doesn't guarantee s/he will problem solve with you, but it improves your chances.

- Get to the point and speak only for yourself. "I am worried that our no-show rate is too high and contributing to low production in our satellite office. I'd like your help in coming up with a new plan."
- Don't bring up the past unless it is useful. That will generally be perceived as piling on.
- Be clear about what you want; don't make others guess at it by asking questions that are really just statements. Don't start by saying "What do you think about our no-show rate?" when you already think that it is too high and you want it to be addressed.
- Check for listening, but don't force agreement. If you are not sure the person is tracking, just say "I'm wondering what you're hearing me say?" If s/he's not getting it, fill in the blanks.
- You might also want to mirror what you are seeing. "It looks to me like you are feeling criticized. Is that so?" If they say no, then move on. But if they say yes, clarify whether you are or aren't criticizing them, and how much. Most conscientious people (99.9% of people in healthcare) want to do an excellent job and are therefore sensitive to any messages to the contrary. On a scale of 1–10

you might be feeling your criticism is a "2," just barely noticeable. But the other person is hearing a "9," which just precedes being suspended for non-performance. Obviously, calibrating here would be helpful.

- Keep the pace of the conversation measured and don't interrupt. Don't allow yourself to be interrupted either.
- After you have discussed options, make an agreement. *Who* will do *what*, by *when*? This keeps the focus on work and doesn't allow for future confusion.

AFTER

Often people have what I call a "24-hour reaction" where more feelings and thoughts occur to them after they process their conversation with you. If the conversation was intense, or if you suspect they are likely to have a strong reaction later, address it by checking in with them. This is as simple as saying, "I'm wondering if you've had any more thoughts or reactions to yesterday's conversation..." Listen, and clean up anything that is lingering.

You will never be done dealing with people's defensive reactions, but you can manage those interactions by how you act. This starts with being vulnerable about your own fears and anxieties, clear and to the point about what you see and what you want, focused on problem solving instead of searching for the guilty, and finally making and keeping agreements. **AE**



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