

Defensiveness Warning and Response

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Overcoming the instinctive defense response is the single most important thing anyone can do to improve their effectiveness in collaboration and to become more innovative. Not only does defensiveness impede our ability to benefit from others' ideas, it degrades our ability to process our own – it makes thinking rigid, impairs problem-solving skill, distorts reality, and moves the priority from solving the problem to self-preservation. (Tamm and Luyet 2004).

The first step in developing a collaborative mindset is to gain a good understanding of yourself. What tends to set you off? How do you approach problems? How do you relate to others in a group setting? How scared are you of having others see your contribution as a dumb idea? Once you recognize your own reactions you can become much more effective at moderating your instinctive defense responses with reasoned thought.

Identifying defensiveness

Most often defensiveness generates identifiable emotional and physical effects, and these effects differ from one person to another. The key to managing the defense response is first to recognize the signs and then to deploy a prepared method of getting yourself back to an open mindset. Remember that once they become apparent you're already on the defense, and are likely beginning to succumb to the brain impairment described above, so it's important that you are very familiar and well-practiced with your planned remedy so you can use it when your brain isn't working at its best.

James Tamm and Roger Luyet (2004) developed what they call a "Defensiveness Action Plan" - an excellent process for identifying and managing defensiveness responses.

The first step is to identify the signs that will tell you that you're getting defensive. Tamm and Luyet identified 50 of the more common signs – first, note any that apply to you, and then pick your top three.

1. Loss of humor	26. Eccentricity
2. Taking offense	27. Being too nice
3. High charge or energy in the body	28. Selective deafness
4. Sudden drop in IQ	29. Attacking (the best defense is a good offense)
5. Wanting to be right ("No question about it")	30. Holding a grudge
6. Wanting the last word	31. Trivializing with humor
7. Flooding with information to prove a point	32. Inappropriate laughter or giggling
8. Endless explaining and rationalizing	33. Sour grapes!
9. Playing "poor me"	34. "I'm aware of that; leave me alone" (defense of awareness)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Teaching or preaching 11. Rigidity 12. Denial 13. Withdrawal into deadly silence 14. Cynicism (victim) 15. Sarcasm 16. Making fun of others (being highly critical) 17. Terminal uniqueness (I'm so special the rules don't apply to me) 18. "It's just my personality; it's just how I am" 19. Not wanting to negotiate 20. Blaming 21. Sudden onset of illness or accident 22. Confusion 23. Suddenly tired or sleepy 24. Intellectualizing 25. Acting crazy (the temporary-insanity defense) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 35. Becoming addicted to alcohol, drugs. people, shopping, working, gambling, chocolate. workshops 36. Personalizing everything 37. All-or-nothing thinking 38. Catastrophizing 39. Fast breathing/heartbeat 40. Cold, clammy skin 41. Hot, sweaty skin 42. Mind reading 43. Jumping to conclusions 44. Magnifying everything 45. Minimizing everything 46. Emotional rigidity (if I feel it, it must be true) 47. Tight stomach 48. Speaking too fast 49. Becoming physically immobile 50. Obsessive thinking
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Overcoming Defensiveness

Then list two specific actions that you will take when the signs appear. Remember that these need to be concrete actions, such as relaxation exercises or directing your thoughts in a very specific direction, that you can initiate when you're not thinking as clearly as usual. Here are a few possibilities:

Acknowledge your defensiveness

Certainly acknowledge it to yourself. Forewarned is forearmed - the simple fact of knowing that when a particular reaction appears you're probably getting defensive is often enough to enable you to back off from it, if you catch it early enough. However, these responses have a nasty habit of reinforcing themselves and quickly becoming difficult to simply turn off.

You might also acknowledge it to others in a spirit of full disclosure and an effort to mitigate the effect of your responses on them.

Physically slow down

Take a couple of deep breaths, do some relaxation exercises, take a short walk, go to the restroom, wash your hands or face, etc. This kind of action can be very effective in dialing down the adrenaline rush that is often part of the defense response.

Confront your internal dialog

When someone does something that sets off our defense response we often start up an internal discussion as to why they did or said that. These discussions can often snowball, going from "he said that because he thinks I'm stupid" to "he's going to try to get me fired." Confronting the

dialog often allows us to turn it around to something more helpful, like “he said that because he doesn’t fully understand what I’m saying – maybe I can rephrase my suggestion”.

Question your assumptions

We often go into meetings or problem-solving sessions holding assumptions about other players – “the architect doesn’t care about the budget” or “the contractor doesn’t care about aesthetics.” Some of the assumptions may actually be true, but calling them into question can have a couple of positive effects.

First, the assumptions might not be true. Questioning them acknowledges this and lets us be more objective in analyzing the other’s actions. Second, even if they are true, examining them will allow us to consider ways we could think or act to mitigate their negative effects.

The key is flexibility. If we question our assumptions about others we open up a range of possible ways of dealing with them. If we don’t actively examine them they are likely to sit in the background and continue to drive our thoughts and actions in non-productive directions without our being aware of them.

Detach

We often tend to attach our egos to the outcome of a discussion – wanting to have the group validate our intelligence by accepting our idea and/or fearing loss of face if they don’t. This attachment makes it impossible to see either our own or others’ ideas objectively, and prevents us from benefiting from others’ ideas. Consciously detaching ego from outcome allows us to focus on actually solving the problem rather than on who solves it.

References

Tamm, James W. and Ronald J. Luyet. *Radical Collaboration*, 2004