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Defensiveness: The Poison Pill to Relationships

By *Judge Jim Tamm*
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In 25 years as a judge dealing with relationship issues I almost never had to resolve legal disputes. People were almost always before me because someone got defensive and became a bad problem solver. Defensiveness is a poison pill to good relationships. In conflict, defensiveness is like blood in the water to a shark. A little here, a little there, and in no time the situation has degenerated into a feeding frenzy. 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 is to let yourself experience those feelings, as uncomfortable as they may be.

Defensiveness is also biologically based, and usually charged with energy, so defensiveness can sometimes be detected from physiological cues. These may include more rapid breathing, an increase in pulse rate, feeling too hot or too cold, or restlessness.

Defensiveness is difficult to deal with because defenses operate independently of our conscious thinking process. Another problem is that a defense can 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. It's like covering dog poop with whipped cream. It may look and smell better for a short time, but it doesn't deal with the underlying issue or clean up the real mess.

Defenses are not evil, however. 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. Acting out their defenses, 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 cause problems because they distort our reality. They distort the lens through which we see our lives, and regardless of whether the distorted lens is rose-colored, or dark and smoky, creating a sinister outlook in every situation, it becomes a burden on any good relationship.

Reducing your defensiveness:

The first step toward not acting defensively is to become aware of when you are getting defensive. It is much easier for most of us to spot our defensive behavioral responses than it is to identify the underlying feelings that we don't want to feel. Because the whole point of defensive behavior is to help us avoid feeling something 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. For example, a person may not understand that he is starting to feel unlikable when he is in the middle of a conversation with his older brother, nor that he doesn't want to feel that he is unlikable. He may, however, realize that he has once again started to react to his brother in a sarcastic manner. If he knows that one of his early warning signs of becoming defensive is to react with sarcasm, he can work backwards to better understand his feelings. 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.

A good first step can be to give a name to your first signs of defensiveness, to help you become familiar with how you behave when you get defensive. Our workshop participants over the years have come up with unique descriptions such as: Sudden drop in IQ, Playing "poor me", High energy charge in the body, Withdrawal into deadly silence, Flooding with information to prove a point, All-or-nothing thinking, Trivializing with humor, Selective deafness, Wanting the last word, Making fun of others, Cold clammy skin, Hot sweaty skin, 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 do something about it right now, before you make things worse by getting more defensive.

What to do when you are getting defensive:

Here are some general ideas that can be helpful when you are getting defensive.

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 with the people you are with. For example, saying something like "Can you go back over that again? I think I'm getting a little defensive and I may have missed your point," acknowledges your defensiveness, both to yourself and your colleagues, and asks for their help in dealing with it. 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 of deep breaths without making a big deal about it to anyone else can also be a calming and centering experience.
3. Confront your negative self-talk. Self-talk is the chatter that goes on inside your head. It is the story you are making up as you watch events unfold before your eyes. Negative chatter, e.g., "I can't do this," "I'm going to look like an idiot," "I see I'm getting defensive now and I know I'm going to screw this up," etc. will only make things worse. Confront this negative and consciously turn it positive, e.g., "I know this is difficult but I can get through

this,” “I can take care of myself,” “I can still be a good listener,” etc. Being consciously aware of positive affirmations can effectively 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 feeling to the other person so they have a better idea about what is going on with you.

5. Start over. This is a recover model, not a model of perfection. So, when your early warning signs of defensiveness tell you that you’re getting defensive, acknowledge that to yourself, take some appropriate action to minimize the damage, and then start over. Everyone gets defensive occasionally. It’s not the end of the world. You will usually be better served by letting it go and focusing on the future than by blaming yourself for your defensiveness in the past.

Author's Bio:

Jim Tamm is a former judge and is on the faculty of the International Management Program at the Stockholm School of Economics, the NASA Management Education Program and the Leadership Academy of the University of California, Santa Cruz. His client base ranges from the United Nations to Boeing, Toyota, NASA, universities and toy companies. He is co-author of *Radical Collaboration: Five Essential Skills to Overcome Defensiveness and Build Successful Relationships* (HarperCollins) and can be reached at JimTamm@RadicalCollaboration.com or www.RadicalCollaboration.com. © 2007, Jim Tamm

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