

Overcoming the Tendency to Be Defensive

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Acting defensively is a major condition in every person's life. A person's defensiveness, the tendency to protect the self while facing statements from another person, often blocks constructive decisions and behaviors. Even among best friends, a person's defensiveness makes him/her feel vulnerable, so that he/she guards much of what he/she says. Over-guarding is a clear sign of defensive attitudes and behaviors. Since this factor is so perverse in human experience, it is not surprising that people usually respond defensively to assertion messages. Assertion is acting assertively, which means making a direct, strong declaration. It is to aver, maintain or defend by words or measures, and to vindicate a claim or title to a position on the basis of knowledge and norms.

In this exquisite book, **The Miracle of Dialogue**, Reul Howe points that strength and profoundness are needed in every truly human conversation. These attributes are specially necessary in a dialogue in which very important issues are going to be addressed as they relate to who we are (identity), what do we have (resources) and what can we do (actions and behaviors) to come to a solution.

Social scientists have coined a special phrase to describe an assertion, and the predictable defensive response to it. It is called the **push-push back phenomenon**. The logic is that virtually every assertion message is experienced as a push. Even when the assertion is only trying to help the other person or moving him/her from a tense territory, the confrontation experience is experienced as a push. In response to that push, there is an almost inevitable push back.

No matter how we phrase the assertion messages, people seldom like to receive them. Who wants to find out, or admit that he/she has trespassed on another's space of respect and dignity and made a tangible, negative impact on the other individual? Common people don't want to quickly learn that they have adversely affected another's life. That is why even the best assertion messages tend to trigger defensive responses from a receiver.

Warning: when you send a well worded assertion message, don't expect peaches and cream. Anticipate an attack or some other form of defensive response. Avoid, by all means, engaging in that kind of a destructive dynamic.

The research of Jack Gibb, **Defense Level and Influence Potential in Small Groups**, presents the interesting findings of studied defensiveness by listening to recorded conversations in many different settings over almost a decade. He discovered that defensiveness in one person tends to activate the other person(s) in the interaction. As the conversation proceeds, an upward spiral of increasing defensiveness often occurs, causing an escalation of aggressiveness and creating an environment proper for destructive behaviors.

The spiral is evident when one person asserts to another. The person receiving the assertion is apt to become very defensive. What he/she actually hears is often a distortion of what was said and the response is typically hostile. This response triggers the other person's defensiveness and he/she counters with inflammatory remarks. This is a vicious cycle of mutual recrimination, including the syndrome of delayed responses. After much heat and headaches, the asserter's needs are still unmet, the relationship suffers, others watching, and each party becomes more distant and apart.

In the face of predictable defensive responses, the simple statement of an assertion message (verbally or written) rarely achieves results. To face such a dramatic challenge of overcoming the tendency to behave defensively, social scientists have created an assertion process with six steps:

1. Preparation
2. Sending the message
3. Silence
4. Reflective listening to the other's defensive response
5. Recycling steps two through four as often as necessary
6. Focusing on a constructive solution

The preparation for an assertion includes a healthy rehearsal of the interaction. A firm behavioral law of assertion training is to send your first assertion to people in an adequate situation where there is high likelihood of getting your needs met. Thus, the content expression and situational rehearsal help the actors involved to shape and practice responses to the

difficult issues that may be raised, and do a more competent job at the actual confrontation responses.

Once the assertion message has been prepared, it is time to send it. Another behavioral law is that the way the message is sent determines the successfulness of the assertion statement. Using a third party, to send the message, though may work, often brings more complexity, noise and the possibility of distortion. Beginning with small talk is not recommended. Get down to business directly and do so with sensitivity. How the message is sent is as important as phrasing it carefully.

When making a strong declaration and behaving assertively, your body language should demonstrate that you mean what you say, and that you are not political or ambivalent about it. In addition, you should communicate always with respect for the other person. Remember another behavior law: While communicating, often words (verbally or written) can cause damage if they are not properly organized and as a consequence, results fail. Again, engage actors should not forget about their postures, eye contact, facial expression, gesture, voice and style.

Being silent allows the other party to think about what you said, or for them to speak whatever is in their mind. Silence allows the other person to express defensiveness... It is about giving time to come to a shared solution.

Abraham Maslow, in his probably best book **Toward a Psychology of Being**, argues for reflective listening to the defensive response of the other person for diminishing such a behavior, for breaking the vicious cycle of increasing defensiveness, and for grasping a better understanding of the whole situation. Here we face another behavioral law that establishes that there is a defensiveness- reducing power in effective listening responses. Also, sometimes we can discover a strong need of the other person, which conflicts with your need, and this can be crucial information for coming up with a solution.

In the face of a hostile response avoid what most people do, and that is to come with a counterblow, thus ironically putting you on the defensive and inflict damage. Some people defend themselves by asking questions, so don't answer questions when you are asserting reply with reflecting listening response. Be aware that people respond to a direct statement by debating,

crying and withdrawing. The general strategy for dealing with these defensive responses is: listening reflectively, and reasserting with facts, feelings and with the disposition of always being able to self-correct.

Help others understand your predicament and your solutions to a problem or a controversy. We are living in times of great need for wise solutions. Coming to terms with this new epoch will allow leaders and their organizations to be part of solutions instead of problems.

Focus on workable solutions. There is always a way when human creativity is activated. Crisis or conflict occurs when people fail to address each other and turn away defensively for the purpose of self-justification.

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