

Reducing Your Defensiveness in Conflict.

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Defensiveness in conflict is like blood in water to a shark. I know. I've spent the past 35 years helping people navigate their way through conflict. During that time I've mediated over 1,500 employment disputes, including more school strikes in California than any other person. Defensiveness is the single greatest contributing factor to individuals getting stuck in conflict

As a senior Administrative Law Judge for the California Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) I rarely have to deal with strict legal issues. More often, parties end up with me as a part of their lives (usually an unpleasant part) because someone became fearful and got defensive. When we get defensive our thinking becomes rigid and we are lousy problem solvers. This not only impacts our problem solving skills, but it invites everyone else to get defensive, rigid and ineffectual as well. Then what you have is a room full of defensive, rigid thinking, ineffective problem solvers, i.e. **LITIGATION**.

Becoming defensive is not about protecting ourselves from other people. We get defensive because we don't want to feel something within ourselves, i.e. **FEAR!** Defensiveness is always fear based. If someone is acting defensive, you will find fear if you look deep enough. If individuals feel insignificant, incompetent or unlikable they may act in ways so that they will not have to feel the uncomfortable feelings. They may act out towards others, become very sleepy, intellectualize issues, trivialize with humor, go shopping, or act in dozens of other ways to avoid or suppress their fears.

Defensiveness reduces our effectiveness in many ways; however, the most common are distortion and compensation. Defensiveness can distort our perceptions when we sometimes project our fears and feeling on to others. For example, if I fear that I am not competent, I may project those feeling on to others and assume that everyone else also believes me to be incompetent, or that everyone around me is incompetent and I am the only competent one. A different type of distortion will lead me to believe that everyone else suffers the same unresolved fears regarding their own competency, so I don't feel so alone. In reality that may or may not be the case, however, my distortion of reality will negatively impact my ability to deal effectively in conflicted situations.

Sometimes our defensiveness will lead us to seek from others that which we do not do for ourselves. Have you ever been to a dinner party where the host, uncertain of his or her ability as a cook, will go on and on about how poorly everything was cooked? Of course, what does everyone else do? "Nonsense, it was wonderful, you are a marvelous cook, this is the best I've ever had." This method of defending ourselves leads us to compensate for our fear. This can be very problematic in relationships where one party seeks the constant reassurance of the second person. A marriage filled with "Do you love me? Do you love me now? Do you still love me?" or a work relationship where an

employee needs constant praise from the boss, will become tiresome. The relief offered by the constant assurance is only temporary because it does not deal with the real underlying fear. Therefore the need is insatiable.

We all have defenses. We learned them primarily as children when we didn't have the skills, power, or available choices that we have as adults. Our chosen defense systems were our shelters. They protected us from feeling powerless and fearful. If our parents were fighting perhaps we would learn to cope with our fear by tuning out the fight. If that didn't work maybe the best defense was to become numb to our feelings. These may be the most effective strategies available to a child. If we use the same strategies as an adult, however, we become poor listeners, or we don't allow ourselves a full range of emotions. We may not feel as much pain but we also don't feel joy or love or a real sense of aliveness. *At that point it isn't so much that we have defenses, it's that the defenses have us.* Individuals whose behavior is dominated by their defensiveness are at a critical disadvantage when they get into conflicted situations, not only because they distort reality, but also because much of their energy goes to self-preservation rather than effective problem solving.

Fortunately it doesn't have to be that way. In the late 1980s the California PERB teamed up with the Hewlett and Stuart Foundations to design and provide intensive training to some of the most conflicted employment relationships in California. This pilot program combined interest-based collaborative problem-solving training along with relationship and trust building skills. The pioneering program was by far one of the most progressive governmental interventions seen within the State of California, if not the entire United States. The results were beyond our wildest dreams.

Two studies documented the success of the approach. The first was conducted by the University of California, Berkeley, Institute of Industrial Relations, and was published in 1991. It confirmed that transformations from ineffective, adversarial working relationships into effective, trusting relationships were the norm rather than the exception.

- Prior to the training 70% of participants characterized their working relationship as adversarial. After the program less than 1% said it was adversarial.
- Prior to the training 57% said their working relationship was unproductive. After the training 87% felt their working relationship was productive.
- Prior to the workshop, "a lack of mutual understanding" was the most cited characteristic of the relationships. After the training, "effective communication" became the most cited characteristic.
- Significant improvements were experienced in resolving conflict and managing differences, with 89% of the participants reporting more effectiveness in this area after the training.
- The study also concluded that the results were not a momentary "honeymoon" response, but were long term-gains.

Equally dramatic was a 1993 study of conflict resolution among 94 groups participating in the training over a three-year period. The research studied records of the California

PERB, which keeps track of labor-management disputes. **The research documented an 85% reduction in the rate of disputes among those having participated in the training three years earlier.** At the time of the study we were able to document a direct savings to the State, for just the first third of the groups trained, of approximately \$675,000 due to the reduced level of conflict.

Besides being on the faculty of this unique State pilot project, one of my assignments for several years was to do follow-up work with course participants. This often included work with the constituencies of the participants, or additional refresher training, or facilitation of disputes. As reflected by the two studies mentioned above, parties were remarkably able to sustain these skills over time. In following up with participants, however, I found more challenges keeping trusting, non-defensive relationships alive than I found keeping problem solving and negotiating skills fresh. That follow-up work led to a couple of changes. The first was to pump up the interpersonal skills part of the training. The second was to make the training available in non-labor-management settings to broaden its applicability.

The most effective way to supercharge the interpersonal skills part of the program was to incorporate FIRO Theory into the training mix. Created by Dr. Will Schutz to help the US Navy improve compatibility among battleship command teams, FIRO stands for Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation. The theory states that everyone orients themselves in characteristic ways toward other people. The principal assessment instrument is the FIRO Element B (for Behavior). It is a substantially revised and updated version of the popular, but now obsolete, FIRO B instrument. The theory is used to help individuals increase their self-awareness, understand their behavior and how they interact with others, as well as how to be less defensive and more effective in conflicted situations.

This underlying concentration on self-awareness is the key to reducing defensiveness in conflict. A study conducted by Mayte Barba, a doctoral candidate at University Iberoamericana in Mexico City, documented the impact of the increased focus upon self-awareness. The study involved participants over a six-year period from nine different countries. Participants reflected a 49.5% increase in effectiveness at reducing their defensive behavior in conflict. That accompanied a 44.8% increased effectiveness at getting their interests met in conflicted situations. Thus the implications of reducing defensiveness for businesses or community groups, as well as individual interpersonal relationships are enormous. Increasing self-awareness is one of the most cost-effective ways for an organization or company to reduce its "Defense" budget.

Defensiveness is an unconscious response to our fears. Defenses are difficult to change, in part, because we are not conscious that our behavior is really a defensive maneuver. Therefore, the first and most important step to reduce defensiveness is to become aware of when you get defensive. We all exhibit telltale signs of our defensiveness, and usually we are the last ones in the room to become aware that we are acting defensively. Some of us seem angry when we are defensive. Others withdraw and get quiet, or passive aggressive, or start blaming. My personal favorite is to get confused. When I am

receiving feedback I don't want to deal with, I notice my tendency to be the only one in the room that doesn't understand the feedback.

The easiest way to discover how you behave when you get defensive is to ask your spouse, colleagues or children, and then try not to get defensive about what they tell you. Another way is to start paying attention to how you behave when you become fearful. Look for patterns. When people have questioned whether you were getting defensive, did you tend to withdraw or did you become an attack dog? Look for signs that you act differently when you're anxious, compared to when you are relaxed and feeling safe. My colleagues have developed a good natured list of about 35 different signs of defensive behavior that I would be happy to send to any requesting it.

Once you become aware of how you exhibit your defensiveness you can turn that knowledge into an early warning system. If I have enough self-awareness to know that I tend to get confused (or angry, or quiet and withdrawn, etc.) when I get defensive, I can take notice when I find myself behaving that way. I can then ask myself "Is it possible that I am getting defensive?" I can turn what used to be a liability into an ally, because if I recognize that I am getting defensive, I can do something about it.

Approaching your own defensiveness with a little compassion and a curious mind will head you in the right direction. One of the least effective things you can do when you notice you are feeling defensive is to beat yourself up about it. Better an attitude of "I seem to be getting defensive, I wonder what that's about" which could allow you to conduct some emotional archeology of your underlying fear without judgment.

Besides trying to root out the underlying fear, you can take some more immediate steps that we have found to be particularly helpful:

- **First, take responsibility for your defensive behavior.** Recognize that you do, in fact, have a choice about how you will behave. Acknowledging to yourself, if not to others, that you are becoming defensive starts the process of bringing the unconscious to consciousness. When I recognize that I am becoming defensive, I find it helpful to say something like "I notice I'm feeling a little defensive and I don't listen as well when I get defensive. I really want to understand what you are telling me so could you start again from the beginning?" Simply taking responsibility for my defensiveness by acknowledging it helps me stay more centered in conflict. You don't have to get defensive just because you are feeling fearful, and acknowledging the fear is a good first step. Acknowledging your own defensiveness can also disarm the other party to the conflict. More often than not I've seen other parties react with a greater willingness to slow down and be helpful rather than become defensive themselves.
- **Slow down!** Take a breath, take a break, take a walk. Excuse yourself to go to the bathroom and just be alone for a minute. Slow your breathing to let your body relax and calm any frantic adrenalin rush.
- **Confront any negative self-talk.** Notice how you are talking to yourself. We often have a fearful critic tucked away in the back of our mind saying things like "I can't handle this, I'll make a fool of myself, I'm going to ruin this, etc., etc."

Becoming aware of that negative self-talk and consciously changing it to something like “yes this is difficult but I can get through it” can transform the critic into a cheerleader, providing helpful internal support.

- **Check your inner assumptions.** What assumptions are you making about the situation. Are you assuming that because someone disagrees with you that means they don't like you? Maybe it only means they have different interests regarding this situation and it has nothing to do with their feelings toward you. Become conscious about your assumptions and take every opportunity to check them out for accuracy. Sometimes indigestion looks remarkably similar to anger. I suspect half the conflict I deal with would simply have gone away if parties had taken an early opportunity to check out the stories they were making up about each other's behavior.
- **Detach from over-identification with the problem.** Sometimes we don't realize how much of our self-esteem we are attaching to our favorite solution. When our proposal gets rejected it can feel like we are personally rejected. Separating our self-image and self-esteem from the problem gives us greater problem solving flexibility. It also reduces the desire to strike out at the other side if they reject our ideas.
- **Start over.** This is not a perfection model. It is a recovery model. We all get fearful and defensive. The effective problem solvers are able to recognize when they get defensive and then take some action to start over.

If you want to be more effective in conflict, managing your defensiveness is the best place to start. Increasing your self-awareness, and becoming authentic and non-defensive reduces distortion and fosters more creative problem solving. There is lots of evidence supporting that, and maybe you and your lawyers won't have to spend time in a hearing room with me.