

Dealing with Defensiveness

By Catherine Armstrong

Jane and Jim have worked for the same company for about 5 years. Recently, because of company reorganization, they have been assigned to the same team and work closely together.

Both Jane and Jim are competent at their jobs, however Jim finds that Jane doesn't always listen to his ideas and often doesn't let him know what she is working on. Yesterday, Jim was letting a client know that the product they ordered would be delivered early next week. The client told him that Jane had already promised delivery by this Friday. Jim knows that this won't be possible and needs to discuss his concern about lack of communication with Jane.

Later that day, Jim spoke to Jane about her promise to the client. He also let her know his concerns about their ongoing lack of communication. Jane replied that she didn't know what he was talking about and if he didn't waste time talking to her, he could get the product out to the customer as promised.

We may try our best to approach a problem with another in a respectful and principled manner but they may respond by attacking, blaming, withdrawing, criticizing or ridiculing. A defensive reaction usually indicates fear of the outcome or fear of the consequences. By being prepared, you can minimize your own defensive reaction and continue to work towards a satisfying solution.

- ◆ You can't control another person's feelings or actions. You can influence them by remaining respectful and honest in your tone of voice and body language.
- ◆ Acknowledge their verbal or non-verbal resistance. "Jane, it sounds like you don't agree that there is a communication problem"
- ◆ Avoid labeling or evaluating another's behaviour. If Jim was to reply 'you're being unreasonable' or 'it's obvious that you don't really care about looking after the customer', he will only make the situation worse.

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- ◆ Communicate support for the other without appearing superior. Do not try to be neutral, this can appear caring, standoffish or hostile. *"Jane, I know that you care a lot about the customer and want to help them"*
- ◆ Be prepared to listen to understand. You may need to reevaluate your own behaviour, attitudes and ideas.
- ◆ When the other person becomes defensive, shift your focus away from your agenda towards them. As long as they remain defensive, the issue will not be resolved. Even if they agree to an idea or suggestion.

What about when *you* become defensive?

- ◆ Take note of your body's response and your tone of voice that lets you know that you are becoming defensive
- ◆ Acknowledge your resistance, either internally or to the other person *"I'm finding that some of my hot buttons are getting pushed"*
- ◆ Remind yourself of your objective
- ◆ Shift your focus and paraphrase what the other person has said
- ◆ Speak from your perspective. Use 'I' statements, not 'you' statements *"I really need for us to work this out so that we can both do our jobs productively and help the customer"*

We can't stop someone from being defensive to our ideas. By managing our own reactions, we can work with the other party to resolve problems and work out solutions that respect both of you. ❖



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