

But, but, but. . .!

Dealing with defensiveness

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Throughout her 12-year career in public relations, Gini Dietrich has managed superstars and slackers--and every type of personality in between. But the worst employees she's ever faced? Those who spin innocent questions into personal assaults, go from tears to tantrums in a matter of seconds, see potential allies as enemies and make excuses for mistakes.

"I'll take average employees over defensive employees any day," says Dietrich, 33, now president of Arment Dietrich, a Chicago-based public relations firm. "I can train average employees to do better, but defensive employees don't want training or constructive feedback. They bring morale down, too."

A case in point is a senior account executive who repeatedly failed to meet the company's required number of weekly billable hours and whose negative attitude prompted complaints from clients. When Dietrich confronted the woman about her lagging productivity and told her to work nights to hit the target, she accused Dietrich of setting unfair requirements and blamed coworkers for not backing her up,

even though they were meeting their billable hours. And when Dietrich didn't give the woman a bonus, she called Dietrich at home one weekend and had a crying fit. "I fired her the following Monday," says Dietrich. "Dealing with defensive employees wastes everyone's time and energy."

Bad news behavior

Management experts say it's no surprise that the incorrigibly defensive don't last long. Defensiveness sabotages relationships and impedes employees' ability to get the job done. Simply put, it's a career killer.

"Defensiveness doesn't show well in the workplace, and bosses automatically distance themselves from employees who exhibit that behavior," explains Karissa Thacker, a New York City management psychologist and president of consulting firm Strategic Performance Solutions. "How do you establish trust with a boss who doesn't want to be around you? How do you get good assignments that will lead to promotions? The answer is, you don't."

James W. Tamm, co-author of *Radical Collaboration: Five Essential Skills to Overcome Defensiveness and Build Successful Relationships*, puts it this way: "Nobody wants to work with a jerk."

Indeed, the 2005 study "Competent Jerks, Lovable Fools, and the Formation of Social Networks," which was published in the Harvard Business Review, found just that. In their examination of work relationships at four diverse organizations, researchers discovered that when faced with the choice of working with a "competent jerk" or a "lovable fool," managers often say that "competence trumps likeability." But the exact reverse turned out to be true in practice at the organizations they studied.

"Personal feelings played a more important role in forming work relationships--not friendships at work but job-oriented relationships--than is commonly acknowledged," the authors wrote. "They were even more important than evaluations of competence. In fact, feelings worked as a gating factor: We found that if someone is strongly disliked, it's almost irrelevant whether or not she is competent; people won't

want to work with her anyway."

Cause and expression

A defensive attitude manifests itself in numerous behaviors beyond tears and tirades. Among the 50 listed in Tamm's *Radical Collaboration*: loss of humor, taking offense, wanting to get the last word, acting like a victim, personalizing everything, using humor inappropriately, withdrawing into silence, endlessly explaining, jumping to conclusions, flooding with information to prove a point, and wanting to be right.

"These are unconscious behaviors that undermine our ability to be in strong relationships and work well with others," explains Tamm, a retired California judge who now runs Radical Collaboration Group, a consulting firm.

Why is this? It comes back to the likeability factor. Ongoing defensive conduct creates tense interactions (at best) and hostile conflicts (at worst).

As for the underlying cause of defensiveness, it's a combination of fear and insecurity. It's one thing to act defensive with a spouse who criticizes your cooking or a mother-in-law who questions your parenting skills. But the stakes are much higher at work, where perception is reality, attitude can be as important as performance, and once you've been labeled as "defensive," your career can grind to a halt.

Managing and overcoming defensiveness

Unfortunately, there isn't a magic pill to help managers more effectively handle defensive employees. Nor is there one that can move defensive employees from what Tamm calls the hostile, adversarial "red zone" into the more peaceful, collaborative "green zone." But you can contain the damage with some behavioral changes. Here are tips for folks on both sides of the line of defense.

If you're a manager:

- Don't distance yourself. The wiser strategy is to keep closer tabs on defensive employees, especially if they're key contributors, and give them positive feedback when warranted. "Your distancing may

undermine their performance--and, ultimately, that would reflect poorly on you," Thacker says.

Throughout his management career, Jay Kemper, 48, CEO of Unicus Marketing, Inc., has found that giving defensive employees lots of attention, structure, and well-deserved praise helps to diffuse or even neutralize their emotional tendencies. "It prevents that anger ball from swelling inside of them," he says.

- **Confront the problem.** Instead of ignoring an employee's defensive conduct, bosses should address it head on, according to Jennifer Thompson, an industrial psychologist and director of the business psychology program at The Chicago School.

First, state the obvious: "Kathy, when I give you feedback on your work, I sense that it makes you feel defensive, because you roll your eyes, make excuses, and cry."

Second, seek input: "I wonder if there's another way that I could give you feedback so that you wouldn't become defensive. Do you have any suggestions?"

Third, force a change: "A goal for your next performance appraisal is for you to stop acting defensive, and you will be held accountable for doing so." As Thompson says, "Be clear about why employees should improve and what the consequences will be if they don't. By linking it to the performance appraisal, you'll have documentation to let the person go if he doesn't change."

- **Set boundaries.** If an employee becomes defensive, call a "time out" until he's calmed down and can discuss the issue professionally. "Don't let employees get away with this behavior. It's disrespectful and manipulative," Thompson says.
- **Be flexible about delivering feedback.** "I'm

responsible for knowing how my employees receive criticism and then targeting my approach to each individual, in the hope of lessening the opportunity for defensiveness," Dietrich explains. "With some people, I can say, 'You won't like this, but,' and with others, I sandwich the feedback between two positive statements."

Similarly, some employees respond better to e-mail than in-person conversations because it allows them to think about what's being said and then formulate an unemotional response. Thacker also recommends being sensitive to timing and context: "Giving feedback or asking tough questions in the hallway in the middle of the day when employees are racing to meet deadlines isn't the most effective way to get your message across."

If you're an employee with defensive tendencies:

- Recognize your behavior. "Unless you acknowledge that you've acted defensively through verbal or non-verbal communication you'll never be able to change," Tamm says.
- Control body language and comments. Feel like you're about to roll your eyes or let your temper flare? Then take a deep breath, count to five, and ask to table the discussion. "It's perfectly acceptable to say, 'I need a little time to think through what you've said and prepare questions. Can we talk again tomorrow?'" Thacker says. And if you can't suppress a defensive comment? Don't make a big apologetic scene afterward. The next day, behave appropriately and tell the boss, "I'm ready to hear what you wanted to discuss yesterday."
- Stop negative self-talk. As you receive critical feedback, the little voice inside your head might say, "My boss hates me; I'll get fired and my family will starve." Negative self-talk accomplishes only one thing--it will work you into a defensive frenzy, potentially leading to behavior that you'll regret. "In

the heat of the moment, make a conscious effort to turn the negative self-talk into positive self-talk," Tamm recommends. "Make that little voice whisper, 'This is a difficult conversation. I'm feeling uncomfortable listening to these comments, but I can get through it.'"

- Know your triggers. Are you more likely to be defensive when you're getting organized or immersed in a project? "Be aware of what triggers your defensiveness, and then manage your emotions," Thacker advises. "It's okay to say, 'Part of the reason I'm having this strong emotional response is that I'm focusing on something else right now. I'm better able to listen if we have these tough talks at the end of the day. Can we have meetings then?'"

As for Gini Dietrich, she now tries to weed out potential defensive employees by asking behavior-based questions in job interviews and providing a personality test to determine how candidates handle confrontation. In addition, she created a formal policy for handling defensive employees. "We now give them a verbal warning about how their behavior is affecting the business and their coworkers," Dietrich says. "If that doesn't work, we give a written warning--and that usually creates a 180-degree turn in behavior."

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