

# Overcoming the Destructive Dynamics of Defensiveness

Defensiveness exacts a terrible price on relationships and results. It poisons communication, breeds distrust, and creates roadblocks to hitting performance targets. It's a significant factor in employee attrition, separation or divorce in couples, even in the termination of a business relationship between alliances or vendor and customer. Understanding what creates defensiveness, and what dismantles it, can make a significant difference in your most important relationships at work and at home.

Defensiveness is an automatic, emotional response to a perceived threat.

"What perceived threat?"

Everyone reacts at some time with defensiveness in order to protect themselves: it's universal.

"What? You're calling me defensive?!"

In the moment, we think it's the other person who is being defensive, behaving irrationally, and making exaggerated statements. After the heat of the moment has passed, however, it's easier to reflect on the ways that we ourselves were defensive too. Defensiveness is usually a two-way street; as one person becomes defensive, the other person responds defensively and the situation escalates from there.

"Well, you started it!"

Once locked into a defensive battle, people find it difficult to change the dynamics. The fight or flight cocktail of hormones kicks in, sending blood to the our extremities, and, as Daniel Goleman so clearly describes in his work on Emotional

Intelligence, gives reign to the most primitive part of the brain, the amygdala. The executive center of the brain, which we rely on for creative problem solving and good decision making, has basically shut down.

## Choosing Dr. Jekyll When You're Mr. Hyde

What are we to do? We seem doomed by defensiveness, transformed into the relationship equivalent of Mr. Hyde (from Robert Louis Stevenson's book *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). Sometimes, in the midst of our defensiveness, the phone interrupts and we revert to Dr. Jekyll again, suddenly polite, even cordial, and capable of making reasonable arrangements and decisions—at least with the person on the other end of the line. Usually, once we hang up the phone, we're back to Mr. Hyde. But we don't have to be.

We can unlock ourselves from this defensive battle, make the decision to treat the other person with respect, and take a more skillful approach to the conversation. Those who can choose to be Dr. Jekyll when they're feeling like Hyde reap many rewards in the relationship and the task at

hand. It is not easy however.

## Controlling Your Half of the Relationship

If only we could command the other person to treat us with respect and use listening skills. Unfortunately you can only control your half of the relationship. You can't control the other person. The good news here is that neither does the other person control you. To say, "You made me angry," isn't really accurate. As Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh points out in his book, *Taming the Tiger Within*, someone else in the same situation might have reacted differently. Only you can make yourself angry. Anger is your reaction to what the other person says. A responsible approach to relationships means managing your own reactions differently rather than trying to control other people's behavior.

While you can't control the other person's behavior, you may influence it. We're not always aware of how our words or behavior spark others' defensiveness. In fact, we might even deny that we had any part to play in it. If you knew what stirs a defensive reaction in someone else, would you try to do something different?

One leading marriage researcher found that in successful marriages there are at least five positive interactions for every negative interaction. Work relationships may have a different ratio, but it still takes several positive interactions to heal the damage done by a defensive exchange. Once you are aware of what sparks your own defensiveness and that of others, you can make the choice to act and react differently.

### Changing Defensive Behavior

In his important article, "Defensive Communication," psychologist Jack R. Gibb identifies six characteristics of defensive relationships. His findings came from years of studying people working together. He found that people become defensive when they think others are: critical, controlling, guarded, aloof, superior, or dogmatic. Ironically, as you look at the list and think of a time when you've been defensive, you might say, "Well the other person was controlling..." or, "He was being aloof." Remember, defensiveness is a two-way street; you might be unaware that the other person also perceives you as controlling the relationship or being aloof.

Fortunately, as Gibb identifies, each of the characteristics of defensiveness have antidotes: being non-judgmental, collaborative, genuine, understanding, equal, and open-minded. But how do you suddenly become non judgmental, for example, when in the past you have been critical? Or collaborative when you've been controlling? Interpersonal skills provide a good stepping stone for changing behaviors that in the past have sparked defensiveness. Following are some of Ridge Training's electronic resources for learning to dismantle defensiveness and create productive, healthy relationships.

These resources are available at our web site, [www.ridge.com](http://www.ridge.com). The URLs for these and other electronic resources are listed in the resources section at the end of this article.

#### 1. From Critical to Non-judgmental

The fastest way to change other people's perception of you as being critical into a perception of being non judgmental, is to become aware of things you unknowingly say that put up roadblocks to communication. Learn what roadblocks you may be putting up, and what to do differently in the August 2007 *Ridge Insights* e-newsletter about communication barriers, and in the article, "Recognizing Opportunities: Getting Results Through Listening," found in the Articles section of our web site ([www.ridge.com](http://www.ridge.com)).

#### 2. From Controlling to Collaborative

One way to be more collaborative is to get agreements with other people. Agreements prevent defensiveness by creating mutual understanding about what is expected. In the Articles section of the Ridge web site is a primer on agreements titled, "Prescription for Action: Getting and Maintaining Agreements." If you have agreements but they're not working well, our guide on "Troubleshooting Agreements," also found in the Articles section, can help.

Managing resistance is another important skill in collaborating. The August 2006 *Ridge Insights* e-newsletter about managing resistance is written for managers who are leading a change initiative, but it could just as well apply when one person is working collaboratively with another.

#### 3. From Guarded to Genuine

Candor is one of the ways to minimize

defensiveness in relationships. Candor brings the conversation to what's really at stake. The article, "The Candor Imperative," in the Articles section of our web site, suggests ways of increasing candor in relationships.

#### 4. From Aloof to Understanding

You can avoid the perception of aloofness and build relationships by using listening skills to demonstrate understanding. Effective listening dramatically reduces defensiveness. Attending and following are two important listening skills in accomplishing this. The article "Recognizing Opportunities: Getting Results Through Listening" explains how to use listening as an effective problem-solving tool.

#### 5. From Superior to Equal

There are many ways of touting one's superiority, but only a few ways of demonstrating equality. When in conflict, one way is to identify each person's needs as mutually important. The article "How to Get Somewhere in Conflict" explains how to identify the real needs behind both sides of a conflict.

Another approach is to recognize others by saying out loud what you appreciate. The *Ridge Insights* e-newsletters about appreciation (December, 2006) and recognition (November, 2007) give quick tips for doing this more often. Ridge's Appreciation Alerts, also found in the Articles section of our web site, provide a fun way to show this recognition.

#### 6. From Dogmatic to Open minded

Being open-minded in the heat of defensiveness and conflict is extremely difficult. But that's when we most need it most. The article "Just Do It: Dealing with Emotions in Conflict" provides a structured way to

stop arguing and start listening.

### Conclusion

Defensiveness will always be a potential response within us. Understanding what defensiveness is and how it operates gives you new eyes for seeing it. This awareness also gives you the freedom to respond to defensiveness differently. With so many ways to prevent defensiveness and so many choices for behaving differently in the moment, you can start making a difference in your key relationships now.

## Ridge Training Resources

**Articles** ([http://www.ridge.com/Pub\\_Article.html](http://www.ridge.com/Pub_Article.html))

Attending (<http://www.ridge.com/downloads/Attending.pdf>)

Appreciation Alert ([http://www.ridge.com/Pub\\_Article\\_Apprc.html](http://www.ridge.com/Pub_Article_Apprc.html))

Following: Inside Every Good Follower is a Leader (<http://www.ridge.com/downloads/Following.pdf>)

How to Get Somewhere in Conflict ([http://www.ridge.com/downloads/KeyIdeas-CM\\_GetSomewhere.pdf](http://www.ridge.com/downloads/KeyIdeas-CM_GetSomewhere.pdf))

Just Do It: Dealing with Emotions in Conflict ([http://www.ridge.com/downloads/KeyIdeas-CM\\_Emotions.pdf](http://www.ridge.com/downloads/KeyIdeas-CM_Emotions.pdf))

Prescription for Action: Getting and Maintaining Agreements ([http://www.ridge.com/downloads/RX\\_For\\_Action.pdf](http://www.ridge.com/downloads/RX_For_Action.pdf))

Recognizing Opportunities: Getting Results Through Listening (<http://www.ridge.com/downloads/RecognizeOpportunities.pdf>)

Troubleshooting Agreements ([http://www.ridge.com/downloads/Troubleshoot\\_Agr.pdf](http://www.ridge.com/downloads/Troubleshoot_Agr.pdf))

The Candor Imperative (<http://www.ridge.com/downloads/CandorImperative.pdf>)

**Ridge Insights Newsletter** ([http://www.ridge.com/Pub\\_Insights.html](http://www.ridge.com/Pub_Insights.html))

Agreements, January 2008 ([http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2008\\_01.html](http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2008_01.html))

Appreciation, December 2006 ([http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2006\\_12.html](http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2006_12.html))

Communication Barriers, August 2007 ([http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2007\\_08.html](http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2007_08.html))

Following, September 2007 ([http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2007\\_09.html](http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2007_09.html))

Following Up Agreements, February 2008 ([http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2008\\_02.html](http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2008_02.html))

Managing Resistance, August 2006 ([http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2006\\_08.html](http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2006_08.html))

Recognition, November 2007 ([http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2007\\_11.html](http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2007_11.html))

Rigorous Candor, June 2006 ([http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2006\\_06.html](http://www.ridge.com/insights/ins2006_06.html))

### Other Electronic Resources:

Defensive Communication, Jack R. Gibb, Ph.D. ([http://www.geocities.com/toritrust/defensive\\_communication.htm](http://www.geocities.com/toritrust/defensive_communication.htm))