Tired of Defensiveness? Make It About the Work

BY ANNE E. COLLIER

WE ALL KNOW people who resist constructive feedback and disagreement. If we're honest with ourselves, most of us have been that person at one time. They (or we) are defensive and choose to believe that colleagues' statements are personal attacks. For those of us who work with the perpetually defensive, it's exhausting. We spend time and energy trying to figure out how to get the best results without the drama of working with someone who feels personally attacked more often than not. We can find ourselves doing a cost-benefit analysis, weighing a message's importance with the pain of delivering the message. The work suffers and so do we.

More to the point, the time and effort spent on dancing around a person's *reactions* could have been better spent on *the work*. Let's review a typical situation. You are working with a colleague; you think you are both focused on outcomes for the client. You both want to deliver an excellent work product. It's one of those projects that isn't plain vanilla, but rocky road. You share a new approach or the tweak that you believe will more elegantly accomplish the client's goals. Your colleague immediately reacts,

> **When confronted with a defensive response, dig for understanding.**

and not in a good way. The colleague exclaims, "What do you want from me?! I am trying as hard as I can! I am putting your work first. My other work is suffering. I can't do *everything*. Just tell me what you want." You are taken aback—stunned, actually. It never occurred to you that the idea would be perceived as criticism, or a character or professional assassination. You are also surprised that your colleague would perceive a suggestion as lack of appreciation.

The underlying issue is that your colleague is making the work about him-, her- or themself. This is different than taking pride in one's work and closely identifying one's identity with the quality of one's work and professionalism. Rather, it is the counterproductive practice of conflating criticism, alternative thinking and even musings about how to improve the work with some version of "*I* am a failure" or "You don't appreciate *me*." Whether this resonates with you, either because it applies to you or a colleague, there is hope. And that hope is changing the focus to *the work* and away from the person.

5 STRATEGIES FOR THE DEFENSIVE TO EMBRACE RECEPTIVITY

If you are sheepishly acknowledging that, yes, you take too much personally, ask yourself: Is it working? The answer is likely "no," and you know it. Also know that you have the capacity to choose a more productive view, and here's how:

1. **Focus on work.** You have the power to choose your focus. When you focus on the work, your fears about inadequacy fall away. When you focus on yourself and whether you are good enough or appreciated, or on another's opinion of you, you divert your energy from your work. Your performance suffers, bringing about the very thing you seek to avoid—poor performance.
2. **Be more confident.** When you put your fears and feelings about the work ahead of the work, you dedicate your brain power to avoiding feelings of inadequacy. If you instead choose to be confident—trust that you and your colleagues will creatively conquer the challenge—you feel better, elevating your mood as you improve productivity.
3. **Be curious and learn.** By being self-protective, you can't grow personally or professionally because you have positioned yourself so that it is impossible to learn from others. And, while it will take courage to let go of the self-protective way of being so that you can embrace the opportunity to learn, it's worth the risk. Learning is the only way to excel and be valued, which is what you want. Otherwise, you wouldn't be defensive.
4. **Listen for the signal; ignore the noise.** If you find yourself

CHRISTINE CUTHBERTSON/GETTY IMAGES

getting defensive, pause and listen for the "signal"—what's important—and ignore the "noise." Noise is others' fretting, worrying, and unproductive and personally directed criticism. The more you can ignore that which isn't moving the work forward, the more effective you will be.

5. **Empathize.** If your colleague seems unfairly critical, remember the colleague cares about getting results. It's about the work, not you.

5 STRATEGIES FOR DEFENDING AGAINST DEFENSIVENESS

Interested in coaxing your colleague from defensive to receptive? Here's how:

1. **Be who you want others to be.** If you want defensive colleagues to focus on the work rather than fears about inadequacy or failure, you must model the behavior you want. This means being calm, patient, curious and, of course, focused on the work.
2. **Use neutral language.** Especially with the defensive, using neutral language to discuss underperformance or give constructive feedback improves receptivity to the feedback. Avoid exaggerations such as "always" or "never." Try not to say "should" or "should not," which some view as personal criticism.
3. **Be ready with curiosity.** When confronted with a defensive response, dig for understanding. Ask questions such as, "What concerns you about what I said?" and "What did you hear when I said … ?" Once you understand your colleague's underlying concerns, you can address any misperceptions and clarify expectations.
4. **Set boundaries when necessary.** While you might find it uncomfortable to address an unproductive behavior, it's more uncomfortable to suffer long term with a colleague's defensiveness. With compassion, clarity and a sense of calm, share the impact of your colleague's behavior on you and the work. Then listen for the underlying fears—they are there—and address those. Next, set the boundary: "When working together, we need to stay focused on the work." If you are up against a deadline, suggest that you focus on the work now and discuss your work relationship later. This gets the job done while signaling that your colleague's concerns are important to you.
5. **Be receptive to feedback.** To resolve any concerns, your colleague must be candid with you. And you want to encourage that feedback. This means you may hear something that triggers defensiveness in *you*. This is an opportunity to model what you want. Keep the focus on the work, stay curious and embrace the criticism. Seek to understand and collaboratively resolve frustrations and miscommunications about expectations, work styles and processes.

While defensiveness is frustrating, addressing it is a gateway to a better working relationship and better results. And that's what it's all about. **LP**

Anne E. Collier is the CEO of Arudia, a firm dedicated to improving culture, collaboration and communication. Collier is an expert leadership coach steadfast in her commitment to excellence and her clients' goals. She coaches and delivers programming designed to help individuals, teams and organizations amplify accomplishments, improve financial stability and achieve greater self-actualization; they perform well because they are confident, deliberate and resilient. **anne@arudia.com**