

COACH *Notes*

Taking the "War" Out of Our Words



with Nondefensive Communication

You're sitting down to your desk to begin work at 8:10 a.m., when your co-worker looks at his watch and then over at you and asks: "Had a little too much fun last night?"

Ha, ha, you laugh. But inside, your story is going like this: *Who does he think he is, Mr. Perfectly On Time Every Single Day? What's wrong with being late one day? Jerk. He's always so critical.*

Freeze frame.

If an offhand comment such as that one can provoke such feelings of defensiveness, imagine what can happen with the larger issues at work, emotional issues at home or ethical issues in our community.

What happens, says Sharon Ellison, M.S., is essentially war.

Ellison, founder of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication, teaches that the way we communicate with each other uses the same principles and tactics we would use in physical combat, based on the belief that we must protect ourselves by being defensive. As soon as we feel any threat, either of not getting what we want or of being harmed or put down in some way, we choose from among the three basic defensive war maneuvers: surrender, withdrawal or counterattack.

"It's a sad commentary on our use of human imagination," Ellison says, "to realize that for centuries we have essentially used a war model as the foundation upon which we have built our entire system for spoken and written communication."

O.J. Harvey studied this connection between language and violence when he was a psychology professor at the University of Colorado. Using random samples of pieces of literature from countries around the world, he tabulated the frequency of words that classify and judge people—the types of words that often provoke defensive reactions. Not surprisingly, he found a high correlation between the frequent use of such words and the incidence of violence.

The myth is that defensiveness will protect us, that to be open is to be vulnerable and weak. On the contrary, it is being defensive that weakens us. Consider this: When you are defensive, do you feel safe? Competent? Confident? Do

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you learn well? Power struggles and unnecessary, destructive conflicts are the more likely outcome.

Ellison, who estimates that we use 95% of our communications energy being defensive, describes the six most common defensive reactions as follows:

Surrender-Betray. We give in but defend the person's mistreatment of us, taking the blame ourselves. For example, "He's under a lot of stress with that new project. I should have known better than to ask a question right then."

Surrender-Sabotage. We cooperate outwardly but undermine the person in some way. Passive-aggressive behavior falls into this category. For example, we agree to edit a coworker's draft report, but then procrastinate actually doing it.

Withdrawal-Escape. We avoid talking to someone by not answering, leaving the room or changing the subject.

Withdrawal-Entrap. We refuse to give information as a way to trap the other person into doing something inappropriate or making a mistake. For example, we might stare at a person and not answer her question until she gets embarrassed and drops it or gets angry and says something inappropriate. We then call attention to her behavior.

Counterattack-Justify. We let someone know she is wrong to be upset with us, explaining our own behavior and making excuses. For example, "I would have gotten that done sooner, but I've been really busy."

Counterattack-Blame. We attack or judge the other to defend ourselves. We might say, "You're always so obsessed about that," or, "Why are you in such a bad mood?"

How much does defensiveness cost us? As individuals, it can cost us our confidence, respect, relationships. As professionals, it can cost us productivity, clients and success. Defensiveness in organizations can make team performance, revenues and reputation all suffer. And defensiveness can cause communities to go without peace, solutions for global issues or abundance.

In short, the cost is huge.

Changing how we communicate as individuals—learning that we can protect ourselves and have greater influence without using a war-based language—will not only shift our own personal and professional lives, but can ultimately lead toward a more peaceful world. ■

Avoid Provoking Defensiveness (Try Some New Tactics)

Make clear requests for specific actions, rather than using vague, abstract language.

"I just want you to treat me fairly" is likely to cause the other person to deny (defensively) ever having been unfair. Clarify exactly which concrete actions you would like for the other person to take, such as: "I would like you to give me as long a break as the other employees."

Avoid blaming and judging others. The more people hear judgment and criticism, the more they tend to invest their energy in self-defense or counterattack. The more directly we can connect our feelings to our needs, the easier it is for others to respond compassionately.

Ask questions to gather information. The goal is to understand accurately what the other person means, believes or feels. Come from a place of true, neutral curiosity. Avoid assumptions, as well as questions that actually serve to convey your own opinion.

Verify your observations and/or assumptions.

Avoid stating opinion as fact or trying to persuade others to agree. For example: "When I hear you saying you are in a good mood, and at the same time I see you rolling your eyes and shrugging, then I imagine that something is wrong but you don't want to tell me. Then I feel frustrated, and I'm not sure if I should ask you more questions or leave you alone."

Avoid exaggerations using words such as always and never.

These often provoke defensiveness rather than understanding. Observations of others' actions are best when free from evaluation or opinion, and when they simply describe actions. For example, rather than "You never do what I want," try "The last three times I initiated an activity, you said you didn't want to do it."

Listen deeply to the expression of feelings and needs beneath defensive or aggressive statements.

For example, if a team member says, "Back off! I'm doing my best," he may be feeling worried and needing acknowledgment for his effort. When we understand a person's underlying needs and feelings, it is a lot easier to find compassion. ■