

Managing Defensiveness:

Yours and Others...
RRC Lunch and Learn

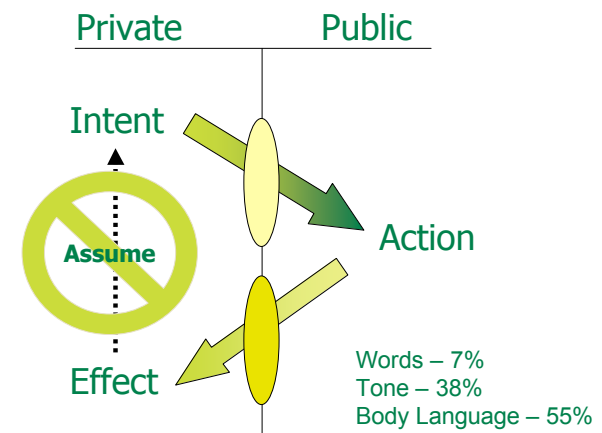
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1. Defensiveness is a behavioural response to a perceived threat or attack to ones face or self-esteem.
2. Result of what and how something is communicated.

Defensiveness

- Is the unconscious effort to protect the self from anxiety, either through divisionary and intimidation tactics or by distortions of reality.
- Behavioural response is typically either passive (seen in body language) or aggressive (obvious in body language and tone of voice)



Where Does Defensive Behaviour Come From?

- We are embarrassed
- We are humiliated or feel stupid
- We don't see ourselves that way
- We feel betrayed
- We don't think that the person has the right to give us that information
- We are reminded of earlier negative experiences
- We feel a sense of failure
- We feel forced to make a change, and change is difficult
- We grew up in an atmosphere where negative feedback was experienced as a bad thing.

Cognitive Dissonance

- “the hard wired psychological mechanism that creates self-justification and protects certainties, self-esteem, and relationships” p.10
- “a state of tension that occurs whenever a person holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent” p. 13

Mistakes Were Made (but not by me), Carol Travis and Elliot Aronson, Harcourt, 2007

Sigmund Freud claimed that defensiveness happens when we are presented with an unbearable idea. An unbearable idea is one, whether conscious or unconscious, that makes us unacceptable to ourselves.

- Most people have a reasonably positive self-concept, believing themselves to be competent, moral, and smart, their efforts at reducing dissonance will be designed to preserve their positive self-images” p. 29-30

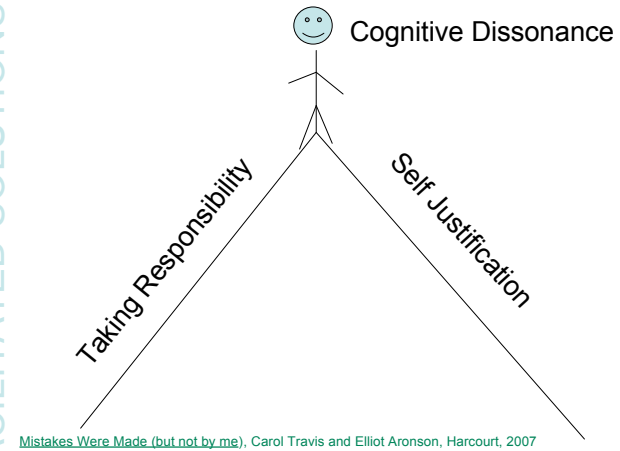
Mistakes Were Made (but not by me), Carol Travis and Elliot Aronson, Harcourt, 2007

Three Core Identities

- 1) Am I Competent?
- 2) Am I a Good Person?
- 3) Am I Worthy of Love?

Which identity do you feel challenges at moments like this?

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen Penguin, 1999



Common Defensive Mechanisms

- | | |
|-------------|----------------------------|
| • Sarcasm | • Catastrophizing |
| • Rigidity | • Trivializing |
| • Blaming | • Endless explaining |
| • Shaming | • Withdrawing into silence |
| • Teaching | • Loss of humour |
| • Preaching | • All-or-nothing thinking |

The irony

“The mind wants to protect itself from the pain of dissonance with the balm of self-justification; but the soul wants to confess.” p. 217

Mistakes Were Made (but not by me), Carol Travis and Elliot Aronson, Harcourt, 2007

Three things to Accept about Yourself

1. You will make mistakes
2. Your intentions are complex
 - Conscious
 - Less conscious
 - Unconscious
3. You have contributed to the problem

Defensive Communication

Defensive Climates

Supportive Climates

1. Evaluation
2. Control
3. Strategy
4. Neutrality
5. Superiority
6. Certainty

1. Description
2. Problem orientation
3. Spontaneity
4. Empathy
5. Equality
6. Provisionalism

Defensive Communication by Jack R. Gibb

“Feeling like a victim of injustice in one situation does not make us less likely to commit an injustice against someone else, nor does it make us more sympathetic to victims.” p. 192

Mistakes Were Made (but not by me), Carol Travis and Elliot Aronson, Harcourt, 2007

“Pain felt is always more intense than pain inflicted.” p. 192

Mistakes Were Made (but not by me), Carol Travis and Elliot Aronson, Harcourt, 2007

Evaluation/Description

Evaluation – You are evaluating or judging the other person. “You are a ...”

Description – You describe what is going on rather than evaluate. “You arrived late to work three times this week.”

Control/Problem Orientation

Control – The degree to which a person experiences the other as trying to convince or control them.

Problem Orientation – Describing a mutual problem and trying to solve it together.

Strategy/Spontaneity

Strategy – The conversation is experienced as a strategy (technique) with unexplained motivations.

Spontaneity – You are experienced as having uncomplicated motivations, as being straight forward and honest in response to a situation.

Neutrality/Empathy

Neutrality - You are neutral/detached of emotions.

Empathy – You express concern and care for the other person.

Superiority/Equality

Superiority – When you communicate that you are superior in some way (e.g. position, knowledge).

Equality – You communicate willingness to enter into collaborative participative planning with mutual respect and trust.

Certainty/Provisionalism

Certainty – You are perceived to be absolutely certain about your facts and interpretations

Provisionalism – Person appears to be exploring issues rather than taking sides on them, to be problem solving rather than debating.

When others are responding defensively....

1. Set aside you agenda (for a while).
2. Listen to their words: their fears, needs, hopes, disappointments.
3. Paraphrase what you have heard (i.e. their fears, needs, wants and hopes). For example, "You need me to know that you have spent a lot of extra time with the student."
4. Take responsibility for something (i.e. "I should have shared this concern with you earlier.")
5. When they are again able to engage in content, return to your agenda and problem solve on next steps.

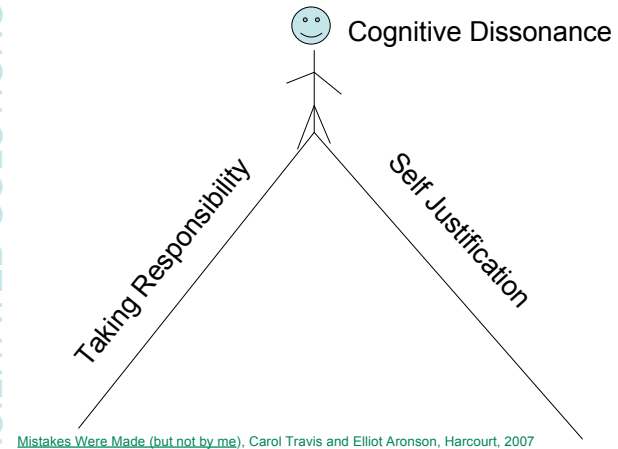
Process trumps content

Put another way....

It is often not the **what** it is the **how**.

Reasons to admit your mistakes

- You will probably be found out anyway
- You will learn and grow
- You undoubtedly did something that resulted in making the situation worse
- You can lead by example
- People will like you more



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