Managing Defensive Employees

Defensive employees can infect teams with distrust, uncertainty and caution. Gird yourself against infection with these practical tools.

Handling Defensiveness

The tools below are designed to help you manage yourself, and achieve improved results when dealing with defensive people in the workplace.

Before Engaging

Before having a feedback conversation with a highly defensive person, reflect on these two questions:

- **What specifically is the issue you want to discuss?**
  - CHALLENGE YOURSELF: Why is this issue worth bringing up?
  - CONSIDER: Will this issue matter to the other person? If not, can you reframe it?

- **What is your intention in bringing up this issue?**
  - CHALLENGE YOURSELF: What do you hope will result from this conversation?
  - CONSIDER: What is your agenda? Build trust by telling them what you hope this conversation will bring about.
Six Techniques to Manage Defensive Employees

1. **Seek to Understand**
   No matter how wrong-headed their reasoning sounds to you, explore their point of view with curiosity. Ask them to tell you their thinking.
   
   **TAME THE BEAST:**
   *by being on their side*

2. **Protect Against Infection**
   Defensive people exude emotions like anxiety and anger. It’s easy to get infected by those emotions. Prepare yourself. Stay solid in your intention.
   
   **TAME THE BEAST:**
   *by being healthy*

3. **Don’t Debate**
   Arguing over details distracts from your issue. Begin sentences with, “Nevertheless,” then repeat your issue, word for word.
   
   **TAME THE BEAST:**
   *by not engaging with them*

4. **Speak for Yourself**
   Be prepared to talk about the impact the person's behavior has on you. Do not speak for others. Others’ experience can be debated. Yours cannot.
   
   **TAME THE BEAST:**
   *by showing your heart*

5. **Display Vulnerability**
   Over time, share thoughts and feelings about things that have no connection to the person who's defensive. Model non-defensiveness.
   
   **TAME THE BEAST:**
   *by sharing your humanity*

6. **Appreciation**
   Over time, acknowledge what's going well. If you only give corrective feedback, the person may have some justification for being defensive.
   
   **TAME THE BEAST:**
   *by seeing them as a whole person*

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Learn to use these techniques effectively by listening to episode #233 – Taming the Defensiveness Dragon of Essential Communications’ The Look & Sound of Leadership podcast.