



Hosted by Tom Henschel

How to Manage Defensive People

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A leader with a direct report who is, she says, the most defensive person she's ever known, devotes an entire coaching session to gathering tools to help her cope.

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Vulnerability as a tool

Jacqui was a highly analytical introvert. I learned early in our coaching that she used silence to think. That is not to say she didn't speak up. When she felt strongly about something, the words flew out of her. From our very first conversation, I knew Jacqui felt strongly about a direct report of hers named Tate.

According to Jacqui, Tate was the most defensive person she'd ever met. Not every minute of every day. Not even every day. But when she'd attempt to give him feedback, his hackles would go up. He'd interrupt her and say things like, "I do have my MBA, you know," or "I don't know why I even try!"

I asked Jacqui if she thought Tate's defensiveness might be triggered by her gender or her race. She didn't think so. She told me he displayed the same defensive behaviors in meetings with department heads and chief officers.

During a recent coaching conversation, she said to me, "I'd like to help him. He's ambitious, but if he can't tame his defensiveness, he's gonna kill any chance he has at advancing. But how do I talk

to him about his defensiveness when he'll just get defensive about the fact that, no, he's not being defensive?"

She thought.

Then she said, "I tried what you suggested, about being vulnerable myself and seeing if that might work as an invitation for him to be vulnerable. I decided to tell him how, sometimes, I'm not a hundred-percent confident when I present to senior leadership. You know what happened? He started mansplaining to me how to be confident! He took my vulnerability and used it to make himself into a hero. I was about to rip his head off."

"What happened?" I asked.

"You would've been proud of me, Tom. I stayed calm. I thanked him. I told him how much I appreciated his suggestions. I remembered that you and I talked about showing appreciation, right? Make a safe space for him. Don't argue. Well, I did my best."

"Would you try it again?" I asked.

“ He's a hand grenade and I'm tiptoeing around so I don't set him off.

"Being vulnerable? Not eagerly." She gave a big sigh. "But I see your point. If I want to build trust with him, I should keep it up. But it's hard, Tom. I feel vulnerable enough already, like he's a hand grenade and I'm tiptoeing around so I don't set him off. But okay. I'll remember vulnerability."

She thought.

2 Questions to Ask Yourself

Then she said, "Sometimes, I think – I'm embarrassed to admit this – I think, 'Who cares anyway? Let him screw himself in front of senior leadership. I tried!'"

She thought.

She asked, "Is there a way I can get him to stop sabotaging himself? I may be wrong, but even if he's male, and even if he's white, I don't think he can act like that and ever move up. Isn't there some way I could help him achieve his goals?"

I said, "Jacqui, you just answered one of two questions that are important when you're trying

to manage someone who's defensive. You answered the 'issue' question. 'What issue are you actually talking about?' Your issue is your concern that his defensiveness may hold him back. Great. Now, with the issue clear in your mind, you can be clear with him. 'Tate, I want to share a concern I have about your career.' Short, clear, simple."

She considered, then asked, "What's the second question?"

“ You're going to bring up this issue, even though you know it might upset him.

"The second question is about intention," I replied. "You're going to bring up this issue, even though you know it might upset him. Why? What's your intention? What's your agenda?"

"I'm asking this of myself?" she asked.

"Yes. And just like the issue question, once you know the answer, you'll share it with him."

After a pause, she said, "My intention really is to help him."

After a pause, I asked, "Have you ever shared the issue or the intention with him? That you think he's hurting himself or that you'd like to help him?"

"Oh, my goodness, no. We're not anywhere close to talking about his defensiveness. I can barely give him feedback about his work!" She laughed at herself. Then she asked, "What else can I do? Besides identifying the issue and telling him my agenda, what else?"

I smiled at her. "I don't think you're going to like this next one."

"Why not?"

Bring empathy to defensiveness

"Because it's empathy. The next tool that helps manage someone who's defensive is to meet them where they are. Align with them. See their point of view. At the moment, I'm not certain you want to see what Tate is seeing."

She smiled, conceding my point without saying so. "How do I change that?"

"His defensiveness irritates you, right?"

"That's an understatement."

"Why? What's rubbing you the wrong way?"

"Because I can't ever get him to hear me. It's like he has fingers in his ears, signing 'la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la.'"

I asked, "If you were going to make up a story about what make someone that way, what story would you tell?"

She changed her look. "That is a whole different question." She sounded almost annoyed that I'd connected her to feelings about another human being. "People like that are scared, aren't they?"

I stayed silent.

She gave a little grunt, like she'd been punched. "That's some shift, isn't it?"

She thought, then said, "How would it change anything I say? Having empathy along with the feedback. What does that sound like?"

Armor and Infection

I said, "Let's imagine he says something in a meeting that's super defensive. You think, 'Aha! Perfect example of the defensiveness issue. Great opportunity for some feedback.' If you want to show empathy – and maybe you do this already – start with listening. Instead of starting with your opinion about why that was a not in his best interest, ask him, 'Hey, when you said that thing, what were you hoping would happen?' Begin with him talking and you listening."

"He's not going to feel like he's walking into a trap?"

“He might,” I said. “One antidote to that is to be genuinely curious. Don’t argue for your interpretation. Listen to his. Explore it with him. Maybe he’s feeling under attack somehow. That’s one reason people are defensive, right? To you it might sound ridiculous, but to him, it’s real. Don’t judge that part of him. Just be curious and accepting.”

She thought, then said, "Do you remember telling me how important it was that I not get infected by his defensiveness?"

"That emotions are contagious and his emotions might run hot? Yes, sure."

“ One antidote to that is to be genuinely curious.

"Well, that is one thing I've done well. Have I ever told you the image I use for that?"

"No," I said.

She took a breath and smiled at a memory. "I was helping out one weekend at a program for troubled girls. I was just a teenager myself, but we were right in there during these really intense group therapy sessions. It was great.

"Before the girls came in for this one exercise, the woman in charge got all us helpers together and said, 'You are about to see some serious shit. There are going to be feelings hurled all over this room. They're going to be big and they're going to be strong. Those feelings aren't meant for you, but they're coming your way. You have to protect yourself against those feelings or you won't be able to do your job. So I want all of you to imagine yourselves standing inside a little nylon tent. It's all around you, like you're standing inside a little cocoon. Stay in your tent. Keep it zipped. It'll protect you. There's a little porthole you can look out, but nothing can touch you as long as you keep your distance.'

"What she told us worked. That room was like a tornado for a while, but I sailed through it. It was magical, like a superpower. I use that tent image with Tate. He gets all agitated, but I don't. Well, mostly."

She thought.

She said, "Before, you used that example of me giving him feedback about something he said in a meeting. Well, I'd bet my house that even if I recounted what got said, word for word, he'd say I didn't get it right, that it was something else. We get in those arguments about what happened all the time."

"Why does it matter?" I asked.

"Why does 'what happened' matter? Because I'm trying to make a point about something he said. But if he won't even admit what he said, how do I ever make my point?"

Speak for Yourself

"Speak For Yourself," I said. "I am answering your question. How do you make your point? 'Speak For Yourself.' This an actual communication technique you can use. When you

“ Stay in your tent. Keep it zipped. It'll protect you.

speak for yourself, you tell him your experience. Just because his version is different from yours, yours doesn't get wiped out. You say, 'This is what I heard. Maybe nobody else heard it, but I did. And here's why I worry about how it makes you look.'

She thought, then asked, "How do I ever measure success here? What am I looking for with him at this point?"

I stayed silent, watching her.

After a moment she answered her own question, saying, "I guess success would be if we were able to talk about him not being so defensive!" Then she added, "And the impact he's having on others. And on me."

She considered further, then said, "Plus I'd like to have some sense he's heard me. If all that happened, I'd call it a success. Okay. That helps."

She thought, then asked, "Do you think coaching could help him?"

I said, "Maybe. Defensiveness would almost certainly show up in the coaching, so, yes, it might. But I've coached defensive people where their armor never really came down. At least not with me."

"I hope I can do better than that with Tate," she said.

Jacqui shared both her core issue and her intention with Tate. She told me the next few minutes felt different, better, easier. Then it was gone. She felt Tate snap back to his old norm. I applauded for her. To me, those few minutes indicated that her use of the tools was a solid display of [The Look & Sound of Leadership](#).



In this [episode](#) of the podcast, this ending is the halfway mark. The episode goes on to add more tools and scripts for managing defensive people.

Core Concepts

Before engaging, determine the real issue. What do you want to talk about specifically?

Before engaging, determine your intention. Why is this something you think worth discussing?

Tools During Dialogue:

- Express empathy
- Speak for yourself
- Notice what goes well
- Protect against infection
- Display vulnerability

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