Addressing Defensiveness in the Learning Environment

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Disclosures

• The speaker(s) do not have any financial relationships to disclose.
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The Ombuds Office

- Is a resource for all
- A safe place to navigate and untangle workplace concerns
- Identifies and surfaces systemic problems
- Provides information and referrals
- Leads workshops on communication and conflict topics
A quick orientation

• Understanding what defensiveness is and how it shows up in the learning environment

• Some immediate and long-term strategies to mitigate defensiveness in the learning environment

• Defensiveness and mitigation in action

• Summary and questions (keep scenarios general)
How you’ve experienced defensiveness

• Giving feedback followed by lashing out or shutting down

• Explaining a new task or process and/or offering correction and suggestion in front of others; asking questions in front of peers

• Inability to see beyond a single perspective in the moment
What triggers defensiveness

Adapted from Radical Collaboration: Five Essential Skills to Overcome Defensiveness and Build Successful Relationships, Tamm & Luyet, (2004), Collins.

Significant
Lack of significance = sense of being ignored
Response: forced notice or removal

Competent
Lack of competence = sense of humiliation
Response: forced control or no responsibility

Likeable
Lack of likeability = sense of rejection
Response: forced understanding or rejection

Our defenses protect us when our significance, competency and likeability are challenged.
Pain, threat, and needs
Common defensive responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bodily responses</th>
<th>CommunicationResponses</th>
<th>Emotional responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Tight stomach</td>
<td>• Withdrawal into silence</td>
<td>• Obsessive thinking</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Stress-eating</td>
<td>• Use of sarcasm</td>
<td>• Magnifying or minimizing everything</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Fast breathing/heartbeat</td>
<td>• Flooding with information to prove a point</td>
<td>• Personalizing everything</td>
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We often experience a physical response first when our defenses are triggered.

How we communicate when feeling defensive is what is likely to trigger or heighten the other person’s defenses.

Our emotional responses can feed our communication responses in the moment and prolong the moment.

Defensiveness in the learning environment

- **Deny**: There is no issue; the issue isn’t with the learner
- **Displace**: Anger with the educator or other learners
- **Forcing control**: Dictating how and when learning occurs
- **Catastrophizing**: Even small concerns are seen as career-ending—shutting down or personalizing
- **Sublimate**: Being more focused on a task or situation within control
- **Project**: Telling educator that they are incapable
Disrupting defensiveness for ourselves

RECOGNIZE: Know your defensive triggers.

ACKNOWLEDGE: The goal isn’t to remove them.

TIME-OUT: Slow down, pause. Give yourself time to process.

EVALUATE: Consider your next option.

START AGAIN: Refresh the conversation.

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Check-in: What stood out?
Strategies for when you have time to plan

- Consider: can this conversation be accomplished effectively in one go?
- Disarming
- Intentional honoring
- Identify relationship goals
  - Preferred realistic outcome (Where do I want to get to in this conversation?)
  - Preferred relationship (and be prepared to share it)
  - Possible interference: what’s getting in the way of achieving your preferred relationship
Strategies for in-the-moment mitigation

- Check myself first: am I capable of being effective in this moment?
- Check in with situation: have I set expectations/formed relationship previously?
- Change discord into agreement
- Name and tame the thwarting tactic
Long-term strategies

These strategies reduce defensiveness and increase psychological safety in learning environments:

• Share what you’re learning—promote a learning environment at all stages
• Create problem-solving partnerships: frame before you solve
• Share what you are unlearning
• Make learning a priority
• Share past mistakes
Reflect on what you need to learn

- What kinds of conversations do I not handle as well as I’d like?
- What kinds of personalities are likely to provoke a response from me?
- Are there specific people, settings, or topics that are particularly difficult?
- What’s one technique I think I’m already good at?
- What’s one I want to improve?
Mitigating defensiveness in practice
Scenario 1:
There is time to plan and the relationship is ongoing
Scenario 2:
The intervention is instant and there may not be an ongoing relationship.
What questions remain?
Check-in: what is one thing you will take from this discussion and put into practice?
Takeaways from today

- Lots of factors affect how and when defensiveness arises.
- Self-regulating our defensiveness can help disrupt unhealthy conflict – for ourselves and for others.
- Specific techniques (like intentional honoring, disarming, turning discord into agreement, setting expectations) can help mitigate defensiveness.
- And remember, don’t expect perfection; embrace humanness and grace.
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