

How to Get On With Your Colleagues

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Part 2
The Challenges

1
Defensiveness



i. A character study

They are by nature extremely efficient. They make an especially good impression in the early days. They might be the first one into the office and the last to leave. They were expected to deliver a report at the end of the week and by Tuesday midday it's already been done. Their desk is immaculate.

But then, slowly, a problem rears its head. Their report was impressive in areas and beautifully presented throughout. However, there were a few things missing, as one would expect, given that this is only their second week with the company. It would have been nice to integrate some of the sales data and perhaps to use a few pie charts to make the conclusions stand out.

So, along with the praise, you mention how a second draft might look. But no sooner have you begun than you are surprised to receive an immediate, curt and distinctly wounded: 'Of course'. You want to explain further, but when you start again, you are cut off with a clipped: 'Yes, no problem at all'. Then comes an abrupt and urgent, 'I understand completely'. Having to hear your account of what they didn't grasp and might want to amend is almost unbearable; it seems that if they could, they would block their ears and start humming. You have, inadvertently, invited a defensive non-listener onto the team.

The attendant challenges start to mount. Whenever you suggest the potential for improvement, they either deny that there's anything wrong or implausibly assert that they also just realised there was a problem and were about to fix it. You sense a sulk brewing every

time you need to speak. If you persist in trying to highlight a worrying area, they develop sharp-edged reasons why the problem exists only in your imagination. The price of feedback rises exponentially. In certain moods, they go on the offensive: they query why you are raising this now (when they have worked so hard); they insinuate that you are getting at them unfairly (they are doing everything they can) and point out that you are the only one to have a problem with them (everyone in marketing is happy with their work).

The defensive non-listener is a perfectionist; that is, someone with an unusually intense and intractable commitment to getting everything right. While this might seem to have its advantages (it could be an asset to have someone who cares so much), perfectionism becomes problematic when it brings with it an inability to listen to what may have gone wrong at the first attempt; when it becomes the cause for an upset over anything less than immediately laudable. The defensive perfectionist, despite their dread of failure, paradoxically cannot bring themselves to take ideas on board and thereby bring their output closer to the perfection they so desire. They will do anything other than take the one step that would be so beneficial to them and those they live and work with: *admit to a problem and see what could be done to put it right.*

ii. Origins

The reluctance to acknowledge fault is so intense for the non-listener because, in their minds, not-already-knowing and making the slightest error have unconsciously become associated with catastrophe. There is perpetually a vast gulf open between what one tells them and what they can hear.

What is said to them	What they hear
It would be great to increase the margin size.	You don't deserve to exist.
Have you thought of adding some extra presentation documents?	Why can you never do anything right?
Maybe we should try to get the data in by the middle of the month in future.	You're a lazy, disorganised wretch.

The psychology of the defensive non-listener was generally established a long time ago. One of the stranger features of adulthood is that we interpret and respond to people in ways that are determined not by the here and now but by certain experiences we went through as children. Our minds seem not always to know what the time is or who we are dealing with. Ostensibly, we understand that we are in the office in the present but, in our unconscious, we may still be back in the nursery in the old house three decades before.

Where we are



Where the unconscious thinks we are



A confusion about who we are talking to



Boss now



Father then

In the case of the defensive, although they might grasp objectively that they are having a conversation with their boss, their unconscious may lead them to behave as if their interlocutor might be their father, who is about to punish them just as he did when they were small.

Psychotherapy has an array of tests that show up the presence of the unknown past and, with it, our proclivity to impose (or, as the technical term puts it, to ‘transfer’) old assumptions and patterns of thinking onto contemporary reality. The best known of such tests, devised in the 1930s by the Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach, presents us with groups of ambiguous images generated by spilt ink, upon which we’re asked to reflect without inhibition, expressing freely what we feel of their atmosphere and identity.

Rorschach’s images have no predetermined meaning. They aren’t about anything in particular; they are suggestive in a vast array of directions, so the atmospheres we see in them depend upon what our pasts most readily predispose us to feel. To an individual who inherited from their parents a kindly and forgiving conscience, a given image might be viewed as a sweet mask, with eyes, floppy ears, a covering for the mouth and wide flaps extending from the cheeks. Another, hounded across childhood by a domineering father, could view it as a powerful figure seen from below, with splayed feet, thick legs, heavy shoulders and a head bent forward as if poised for attack. Bosses themselves too often function a little like a Rorschach blotch, triggering unconscious expectations of how people in authority might treat us.

Hermann Rorschach,
Inkblot test, 1932



Exercise



This exercise indicates how we superimpose the past on the present. Your boss unexpectedly asks you to step into their office. What's your first instinctive reaction? What do you imagine is going to happen?

- (a) They want to ask my advice about something I know quite a lot about.*
- (b) There is probably a new project coming up that they want to discuss.*
- (c) They might be going to promote me.*
- (d) They are angry with me about something. They see me as a liability and a shameful person; there's a chance they will fire me.*

Finally: How did you get on with authority figures in childhood?

The specific details of a childhood that fostered defensive non-listening will always have a local colour and accent to them, but they can be guaranteed to have one thing in common: at some point in the past of the non-listener, getting things wrong (failing in the broad sense) will have been experienced as appallingly and (seemingly) life-threateningly dangerous. Maybe there was a parent who grew enraged at the slightest error, who shouted violently when things were not quite right and gave the child a sense that they might want to do away with them for being less than perfect. Or maybe there was a parent who was kind yet weak and seemed in danger of collapse if we disappointed them or couldn't support them through extraordinary accomplishments. Or else there was a parent who was self-sacrificial and had a way of ushering in guilt for any errors one made, and conveyed that one would be a terrible, ungrateful person if one disappointed them in any way.

As a result, whenever there is criticism, there is also a memory of fierce attack and huge risks, which starts to explain the strength of the denial with which feedback is greeted. In the early years, there was no reliable boundary between the local idea of having failed at a task and the more general idea of being a worthless being, which is why the stakes around a minor comment continue to feel so high.

Without meaning to be, the defensive non-listener is a liar. Yet the more we understand about the origin of the need to lie, the more benevolently we can feel towards those who end up doing so in relation to feedback. Plato once outlined an idea of what he called the

'just lie'. If a crazed person comes to us asking for an axe, we can feel entitled to claim that we don't have one even if we do; we understand that, were we to tell the truth, they would use the tool to do something horrendous to us. In other words, we can reasonably tell a lie when our life seems in danger.

Our life is not generally at risk at the office: a boss will not want to swing at us with an axe when they ask a searching question about a project. But, psychologically, this is precisely how the defensive person may experience the enquiry; this makes it understandable that they might say that there isn't a problem and that the report is completely fine as it is. The defensive person cannot help but fear that their mistakes will be used as a weapon against them. They might long to admit to all that is imperfect about their work, but they never feel sufficiently safe to undertake the process. They are so burdened with shame and guilt already that a colleague's comment, however delicate, feels impossible to listen to. There is too much pre-existing fragility in their psyches for them to own up to yet another difficult insight into what might be wrong with them.

Exercise



When you were a child, what was the dominant message you received in response to your errors?

1. *Don't worry, it's fine, everyone makes mistakes. (Forgiveness)*
2. *How could you be so stupid, idiot. (Aggression)*
3. *I've done so much for you; is this fair? (Guilt)*

iii. Ways forward

To help the defensive non-listener to lessen their fears, a priority is to try to alter their underlying sense of what it means to make a mistake. We need to humanise error and show that it belongs in the lives of all good and admirable people. Ideally, the most senior members of a company would be encouraged to detail their failings in a public forum and to explore their omissions and blunders without judgement, in an atmosphere of benevolent good humour and cheerful pessimism. Within a working team, messing up would be viewed not as a freakish anomaly that deserves to be punished with cruelty and sarcasm, but as something that happens naturally whenever intelligent people gather to take on a complex task.

Part of the challenge is to get the non-listener to admit that they might be defensive in the first place. The best recourse is to frame the quirk in general and non-pejorative terms rather than in individual and shameful ones. It should be stated as an unsurprising and unembarrassing fact of human nature that everyone has defensive non-listening tendencies and that the prestigious and adult move is to admit to the phenomenon with speed and grace. It is as normal to try to shut one's ears to challenging information as it is to slip into sad or irritable moods. To counter the persecutory psyche of the defensive person, the management might simply hang a sign above the door that reads: *We are all (at points) a bit defensive here.*

*Exercise*

We all have things that we suspect are true about us that we can't bear to confront, let alone hear about from others (that we are a little paranoid, judgemental with others or self-pitying...). With great kindness to ourselves, on a sheet of paper, list a few of these negative traits. Complete the sentence: A few awful things about me that I generally don't confront are...

We're trying to practise the little-known art of acknowledging our less admirable, more immature shadow sides. Doing this in the company of other people should let us see that we are not alone in our frailties and lend us courage to listen a little more and block our ears a little less.

The defensive person has been cursed with a conviction that failures, mistakes and errors cannot be forgiven; in line with their formative experiences, they imagine that others will always be shocked by and severe about their less-than-perfect actions. We need to show them otherwise: to help them to see that what happened to them in childhood was not representative of what normally occurs between most adults in a working context and that the catastrophe they fear has already happened to them and therefore need not be warded off in situations that don't warrant it.

Along the way, we need to encourage the defensive non-listener to feel compassion for themselves for what happened long ago. We need to be careful that they do not end up feeling even more ashamed of themselves the more they learn about the origins of their behaviour. Their brittleness is not a sign of arrogance, simply a response to traumatic incidents. They should, in safe circumstances, revisit these in their minds, experiencing a newfound kindness for the vulnerable small person they once were – a child who needed to be perfect because circumstances were too harsh to allow them to be merely good enough.

At the same time, we need to take the defensive non-listener into the mindset of people who give them feedback and broaden their impression of why others call them in for chats. The inner conviction of the defensive is that their critics are motivated by a desire to wound and humiliate, and that any criticism means they are no good. We can show them that, within a working context, there is generally only one reason why criticism occurs: in order for a business to function more

effectively. Commercial organisations have no systematic desire or incentive to shame their employees; they have a much more humane and more urgent task at hand – that of fulfilling their customers and improving their profits.

We need to help the defensive to appreciate the extent to which they have allowed themselves to hear only the aggressive interpretation of any comments on their work and remind them of the true and innocent meaning of most of what will be said to them.

A: What they tell me	B: What it sounds like	C: What it really means
Do add the final figures to the presentation.	You are an idiot.	Do add the final figures to the presentation.
It would be good always to try to start the meeting at 5 p.m.	You disappoint and disgust me.	It would be good always to try to start the meeting at 5 p.m.

Being defensive does not spring from arrogance or pride. It is the adult relic of a childhood fear of what could happen if a mistake were to be admitted, projected into situations where such risks no longer apply. A few others may once long ago have questioned our right to exist every time we erred; we should mourn the difficult long-gone years but then dare to believe that we have entered a more benevolent, goal-oriented and forgiving present.

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Exercise



Perhaps oddly, emotional growth requires a good deal of practice. We all need to practise hearing true but uncomfortable things about ourselves. Hand a colleague the list of your flaws you outlined in the previous exercise. Ask them to read these back to you. Get used to hearing feedback without flinching or suspecting that the speaker is doing anything other than trying to get something done.

2 Poor Teaching

