

Are Your Defences Letting You Down?

BY CANDY TYMSON CSP

Some years ago I was working with a senior executive who, on the morning of a major presentation, had such severe laryngitis that he was unable to speak, so someone else had to read his speech. No major problem, these things happen, except it happened again at another conference. (I later discovered that every time this man had an important speech to give—he got laryngitis).

Then there is the story of the PA who hides her frustration with her demanding boss, except every now and again she makes a mistake that causes him major inconvenience.

And we have all been guilty of giving a great deal of focus to one task, when we really should have been focusing on another.

These are examples of common defensive behaviours. Everyone uses them from time to time to manage anger or anxiety—the power however is in having the insight to be aware when you, or someone important to you, are using them.

Any of These Sound Familiar?

In his excellent book, *The Psychology of Executive Coaching*, Bruce Peltier lists some of the more common defense mechanisms that have become rife in business today. They include:

- **Denial**—unconsciously ignoring the facts, even though they are directly in front of you.
- **Intellectualisation**—ignoring feelings and only being able to discuss matters as intellectual arguments.
- **Passive Aggression**—an old favourite, being passive to someone's face while creating things that will have a negative impact on them.
- **Provocative Behaviour**—behaving in a way that provokes others, so you can justifiably retaliate.
- **Displacement**—expressing hostile urges towards safer targets—such as a family member or the cat!

The list of defense mechanisms is extensive, from behaviours that twist reality to ones that cause people to behave strangely. Those that enable us to adapt to the situation while the main motivation is to avoid something. And finally, those that enable us to deny what really is happening. (If you'd like a complete list of the recognised defense mechanisms and how they operate, just send me an email—it makes fascinating reading!)

So, What Do We Do?

Remember that for most people, defense mechanisms are their adaptive way of dealing with a fear or anxiety. The senior executive who always got severe laryngitis before a major speech was fearful of speaking. His defense of becoming 'sick' enabled him to camouflage this fear and avoid facing it.

The biggest challenge in dealing with defense mechanisms is that often people are just not aware of what they are doing, or avoiding. The secret therefore is to make the unconscious mind, conscious. As Clint Eastwood observed in the role of *Dirty Harry*, "a man has to know his limitations".

Here are some suggestions:

1. Awareness is the key. Once you become aware of the behaviour you can choose what to do about it, if anything.
2. Examine the environment to see what type of behaviour it encourages or discourages. Trust and safety are important issues here.
3. Think about whether this behaviour is common in other areas of your life. Does it enable you to avoid confrontation, for example?
4. Set measurable, achievable goals. Start small and build slowly.
5. Seek support either from a coach, a colleague or your partner.
6. Find an alternative way of dealing with the anxiety or fear such as getting additional training, learning to speak up or moving on.
7. Learn to laugh at yourself. You are only human after all.



There are many different techniques you can use to increase your awareness, such as gathering information by reading, watching an informative program on television, and seeking the assistance of a professional.

Coping Strategies

In their book *Changing for Good* psychologists Prochaska, Norcross and DiClemente suggest a number of what they call 'coping strategies' to deal with defenses. For example, one way of dealing with denial is rather than refusing to face painful feelings or thoughts, set them aside while you focus on a task that needs to be handled, and then return to those feelings at a more appropriate time.

Rationalisation and intellectualisation are ways to 'explain away' problem behaviours by twisting reality and retreating with words. Coming up with an explanation to make the outcome more acceptable such as "I really didn't want that promotion anyway" is a common defense mechanism. Prochaska and his colleagues suggest that we focus on a logical analysis, by thoughtfully and carefully analysing problem behaviours without becoming overwhelmed by emotion.

And finally, an example of dealing with displacement. Rather than taking it out on another person, more socially acceptable channels may be exercise, chores, music and other forms of 'creative aggression'.

I think Victor Frankl expressed it well:

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

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