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Responding to Criticism Without Being Defensive

By Sharon Ellison

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In an actual war, to be attacked means to have our survival threatened. Thus, we might chose between surrender, withdrawal, or counterattack. When we feel attacked (criticized or judged) by others in conversation, we often move into that same kind of survival mentality and automatically defend ourselves. But conversation is different than war. When we defend against criticism, we give more power to the criticism and the person dishing it out than is warranted.

While we might need to set some limits if someone is verbally abusive, I think we often ward off criticism far too soon, discarding anything that is valid, as well as what is invalid. The person's words may hurt, but they will hurt less, I think, if we ask questions, decide which pieces we agree with (if any) and which ones we don't agree with. We can just think about it, we don't have to fight it as if we were being attacked with a lethal weapon. I watch people's self-esteem increase simply from becoming less defensive in the face of criticism and judgement. Besides, we may find a priceless gem in with some junk.

The War Model: When someone attacks, you surrender, withdraw, or counterattack

The Non-Defensive Model: Ask questions, decide what you think, and then respond!

The remainder of this article will demonstrate how to respond non-defensively to criticism by giving examples for parents, couples, and professionals. While the examples are specific to a certain type of relationship, the information is valuable in any relationship. For example, dealing with harsh tones or "pay-backs" can happen with children or adults, at home or at work.

Parents: Are You Letting Your Child Speak Harshly to You? Or Putting Up With Criticism Because of Guilt?

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As parents, we often love our children so much and simultaneously feel inadequate to meet all their needs. They sense this and can learn early how to make us feel guilty as a way to get what they want. I hear so many children, starting at a young age, speaking in harsh critical tones to their parents. Ginny may simply say "You know I hate peas!" Sam might shout "You never want to let me do anything with my friends!" The judgment might be more deeply critical of your choices, such as, "You made dad leave! You should tell him you're sorry so he'll come back."

When we respond to our child or teen or even our adult child's criticism, if guilt has a hold on us, we may "take it," and even apologize, or try to explain ourselves so he or she understands why we behaved in a certain way. If we are over our own edges, we may lash back.

What I think we can do instead is to separate the tone of the judgment from the content of what is being said. We can say to Ginny, "If you don't want peas, I still want you to tell me gently." Or, "If you speak to me harshly, then I'm not going to answer. If you speak respectfully, I'll talk to you about this."

Then, if that child, teen or adult offspring does talk without harsh judgment, we can, if it is appropriate, offer to discuss the situation. In this way, we can not only refuse to cave in to undue criticism, we can model for our children how to (a) talk about what they need and feel without being judgemental, and (b) respond with a blend of firmness and openness even when someone speaks harshly to us or them.

Couples: Avoid the "Pay-Back" When One of You "Gets Critical"

When we are in intimate relationships, we often have a "ledger of offenses" that we have accumulated with each other. And what I do that offends you often prompts the reaction in you that offends me. So when you criticize me, your partner, it reminds me of what you do that "makes" me react that way. And so the counterattack game begins. "Well, I wouldn't have to react this way if you didn't always . . ." Or, "Look at you criticizing me for having a double standard. Haven't you ever looked in a mirror?!"

Instead, if we listen to the feedback, however judgmental it sounds, and figure out whether we think it applies to us or not, then we don't have to retaliate immediately and intensify the conflict. Later, during the same conversation, or perhaps even at another time, we can ask the other person (if we are sincerely curious and not point-proving) "Do you think your sarcasm (for example) contributed in any way to how I reacted?" Or, "Do you think you ever (for example) have double standards—or do you think you don't?" We can bring up related issues, if we create a transition period and deal first with the one our partner brought up.

To remain non-defensive, we must separate how we take accountability ourselves from whether or not the other person chooses to do so at any given moment. When we need to prove our partner is as "bad as we are" or worse, we are neck-deep in the muck of power struggle. In non-defensive communication, we address the issue the other person has brought up trusting that we can bring up our own issue later. Doing so can give both partners a "hearing aid."

Professionals: Drop The Game of Passing the Blame and Enhance Others' Respect

In professional relationships how we get our own work done is often dependent on how well other

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people do their jobs. So, frequently, when we receive criticism it is easy to "pass the buck" and justify why we had difficulty with our part based on how others contributed to that difficulty.

Instead of starting out by shifting blame or making excuses, even if we think the problem was caused by a co-worker, we can ask questions, such as, "What would you suggest I do differently next time?" or, "Were you aware that I had to get the materials from Jane before I could finish the project?" Or, "If she doesn't have her part of the project to me on time, how would you suggest I deal with it?"

If the feedback is about your own performance and not related to what anyone else has or hasn't done, you can just start by asking for more information. You can ask for additional details about how the supervisor or co-worker sees your attitude and behavior. Then, if there are points where you disagree, you can still use questions, such as, "If you think I shouldn't have criticized the quality of George's work on the project, are you saying I should just accept however he does it?" Or, "Are you saying I should just accept how he did it, or do you think it was how I said it?" Or, "Do you think there is any way I can let him know when I think the quality needs improvement?" At some point you may wish to disagree

with part or all of what the person is saying. However, if your initial response to criticism is to gather more information, I think you will gain professional respect. Also, if the other person is off-base, your questions may prompt her or him to re-think the criticism.!

Building Wisdom and Gaining Respect

For most of us, responding to criticism without defending our selves has meant being "defenseless," caving in, losing face, feeling bad about ourselves. On the other hand, responding defensively has meant being harsh, closed, shutting others out. This is a no-win choice. We look bad and undermine our own self esteem either way. If we can learn to respond to criticism with true non-defensive openness and clarity, asking questions, stating our position, and setting limits when needed, we can build our own wisdom and garner the respect of both the children and adults in our lives.

This article is based on the book

Taking the War Out of Our Words

by Sharon Ellison, available

through your local bookstore or favorite online bookseller. Sharon Ellison, M.S. is an award winning speaker and international consultant.

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Defensive Driving: The Basics

By Robert Thatcher

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It is a fact that though drivers can control most of their actions most of the time, they are totally powerless when it comes to the actions of other drivers. They simply do not know what other drivers on the road are going to do. This is why it is very important for drivers to learn the special skill called defensive driving. So if you want to protect yourself and your loved ones from accident, then it is highly advisable that you take defensive driving courses. Such classes offer a wealth of information when it comes to preventing or fixing road mishaps.

What is defensive driving? Simply put, it is a way of driving where the driver takes every possible precautionary measure in order to prevent accidents or untoward incidents from occurring. Defensive driving is probably the best way to ensure the safety of a driver and his or her passengers,

Below are some of the basics of defensive driving:

Be ready with every possible situation that might happen on the roads. Constant preparedness is probably the best trait of a very good defensive driver. Before driving your car make it a habit to check the tire pressure, and the water, oil and gas levels. It is also important to check the lights and mirrors. It is also wise to make sure that you have all the necessary documents pertaining to your car with you before leaving.

Avoid showing road rage. You should also, as much as possible, avoid other drivers showing signs of road rage. Don't react to the anger of other motorists. Always keep your head cool. The color of your car is very important in defensive driving. You are in a better position if your car is brightly colored. Advantageous colors in defensive are red, orange, yellow or other brightly colored. Because they are easily seen, bright colored cars are less likely to get involved in an accident.

Remember to always use your headlight while night driving. It is very stupid, not to mention illegal, to drive without the headlights on at night.

Always follow the three second rule of driving. According to this rule, a driver must always be at least three seconds of driving time from the driver in front in all conditions. Drivers should be five second behind the driver in front during bad conditions.

Never follow a vehicle, especially big trucks and busses too closely. By doing so, driver will be sure to have perfect visibility.

Always avoid being in the blind side of other drivers. If an accident happens, it is pretty sure that you certainly cannot blame the other party for what has happened.

As much as possible, drive with a companion. This will ensure that someone will be there with you in case something happens.

While on the road, avoid getting close to cars that are broken down or has damages. These cars are most likely run by irresponsible drivers. You can bet that they are not defensive drivers.

The above are just the basics of defensive driving. To know more about defensive driving and how it

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can save you money, your car and even your life, then consider enrolling in a defensive driving school soon.

These are only a few of the defensive driving rules that are out there. You will find a wide range of them as well as places to take defensive driving classes on the web.

Robert Thatcher is a freelance publisher based in Cupertino, California. He publishes articles and reports in various ezines and provides defensive driving resources on

<http://www.aboutdefensivedriving.info>

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