



### **Stop Being So Defensive!** **Bruce E. Roselle**

In my work as an executive coach, I find myself in situations where the people I'm coaching become defensive. This often happens as I'm walking them through our FULLVIEW 360-degree feedback instrument, when they see a particular rating or comment that pushes their buttons.

Recently, I worked with a mid-career executive who had overused alcohol at an organization-sponsored, multiple day event. I was trying to help him see how his drunkenness and inability to function over the course of the event was a signal that he was feeling overwhelmed in his executive role, and that he needed to undergo a chemical dependency evaluation as a first step in seeking help. Instead of being open to the offer of help from his organization, he reacted defensively to the suggestions, and then abruptly resigned. His manager and I received the resignation news with shock, and we asked ourselves, "What just happened?"

The answer to our question is that he did not want to fully address the underlying, contributing issues, but instead chose a knee-jerk, defensive response. At the core of defensiveness is an individual perceiving the need to protect oneself from the personal attacks of others and tending to take things personally that others say, even when they are not meant to be a personal attack. As I discuss in my 2006 book, **Fearless Leadership**, this reaction is based on irrational fear and faulty beliefs that trigger someone's fear of being personally rejected, viewed as incompetent, or getting hurt in a way they cannot fix.

**What does it look like?** Defensiveness can be observed in spoken words, emails, texts, etc. in which someone communicates to you or about you or your team, and you find yourself over-reacting to their communication. Most people find themselves reacting defensively at times in a typical day or week, but some folks take it to an art form.

In this executive's case, he exhibited six aspects of defensiveness that you may have seen in yourself and others:

- **Feeling hurt.** You interact with others and you leave the interaction feeling that their words were overly harsh and critical of you. You feel like they are blaming you for something that was not your fault. They did not seem at all to be concerned about your feelings.

- **Blaming others, the context.** Not wanting to be blamed yourself, you find fault in others. If they had just helped you in some way or stepped in to protect you, this problem would not have happened. Or perhaps you blame the organization for lack of clear system and communication.
- **Not genuinely apologizing.** Stuff happens and things go wrong, but defensive people feel overwhelmed if the blame legitimately falls on them. Instead of genuinely apologizing and beginning the restoration process with others, they do an insincere ‘mea culpa’ that leaves others feeling like they were actually the ones at fault.
- **Shifting the focus.** If others are not clearly to blame in the situation, you deflect the focus of the conversation to another, broader topic that obfuscates the real issues.
- **Controlling the interaction.** In order to protect yourself from being blamed, you take steps, sometimes dramatic ones like resigning, to control the narrative and the outcome.
- **Minimizing the impact.** Often, the person being defensive actually is to blame in some tangible way. In these cases, they describe the situation in a way that makes the problem seem to be smaller than it actually is.
- **Shutting down or leaving.** When all else fails, emotionally shutting down or checking out can be used by the defensive person to stop the feeling of being blamed. This includes ignoring suggestions from others designed to be helpful.

**How can you help someone stop their defensive reactions?** Here are several steps that can help you become more emotionally intelligent when dealing with defensive people:

1. **Refrain from reacting defensively.** The typical response when someone interacts to you with blaming, minimizing, shifting focus, or shutting down is to become defensive yourself. The first step, then, is to recognize when you feel your blood pressure rise in a “fight or flight” reaction, take a deep breath, and recognize that your buttons just got pushed.
2. **Shift your focus to the other person.** Look at them with compassion, recognizing that their reaction has little or nothing to do with you, but, rather, has resulted from pent up emotions from various other sources in their work and life. Decide to be curious about what is going on inside of them that has resulted in their over-reaction.
3. **Ask open questions until you understand them.** Using statements like, “Please tell me more about your feelings,” or “Help me understand what upset you” can begin to attenuate a defensive reaction by others.
4. **Move toward a resolution.** Once the person has become less defensive and more open to dialogue, you can also try posing questions like, “How can we resolve this going forward?” or, “What would you like to see as next steps?” This might require a ‘time out’ between step 3 and step 4, to give the person a chance to return to a normal state of mind.