

This is the last of three articles about working with feedback. The first article is entitled "How am I doing?" The second article is entitled "If Feedback is so valuable why do we keep it to ourselves?"

The previous two articles discussed the value of asking for feedback and how effective we are at giving feedback to our colleagues. This article explores what can happen when we are the recipients of feedback.

How good are we at hearing what people say when they are talking about our behaviour. Are we able to accept praise? When someone says we have done a good job do we believe him or her? How do we respond? "Thank you – I appreciate your comments" or "It was nothing – just doing my job".

Are we able to accept criticism? When someone says we could have done a better job do we believe him or her? How do we respond? "Thank you – it would help me to hear your views on how I can improve" or "Hey – give me a break – I'd like to see you do better". Even if we don't actually say it we may start thinking – "Who do you think you are talking to me like that?"

All of us have an actual self image. This is the way we see ourselves - e.g. funny, confident, good at my job, like to be with people etc. We also have an ideal self image. This is the way we would like to be - e.g. calm under pressure, great lover, patient parent etc. Sometimes we are aware of both of these images and the differences between them e.g. I know I'd like to be calm under pressure but I also know that I often get flustered.

Most of us come to work intending to do a good job. Our ideal self image probably contains pictures of (say) being effective, decisive, always on time with deliverables, making a valued contribution etc. Our actual self image may fall short of our ideal self image and contain pictures of (say) being effective only some of the time, terrified of making wrong decisions and a tendency to be indecisive, usually, but not always, on time with deliverables, not sure about the value of the contribution we make, etc. Some aspects of the actual self image and ideal self image can be the same, some aspects will fall short. Most of the time we are able to live with the differences between our actual and ideal self images by accepting the difference or by

pretending that the difference isn't there. (You can't deny that denial is a great defence!) However when we receive feedback that highlights the differences between our actual and ideal self images there is a danger we can get defensive.

Why is being defensive a danger? Well - our defences may make us deaf!

If we are interested in improving our performance we must listen to the people we work with. What they say can help us understand the impact we are making. They will also help us understand how we can be more effective. Being defensive is a sure way of making sure we don't listen to their feedback. Over the years I've collected a long list of ways to be defensive that I, and my clients, confess to using! Here are a few ...

Losing my sense of humour

Taking offence

Feeling a sudden drop in IQ, going blank, unable to think clearly

Wanting to be right - "There's no question about it."

Wanting the last word (rise in volume of voice)

Flooding people with information to prove a point

Endlessly explaining and rationalising

Thinking - "Poor me. I don't need this. Why does this have to happen to me?"

Holding my position rigidly, no matter what

Denying

Withdrawing into deadly silence

Being cynical (Taking the role of the victim)

Being sarcastic

Do any apply to you?! If you would like to see the whole list you can download it from

<http://www.pansophix.com/resources/signs-of-defensiveness.pdf>

and use it to ask colleagues, friends and family members for feedback on your defences.

Defence mechanisms we use and are aware of do not need to be a danger to us. Our awareness gives us a choice. Our awareness allows us to know when we are using a particular defence mechanism. We can then choose. Shall I carry on being defensive or shall I stop and pay attention to what is being said?

It's the defence mechanisms that we use but are not aware of that are dangerous to us. These are the ones that can make us deaf. If we are unaware we are being defensive it's impossible to choose to stop and listen.

Remember "Words are like maps – both can show you the way!"

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