

Don't Get So Defensive!

Sometimes we feel we're not as intelligent, good-looking, successful, personable or savvy as the next person. In this mindset, it's easy to misunderstand someone's communication, make assumptions about their intentions, and perceive they are out to get us personally.

That, in turn, may unleash fears of appearing incompetent, dishonest, unfair or other negatives.

A perceived attack like this strikes at the heart of our fragile self-perception. It also brings to the forefront insecurities left over from our childhoods. In most cases, out of fear...we strike back, and a kind of *defensiveness chain* is created.

Let's look at this workplace example.

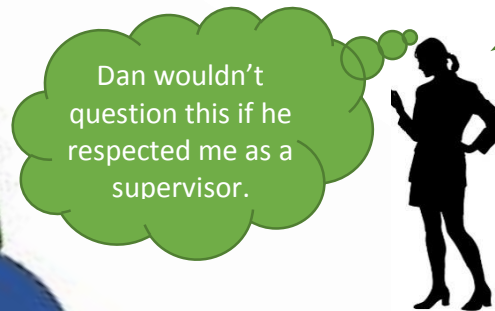
Dan is upset with his supervisor, Jessica, because she moved him from one work team to another without discussing it with him.

Link 1: Dan approaches Jessica.



Jessica, I'd really like to know why I've been moved to Team 3.

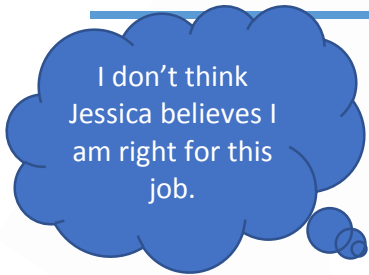
Link 2: Jessica perceives Dan's comment as an attack and reacts defensively.



Dan wouldn't question this if he respected me as a supervisor.

You know, Dan, I don't have to ask your permission to make a change!

Link 3: Dan perceives Jessica's defensive reaction as a threat, which provokes a defensive response from him.



I don't think Jessica believes I am right for this job.



You never ask for my input on anything, so this is just par for the course!

Link 4: Jessica now feels even more insecure about her supervisory skills, so the defensiveness continues...this time with a counterattack.



Well maybe you need to do a better job of presenting information.

And on and on it goes....

Here's How to Break the Chain

1. **Disengage** – When you find yourself feeling defensive, avoid making the assumption that your competence is in question and that you are being personally attacked. Focus on the results you want while cooling down.
2. **Empathize** - Before questioning or correcting another person's behavior, remember what it is like to be on the receiving end of such information. Approach them as you would want to be approached.
3. **Inquire** - Uncover the concerns of the other person by asking questions and listening actively to their answers. This will focus both of you on tasks, not disagreements, while building a foundation of trust.
4. **Disclose** - Reveal your feelings, needs and goals to the other person. A powerful, non-defensive way to do this is through "I statements" such as, "I feel upset that I did not receive your marketing budget on time. Because it was late, I will need to rewrite the proposal."
5. **Depersonalize** - Evaluate the behavior, not the person; look at work as something the two of you *do*...not *who you are*.