

# Communication fundamental improvement ways

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



DEFENSIVE COMMUNICATION by Jack R. Gibb (Transcribed from a mimeographed paper discovered at the University of Toledo, 4/88. Edited only to reduce gender-specific references. des — Note: The original text, with references, appears in Appendix C of the Trust book. Jack has said that this article, which came out of research performed for the Office of Naval Research, " has been more widely distributed than any of my other publications. ") One way to understand communication is to view it as a people process rather than a language process.

If one is to make fundamental improvement in communication, one must make changes in interpersonal relationships. One possible type of alteration—and the one with which this paper is concerned—is that of reducing the degree of defensiveness. Definition and Significance Defensive behavior is defined as that behavior which occurs when an individual perceives threat or anticipates threat in the group. The person who behaves defensively, even though he or she also gives some attention to the common task, devotes an appreciable portion of energy to defending himself or herself.

Besides talking about the topic, he thinks about how he appears to others, how he may be seen more favorably, how he may win, dominate, impress or escape punishment, and/or how he may avoid or mitigate a perceived attack. Such inner feelings and outward acts tend to create similarly defensive postures in others; and, if unchecked, the ensuing circular response becomes increasingly destructive. Defensive behavior, in short, engenders defensive listening, and this in turn produces postural, facial and verbal cues which raise the defense level of the original communicator.

Defense arousal prevents the listener from concentrating upon the message. Not only do defensive communicators send off multiple value, motive and affect cues, but also defensive recipients distort what they receive. As a person becomes more and more defensive, he or she becomes less and less able to perceive accurately the motives, the values and the emotions of the sender. The writer's analysis of tape recorded discussions revealed that increases in defensive behavior were correlated positively with losses in efficiency in communication. (2) The converse, moreover, also is true.

The more "supportive" or defense-reductive the climate, the less the receiver reads into the communication distorted loadings which arise from projections of his own anxieties, motives and concerns. As defenses are reduced, the receivers become better able to concentrate upon the structure, the content and the cognitive meanings of the message. Categories of Defensive and Supportive Communications In working over an eight-year period with recordings of discussions occurring in varied settings, the writer developed the six pairs of defensive and supportive categories presented in Table 1.

Behavior which a listener perceives as possessing any of the characteristics listed in the left-hand column arouses defensiveness, whereas that which he interprets as having any of the qualities designated as supportive reduces defensive feelings. The degree to which these reactions occur depends upon the person's level of defensiveness and upon the general climate in the group at the time. (3) Evaluation and Description Speech or other behavior which appears evaluative increases defensiveness.

If by expression, manner of speech, tone of voice or verbal content the sender seems to be evaluating or judging the listener, the receiver goes on guard. Of course, other factors may inhibit the reaction. If the listener thought that the speaker regarded him as an equal and was being open and spontaneous, for example, the evaluativeness in a message would be neutralized and perhaps not even perceived. This same principle applies equally to the other five categories of potentially defense-producing climates.

These six sets are interactive. Because our attitudes toward other persons are frequently, and often necessarily, evaluative, expressions which the defensive person will regard as nonjudgmental are hard to frame. Even the simplest question usually conveys the answer that the sender wishes or implies the response that would fit into his or her value system. A mother, for example, immediately following an earth tremor that shook the house, sought for her small son with the question, " Bobby, where are you? The timid and plaintive " Mommy, I didn't do it" indicated how Bobby's chronic mild defensiveness predisposed him to react with a projection of his own guilt and in the context of his chronic assumption that questions are full of accusation.

TABLE 1 Categories of Behavior Characteristic of Supportive and Defensive Climates in Small Groups

Defensive Climates	Supportive Climates
1. Evaluation	1. Description
2. Control	2. Problem Orientation
3. Strategy	3. Spontaneity
4. Neutrality	4. Empathy
5. Superiority	5. Equality
6. Certainty	6. Provisionalism

Anyone who has attempted to train professionals to use information-seeking speech with neutral affect appreciates how difficult it is to teach a person to say even the simple " who did that? " without being seen as accusing. Speech is so frequently judgmental that there is a reality base for the defensive interpretations which are so common. When insecure, group members are particularly likely to place blame, to see others as fitting into categories of good or bad, to make moral judgments of their colleagues and to question the value, motive and affect loadings of the speech which they hear.

Since value loadings imply a judgment of others, a belief that the standards of the speaker differ from his or her own causes the listener to become defensive. Descriptive speech, in contrast to that which is evaluative, tends to arouse a minimum of uneasiness. Speech acts which the listener perceives as genuine requests for information or as material with neutral loadings is descriptive. Specifically, presentation of feelings, events, perceptions or processes which do not ask or imply that the receiver change behavior or attitude are minimally defense producing.

The difficulty in avoiding overtone is illustrated by the problems of news reporters in writing stories about unions, Communists, Blacks and religious activities without tipping off the " party" line of the newspaper. One can often tell from the opening words in a news article which side the newspaper's editorial policy favors. Control and Problem Orientation Speech which is used to control the listener evokes resistance.

In most of our social intercourse, someone is trying to do something to someone else—to change an attitude, to influence behavior, or to restrict the field of activity. The degree to which attempts to control produce defensiveness depends upon the openness of the effort, for a suspicion that hidden motives exist heightens resistance. For this reason, attempts of nondirective therapists and progressive educators to refrain from imposing a set of values, a point of view or a problem solution upon the receivers meet with many barriers.

Since the norm is control, noncontrollers must earn the perceptions that their efforts have no hidden motives. A bombardment of persuasive "messages" in the fields of politics, education, special causes, advertising, religion, medicine, industrial relations and guidance has bred cynical and paranoid responses in listeners. Implicit in all attempts to alter another person is the assumption by the change agent that the person to be altered is inadequate.

That the speaker secretly views the listener as ignorant, unable to make his or her own decisions, uninformed, immature, unwise, or possessed of wrong or inadequate attitudes is a subconscious perception which gives the latter a valid base for defensive reactions. Strategy and Spontaneity When the sender is perceived as engaged in a stratagem involving ambiguous and multiple motivations, the receiver becomes defensive. No one wishes to be a guinea pig, a role player, or an impressed actor, and no one likes to be the victim of some hidden motivation.

That which is concealed, also, may appear larger than it really is with the degree of defensiveness of the listener determining the perceived size of the

element. The intense reaction of the reading audience to the material in *The Hidden Persuaders* indicates the prevalence of defensive reactions to multiple motivations behind strategy. Group members who are seen as "taking a role" as feigning emotion, as toying with their colleagues, as withholding information or as having special sources of data are especially resented.

One participant once complained that another was "using a listening technique" on him! A large part of the adverse reaction to much of the so-called human relations training is a feeling against what are perceived as gimmicks and tricks to fool or to "involve" people, to make a person think he or she is making their own decision, or to make the listener feel that the sender is genuinely interested in him or her as a person. Particularly violent reactions occur when it appears that someone is trying to make a stratagem appear spontaneous. One person reported a boss who incurred resentment by habitually using the gimmick of "spontaneously" looking at his watch and saying "my gosh, look at the time—I must run to an appointment." The belief was that the boss would create less irritation by honestly asking to be excused. The aversion to deceit may account for one's resistance to politicians who are suspected of behind-the-scenes planning to get one's vote, to psychologists whose listening apparently is motivated by more than the manifest or content-level interest in one's behavior, or the sophisticated, smooth, or clever person whose one-upmanship is marked with guile.

In training groups the role-flexible person frequently is resented because his or her changes in behavior are perceived as strategic maneuvers. In

contrast, behavior that appears to be spontaneous and free of deception is defense reductive. If the communicator is seen as having a clean id, as having uncomplicated motivations, as being straightforward and honest, as behaving spontaneously in response to the situation, he or she is likely to arouse minimal defensiveness. **Neutrality and Empathy** When neutrality in speech appears to the listener to indicate a lack of concern for his welfare, he becomes defensive.

Group members usually desire to be perceived as valued persons, as individuals with special worth, and as objects of concern and affection. The clinical, detached, person-is-an-object-study attitude on the part of many psychologist-trainers is resented by group members. Speech with low affect that communicates little warmth or caring is in such contrast with the affect-laden speech in social situations that it sometimes communicates rejection. Communication that conveys empathy for the feelings and respect for the worth of the listener, however, is particularly supportive and defense reductive.

Reassurance results when a message indicates that the speaker identifies himself or herself with the listener's problems, shares her feelings, and accepts her emotional reactions at face value. Abortive efforts to deny the legitimacy of the receiver's emotions by assuring the receiver that she need not feel badly, that she should not feel rejected, or that she is overly anxious, although often intended as support giving, may impress the listener as lack of acceptance. The combination of understanding and empathizing



with the other person's emotions with no accompanying effort to change him or her is supportive at a high level.

The importance of gestural behavior cues in communicating empathy should be mentioned. Apparently spontaneous facial and bodily evidences of concern are often interpreted as especially valid evidence of deep-level acceptance. Superiority and Equality When a person communicates to another that he or she feels superior in position, power, wealth, intellectual ability, physical characteristics, or other ways, she or he arouses defensiveness. Here, as with other sources of disturbance, whatever arouses feelings of inadequacy causes the listener to center upon the affect loading of the statement rather than upon the cognitive elements.

The receiver then reacts by not hearing the message, by forgetting it, by competing with the sender, or by becoming jealous of him or her. The person who is perceived as feeling superior communicates that he or she is not willing to enter into a shared problem-solving relationship, that he or she probably does not desire feedback, that he or she does not require help, and/or that he or she will be likely to try to reduce the power, the status, or the worth of the receiver. Many ways exist for creating the atmosphere that the sender feels himself or herself equal to the listener.

Defenses are reduced when one perceives the sender as being willing to enter into participative planning with mutual trust and respect. Differences in talent, ability, worth, appearance, status and power often exist, but the low defense communicator seems to attach little importance to these distinctions. Certainty and Provisionalism The effects of dogmatism in

producing defensiveness are well known. Those who seem to know the answers, to require no additional data, and to regard themselves as teachers rather than as co-workers tend to put others on guard.

Moreover, in the writer's experiment, listeners often perceived manifest expressions of certainty as connoting inward feelings of inferiority. They saw the dogmatic individual as needing to be right, as wanting to win an argument rather than solve a problem and as seeing his or her ideas as truths to be defended. This kind of behavior often was associated with acts which others regarded as attempts to exercise control. People who were right seemed to have low tolerance for members who were "wrong"—i. e. who did not agree with the sender. One reduces the defensiveness of the listener when one communicates that one is willing to experiment with one's own behavior, attitudes and ideas. The person who appears to be taking provisional attitudes, to be investigating issues rather than taking sides on them, to be problem solving rather than doubting, and to be willing to experiment and explore tends to communicate that the listener may have some control over the shared quest or the investigation of the ideas.

If a person is genuinely searching for information and data, he or she does not resent help or company along the way. Conclusion The implications of the above material for the parent, the teacher, the manager, the administrator, or the therapist are fairly obvious. Arousing defensiveness interferes with communication and thus makes it difficult—and sometimes impossible—for anyone to convey ideas clearly and to move effectively toward the solution of therapeutic, educational, or managerial problems.

Footnotes: (2). J. R. Gibb, " Defense Level and Influence Potential in Small Groups," in L. Petrullo and B. M. Bass (eds. ), Leadership and Interpersonal Behavior (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), pp. 66-81 (3). J. R. Gibb, " Sociopsychological Processes of Group Instruction," in N. B. Henry (ed. ), The Dynamics of Instructional Groups (Fifty-ninth Yearbook of the National Society of the Study of Education, Part II, 1960), pp. 115-135.