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CCS INSIGHTS

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Responding To Defensiveness With Confidence

“How do I handle a defensive team member?” This is one of the most common questions I get asked as a leadership coach, and it can be an extremely challenging situation for any leader. When you provide feedback with the best of intentions, it is frustrating to be met with explanations, excuses, blame, and attitude. Defensiveness is quite often less about attitude and more about a perceived threat. They may feel that their competence or value is being questioned. The natural response is to protect themselves. As a leader, it is your job to foster an environment where accountability can thrive. Here are a few strategies you can try to diffuse the situation and create psychological safety within your team.

Resist The Urge To Prove Your Point.

Shift the conversation. When a team member becomes defensive, guide the conversation toward ownership. This keeps the discussion focused on behavior rather than character:

“I have noticed that when we discuss opportunities for improvement, our conversation often shifts towards explaining what happened instead of exploring what we can do differently next time.”

Acknowledge The Other Person’s Perspective.

That doesn’t mean you are agreeing with them. It means you recognize their experience. Feeling understood often opens the door to a more meaningful dialogue:

“I can see you put a lot of effort into this.”

Or

“I understand why the situation was frustrating.”



Redirect Toward Accountability.

Explanations can provide valuable context but they should never replace accountability. The goal isn't to determine who was right, it is to improve future performance:

"I appreciate the explanation, now let's focus on what you will do differently next time."

Reinforce Growth.

When you notice positive change, acknowledge it. Recognition reinforces the behaviors you want to see repeated:

"I noticed that you asked questions instead of becoming defensive. This is exactly the kind of growth that strengthens our team."

Organizational ROI:

When leaders know how to manage defensiveness with confidence, the return extends beyond a single conversation. Organizations benefit from:

- Faster resolution of performance issues.
- Greater employee accountability.
- Stronger trust between leaders & team members.
- Reduced workplace conflict.
- A culture that promotes learning instead of blame.

Defensiveness is contagious, but so is psychological safety. Leaders who respond with clarity and accountability create teams that spend less time protecting themselves and more time improving together. Leadership isn't about winning the conversation, it is about developing the person.

If you find yourself avoiding difficult conversations, repeating the same feedback, or struggling to create a culture of accountability, I can help. Contact me today to schedule a complimentary discovery conversation and learn how I can help strengthen your team, your culture, and your results.

Recommended Reading:

- Crucial Conversations-Tools for talking when the stakes are high. Written by: Joseph Grenny, Kerry Patterson, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler, Emily Gregory
- Thanks for the Feedback-The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well. Written by Douglas Stone & Sheila Heen