



OVERCOMING DEFENSIVE ROUTINES IN THE WORKPLACE

BY WILLIAM R. NOONAN

Any time you hear the phrase, “Here we go again” in response to a problem, it is a clue that a pattern is in play. To a trained systems thinker, the phrase is a signal to search the system for the deeper organizational structures that give rise to the pattern. Have you ever heard yourself say, “There he/she goes again”? If you have, then there is also a pattern in play, but on an interpersonal level.

Most likely, you have focused on the other person’s familiar set of behavior or words. You know what is coming. Your certainty is not based on any omniscient ability to predict the future, but on a careful selection of past behavior. You anticipate a simple repetition of the past. Often there is a quick flash of resignation or a girding of your will to take on the person’s behavior once again. It is all so predictable, at least when it comes to the other person’s behavior. What you may not be aware of is your own response, which is equally predictable.

The phrase “Here he/she goes again” communicates a message that the problem lies with the other person’s behavior. Yet, what is taking place is actually within the sphere of interpersonal interactions. Certain ways of

thinking about and relating to others are reinforced, creating predictable, vicious cycles of behavior called *defensive routines*. Defensive routines come about through a combination of human behavior and the limits of awareness, where we fail to see how our interactions are part of a system of unproductive behavior.

Chris Argyris has extensively researched and written about how well-meaning, smart people create vicious cycles of defensive behavior. In the 17 years since the publication of his book, *Overcoming Organizational Defenses*, this pervasive and insidious reality has been well documented by scholarly research. Defensive routines exist in all organizations, and people feel disempowered and helpless to change them. Every day, defensive routines cripple organizations, resulting in the loss of productivity, a dispirited work force, and a cultural malaise of dissatisfaction.

What Is a Defensive Routine?

Defensive routines are patterns of interpersonal interactions people create to protect themselves from embarrassment and threat. The conditions of threat and embarrassment arise when our abilities are negatively evaluated by a colleague or authority figure. It could be that our reputation is on the line and we find ourselves in a situation where we think we have been set up to fail or where we are getting grilled over a perceived or actual mistake. There are many situations in which whether either potential threats or embarrassments, minor or major, exist. They can be unexpected or anticipated.

Whether actual or perceived, what is under attack is our sense of competence. Competence is the req-

uisite or adequate ability to get done what needs to be done and to do it well. We operate best when feeling competent. What happens when our sense of competency is threatened? According to Argyris, we engage in a characteristic mode of defensive reasoning and behavior.

While we would not think of ourselves as being unreasonable or ill intended, we readily concoct private explanations about why others do or say something that creates difficulty for us. We make attributions about each other’s motives and intentions and hold other parties accountable for the difficulty when we find ourselves at odds with one another. In the privacy of our own minds, we hold our positions with a high degree of certainty. It is hard to listen when you think the other person is dead wrong. Yet, we will be the first to call “unfair” if we don’t think the other person is listening to us.

None of what we are thinking is spoken directly to the person involved. In fact, when and if we share our emotionally charged assessments, theories, and explanations, we generally do so only with those individuals whom we feel will be sympathetic to our views. These private conversations are held behind closed doors, in hallways, and in break rooms. Nothing is discussed in public meetings and rarely, if ever, do the targets of those third-party conversations find out what we really think. The result is “open secrets,” “undiscussables,” or the “elephant in the room.”

Most everyone can think of an example of this behavior, often accompanied by a juicy story. What is often left out of the story is the teller’s complicit participation in it. There is no awareness around how he

TEAM TIP

Consider the comment by Jim Cutler of Lattice Partners: “Before I got into this work, there were a lot of jerks in this world. Now that I have gotten into this work, there are fewer.” Practice detecting, diagnosing, and dealing with defensive routines as a way to shift your perception and turn those you perceive as obstacles into allies.

or she might be involved in creating the secret, the undiscussable, or the elephant. These dynamics become a routine part of the workplace culture. Whole departments become encased in assumptions and expectations that feed predictable, vicious cycles of human behavior. As defensive routines take hold of a company's culture, the consequences are increasingly troubling. I have observed companies in which defensive routines proliferate to the point where the organizational culture becomes so toxic to working relationships that an organization's productivity suffers dramatically.

Defensive routines become so ingrained in our social behavior that they become an accepted "way for how things work around here." What is more apparent is the realization that the organization, project, or team isn't all that it is cracked up to be. No one is walking the talk, and everyone knows it. When this realization dawns on us, our first reaction is usually sadness, disappointment, or a physical sensation of being let down. People talk of being deflated and dispirited. There is a loss of animation. Animation, by the way, is a word that comes from the Latin word *animus* (*m.*) or *anima* (*f.*), meaning soul. That definition holds true here. There is a loss of soul.

But even that isn't the whole story. Along with the loss comes a sense of helplessness. Organizational defensive routines are experienced and reported as being external to anyone's control or influence. We distance ourselves from any sense of personal responsibility. We don't realize that we might be as much a part of the problem as the next person. No one knows how to break the cycle and start afresh. This self-fueling, counterproductive process exists in all organizations and plays out in one-to-one interactions and groups and across organizational divisions, time and again, to the detriment of all.

These situations are depressing, to put it mildly. They are also much more common than we'd like to think, in organizations of all sizes, shapes, and geographies. But there is a way to break the cycle. And although the process is difficult, it is doable and

very much worth the effort.

In my book, *Discussing the Undiscussable: A Guide to Overcoming Defensive Routines in the Workplace* (Jossey-Bass, 2007), I provide a practical guide for detecting, diagnosing, and dealing with defensive routines. These include:

- looking beyond the parts to the interdependency among the parts,
- reevaluating underlying mental models,
- thinking in loops, and
- addressing generic patterns.

It Is Not About the Part

I have heard many senior leaders complain that they are unable to have tough and difficult conversations because of the "egos" around the table. Of course, the conflict exhibited in defensive routines is a result of people coming together with different views and contexts to discuss complex issues. Yet, the excuse of big egos as a justification for not engaging the conflict is not a satisfying explanation. The phrases like "There is a personality conflict" or "It is all about egos" are an example of "causal explanations" used to sanction the feeling of helplessness and justify inaction. It is too easy to write off defensive routines as personality conflicts and leave them alone. This is a surface explanation, and it fails to take into account how all parties are interacting together to create a negative result no one intends or desires.

The dysfunctional teams, strained working relationships, and toxic environments are not a result of company policy and procedure, but come about through human design. By design, I mean that there is a thought behind the action that creates these negative results. The thought is a particular kind of defensive reasoning that serves to protect us from potential threat and embarrassment. In other words, we have been schooled in a socially learned mental model.

The Operative Mental Model

The mental model designed to protect individuals from threat or embarrassment is referred to by Chris Argyris as "Model I" thinking. I pre-

fer the more descriptive term, "Unilateral Control Model," coined by Action Design. This mindset is primarily responsible for setting a defensive routine in motion. It is activated as a means to keep us in control of a situation where we sense ourselves under threat or facing embarrassment (see "The Unilateral Control Model").

When a person is in control, there is a consistency between his or her perception of reality and all incoming information. There is no interference or static. The sense is, "Things are going as I hoped and intended. Things are going my way when I feel in control. I know what I am doing. I feel competent."

When subjected to the conditions of threat or potential embarrassment, however, a person can quickly feel that control gets away from them. Think about what happens when we suspect that our words have been misinterpreted. When we realize that we don't have any control over how another person interprets our words, we immediately go on the offensive, insisting that what the other person heard is not what we meant. If the other person counters with "It is what you said," then the exchange can escalate into a "No, I didn't," "Yes, you did" scenario.

Any time the unexpected triumphs over the expected, there is a good chance that someone will start losing their grip on control. When a conversation goes to a place I hadn't intended or desire, it feels like the rug is being pulled out from under me. For example, I go into a meeting eager to garnish support for my plan, and before I know it, opposition to my brilliant idea takes the center stage of the team discussion. I scramble

THE UNILATERAL CONTROL MODEL

- I am right, you are wrong
- Hold position with high degree of certainty
- Be rational
- Avoid upset
- View other person as an obstacle to overcome

to disarm the opposition, but to no avail. My mind sends out the “May-day, Mayday” emergency call as my idea is shot down.

Then there are those times when I am carrying on my end of the conversation in a civil manner and I notice the other person has daggers in his or her eyes. Something I said clearly must have triggered a reaction, but I am clueless as to what it was. Or, I can be listening to another person and seize upon a word or phrase that indicates to me that the other person has no understanding of my position. Their potentially innocent comment inadvertently stimulates my response of “What in the ‘blip’ are you talking about?”

My least favorite time for losing control is when I am trying to point out something problematic with what another person said or did, and suddenly, I am being told that I am the problem. I see the other person as being defensive and trying to turn the tables. We both end up clutching our respective sides of the issue and trying to wrestle a confession from each other as to who takes the larger portion of the blame.

When these encounters occur, I feel disoriented, disturbed, and distracted. There is momentary bafflement over what is going on. I am not thinking about mutual benefits or outcomes. I can’t allow myself that luxury. I am being threatened; I am not in control of the situation, and that is an unpleasant experience.

Being out of control is not pleasant for anyone. We all have different tolerance points, triggering situations, and emotions, but we share a common reaction: We try to get a firm grip on the reins of control. When the conditions of threat or embarrassment arise, our need for control shifts into a higher gear. We all exhibit the thinking and actions of the Unilateral Control Model, particularly when our predominant concern is self-interest and preservation. According to Argyris, this socially learned prescription of thoughts and behavior is so ingrained in us that it appears as a default state of mind.

There is nothing wrong with being in control. It’s possible to be in

control and, at the same time, work happily with entire teams of people, in which most if not all members also feel in control. Unilateral control is different. The term “unilateral” is what gives this model its distinctive defensive quality. Being “unilateral” means there is a one-sidedness to the thinking, and what one person is thinking is imposed upon others. The aim of the Unilateral Control Model is to win, not lose. In a defensive routine, no one is thinking that “win-win” is an option. In conversations, this aim manifests itself as a desire to assert our views and to “convince the other person that I’m right and you’re wrong.”

Another feature of the model is the aim of remaining rational in order to avoid creating upset. Upsetting situations are breeding grounds for the conditions of threat and embarrassment. It is embarrassing to show too much emotion. Public displays of anger can be intimidating to others. We suppress these negative feelings if they arise within us. In case studies of difficult conversations, people often report thinking things like, “There’s that big smile as he worms his way out yet again. Stay cool, take a deep breath, and try one last time” or “I hope I am not letting on that this is getting really annoying. Take it easy.” These are instructions for how we coach ourselves to remain rational. Remaining rational is a way to get a grip on the situation. The appeal to reason keeps things cool and away from emotions. We tell ourselves that bringing emotion into a situation where conflict already exists will only make matters worse.

The Unilateral Control Model is not necessarily a bad thing; in fact, it is sometimes necessary. What’s important to understand is that the Unilateral Control Model is not our only option, and it is not generally the best tack to take when trying to resolve or minimize defensive routines.

When we engage in defensive reasoning with others, our working relationships suffer. I imagine defensive routines as a massive knot created by entangled lines of personal relationships, tightly wrapped perceptions, and restrictive cultural norms.

From a distance, it seems impossible to figure out where one line begins and the other ends. Any attempt to pull tighter on one end or another only makes matters worse.

My grandfather taught me that about knots. I’d get a firm grip on both ends of the string and pull hard. He would stop me. “That’s not the way to do it,” he would say gently. “It only makes it harder to undo.” He’d take the knot in his big hands and began to massage the bundle of crisscrossed cords with his fingers. His gentle tugs and pulls began to loosen the core of the knot. Soon little loops would appear, giving way to opportunities for disentangling the whole mess. The same approach can work with untangling the knot of defensive routines.

It’s a daunting task to track the multiple layers of loops. There is so much going on that it is hard to sort it all out. The challenge of raising the “undiscussables” makes matters worse. When the stakes are high and issues complex, talking about “undiscussables” can activate the very conditions of threat and embarrassment that create defensive reasoning. A public discussion about organizational defensive routines can quickly deteriorate into fault-finding and assigning blame. People need a way to safely approach defensive routines so that they can mutually acknowledge the interdependent nature of their interactions. They can do so by thinking in loops.

Thinking in Loops

Basic to systems thinking, a loop is the visual representation of the pattern of interrelationships among the parts of a system. An interpersonal interaction loop is the sequence of thinking and action between two parties, be they individuals, teams, or divisions within an organization. Understanding the loop-like nature of human interactions is analogous to riding a bicycle. Recently, I bought a touring bike where my shoes are locked into the pedals. After many miles and a few falls, I got used to being locked in and discovered the result of a more efficient motion that uses the pedal stroke up as well as the stroke down. Now, I ride exerting equal pressure up and down as

I make the circle around. The same principle applies to thinking in loops. As a practitioner, I look for how the upward and downward strokes of human interaction propel the players around a predictable pattern of thoughts and behaviors.

Each stroke represents the interpersonal force of action on your thinking. Your thinking exerts a direct influence on your actions, which in turn influence my thinking. My thinking shapes my actions, and the loop repeats itself for the duration of our ride together. In this analogy, the pressure is equal and accounts for the cycle's motion. Your reaction to what I said has an equivalent impact on me as my actions had on you. I may express it differently, but the effect is the same.

Visually, this kind of loop is represented as a four-box map depicting the interrelation between the thinking and acting of the respective parties. Maps of defensive routines can be comprised of interpersonal, team, and interdivisional loops of interaction. A good map is a neutral and balanced description of a defensive routine. When used effectively, it can reduce the tendency to blame and provide a handle for navigating complexity.

Generic Defensive Routines

Like systems archetypes, there are generic defensive routines common to interpersonal, team, and division interactions. Consider a case study (this example appears on a DVD that accompanies the book). Mark, the operational manager of a company's plant, and Brenda, the director of sales, appear to be in a personal conflict. The company's organizational structures provide an arena for their interpersonal drama to play out. Mark and Brenda work for divisions that should be in partnership with each other but are actually "Accidental Adversaries." "Accidental Adversaries Storyline" is a brief description of this kind of interpersonal defensive routine.

In the scenes leading up to and including the business meeting they attend together, Mark and Brenda act similarly toward each other. Both push their views by arguing hard, loud, and at a high level of abstraction. No

ACCIDENTAL ADVERSARIES STORYLINE

In a competitive market, Sales signs contracts with clients who rely on a regular flow of product. As this customer segment grows, there is increased pressure on Operations to maintain a tighter schedule. Tighter schedules require higher plant reliability in order to ensure the regular delivery of product. Tighter schedules are less flexible and don't tolerate unexpected events well.

When unexpected events do occur, there is a greater disruption to the schedule. Operations minimizes risk to equipment and crew by extending the time for repair, causing a delay in the delivery schedule. From Operations' perspective, these delays in the schedule increase plant reliability. From Sales' perspective, the more the schedule is delayed, the greater the chance of lost customers. Wishing to avoid losing customers, Sales puts more pressure on Operations to keep on schedule. If too many disruptive events occur delaying the schedule, the system will break down. As the system approaches breakdown, Sales blames Operations for the potential loss of customers, and Operations blames Sales for creating the time crunches.

[CLICK HERE](#) to link to a causal loop of this storyline.

attempt is made to inquire into each other's perspective. As the conversation heats up, they blurt out more emotionally charged assessments.

Although they take opposing views, how Mark and Brenda see themselves and each other is similar. Each sees the other as being wrong and an obstacle to overcome. Each sees their own view as reasonable and obvious. Mark is looking out for his crew, and Brenda shares an equal concern for her sales staff and customers. Both are protecting the company's interests, yet each one questions the other's motives. They share the same mindset: The

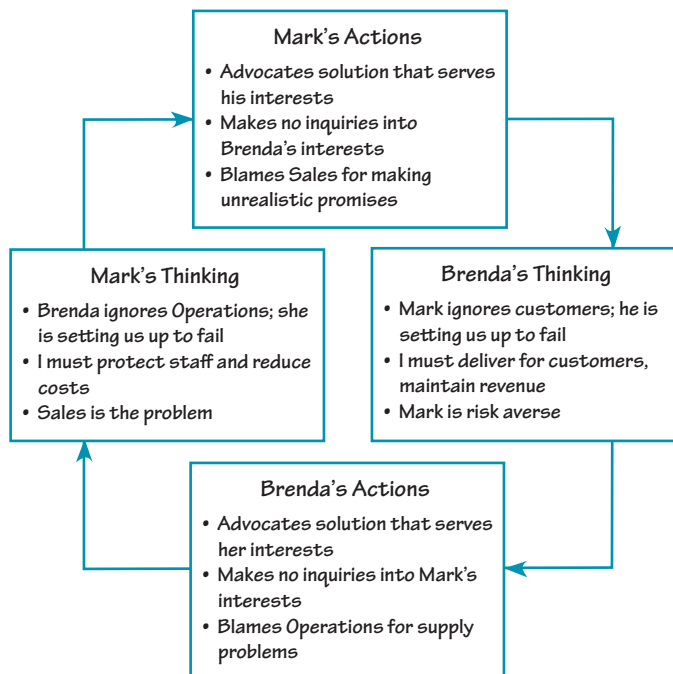
Unilateral Control Model.

How Mark and Brenda triggered each other is mapped out in "Generic Defensive Routine Between Mark and Brenda." Using neutral and more generic terminology helps to show how they are essentially thinking and acting toward each other in similar ways.

When caught in this kind of defensive routine, the results are predictable. Mark and Brenda's working relationship suffers, the issue remains unresolved, and the decision-making cycle is delayed.

While the content of Mark and

GENERIC DEFENSIVE ROUTINE BETWEEN MARK AND BRENDA



STEP

1. Stop the Action

Stop as soon as you realize that you are trading abstract conclusions back and forth with another person. Your chance of stopping the action improves if you are able to detect the mental and physical cues that tell you that you are stuck in a point-counterpoint argument.

2. Try Getting Curious

Adopt a different mindset by getting curious about the differences in opinion. Shift to curiosity by considering “What may be obvious to the other person may not be to me” or “What may be obvious to me may not be to the other person.”

3. Engage the Difference

Acknowledge the difference by publicly naming it. Paraphrase the other person's position in a way that captures the fullness of their thinking and underlying concerns. Refrain from adding your own inferences. Let curiosity drive the discovery of what you don't know about the other's perspective or what is missing in your thinking.

4. Pursue a Line of Inquiry

Ask well-crafted questions that help to bring the other person down his or her ladder of inference, surface additional information, solicit examples, and invite challenge to your way of thinking.

Brenda's views is unique to them and their business issue, the pattern of their thinking and behavior mirrors a generic defensive routine found in any point-counterpoint conversation. It is the familiar, “yes, but...,” the “common cold” of business conversations. Both parties view their own respective positions as right and the other as wrong. The other person becomes an obstacle to overcome. There is minimal inquiry into each other's perspective, and each pushes their respective position harder and sometimes louder.

When a visual map or narrative description of this loop is made, the participants have an opportunity for reflection—I am doing to the other person the very thing I accuse the other person of doing to me. This awareness can often be leveraged in the direction of doing something different.

Nevertheless, in the heat of a point-counterpoint debate, it is not

easy to pull out and change direction. I keep a simple mnemonic device in mind that helps me turn the conversation around (see “STEP”).

Weeding the Garden

In every organization I visit, I witness defensive routines. I have come to think of them as “weeds” in the garden of modern organizations. Weeds exist in every garden. They grow right alongside the good stuff. Their presence deprives healthy, productive plants of needed nutrients. Because weeds are never as pretty as the plants consciously chosen to be in the garden, our immediate and first reaction is to get rid of them.

The only sure way to get rid of all weeds is to sterilize the soil with strong pesticides. If zero growth is the desired result, then a sterile environment with no beauty, value, or produce is what happens. The alternative is to apply pesticide alongside the nutritional produce and aesthetic beauty growing in the garden. Too little will prove ineffective, and too much damages the vegetation and those consuming it. On the other hand, if nothing is done with the weeds, the garden can be overrun with them very quickly. They always seem to grow faster than any other plant in the garden.

Personally, I keep on eye on the weeds throughout the growing season. I use pesticides in areas where I absolutely want to stop all growth. I accept a tolerable amount of weeds. When they threaten to take over the

garden, I have to roll up my sleeves and get to work. They won't go away by themselves.

I think of organizational defensive routines in the same way. While we can work to minimize their negative impact on an organization's productivity, they will always exist. The work is not a mechanical fix, but a personal “roll up your sleeves” commitment to get your hands dirty.

I have respect for the tenacity of organizational defensive routines. There is always a risk when engaging them publicly. A sincere willingness to talk about the elephant in the room doesn't translate into knowing how to do it. Prudence dictates developing the skill to engage a defensive routine before carelessly venturing into a discussion of the undiscussables in one's organization.

The work to reduce the negative impact of defensive routines in organizations is slow. I live with no illusions of complete eradication. What I do hope for is that each individual in an organization will take up the commitment for reflection, worry less about the “other guy,” and embark on an inner discovery of self. ■

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NEXT STEPS

Strategy for Making the Shift in Thinking

1. **Catch Yourself in the Act.** If you find yourself thinking, “Why did she do that? She is just looking out for herself,” or “He is on this power trip again,” then you know you are attributing negative intentions.
2. **Acknowledge Your Blindness.** Although your reaction feels clear and certain, the reality is that you cannot know another person's intention without directly asking him or her.
3. **Make the Switch.** Make an alternative assumption that you are blind to the other's true intentions.
4. **Separate Intent from Impact.** Assuming positive intent does not mean brushing off what the other said or did and excusing him from his actions. His behavior had an impact on you. The impact is what you want to raise with him in conversation.
5. **Register the Impact.** Start with the observable behavior that had an impact on you; that is, paraphrase what the other person said or did. Keep your paraphrase free of inference. Then describe the impact it had on you.