

HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH DEFENSIVE PEOPLE



OVERVIEW: We often avoid difficult conversations with colleagues or clients. It feels like a pointless energy drain when you're almost certain to get defensiveness or push back. Unfortunately, with this strategy, you end up feeling stuck and never get what you want. This worksheet offers a framework of combining an Assertive Statement with Reflective Listening as a strategy on effectively steering through these conversations:

ASSERTIVE STATEMENT

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REFLECTIVE LISTENING

STEP 1: CRAFT YOUR ASSERTION: Prepare a clear assertive statement. Ensure your statement is to-the-point, specifically identifying their harmful behavior (XX), the feeling or feelings it invokes for you (YY), and the consequences that result (ZZ). If this feels uncomfortable, it's because you don't do it often. There's a lot of power in making this type of statement, including just writing it down and practicing saying it out loud in your own words.

"When you _____, I feel _____, because _____,"
XX YY ZZ

Examples:

- When you interrupt me when I'm speaking in meetings, I feel disrespected, because the team never takes my full thoughts into account before moving forward.
- When you independently speak to my boss about an issue that you and I were resolving together, I feel sidelined because I directly worked on this issue and had valuable feedback that could have added to that conversation.
- When you unilaterally agree to change course from our previous collective decision based on your conversation with Jason, I feel undervalued and frustrated because the many hours I had spent working on that project feels wasted.

Your turn (write it down, and say it out loud):

To prepare to reassert (see Step 2), write at least 2 other ways to phrase the above assertion:

Additional Tips for Your Assertive Statement

Making Statement: Make it timely (i.e., give the other party the benefit of having some recency to what you are referring to). Keep your body language open and your tone level. Work to establish a base of trust and respect.

Follow it with Silence: Silence lets the other person think about what you said and gives them space to respond. In a way, silence allows that natural defensiveness to come out.

STEP 2: REFLECTIVE LISTENING: When you make an Assertive Statement, the other party will likely get defensive. It's human nature. Reflective Listening is a strategy to work past it. This lets the other person feel heard and can incrementally lower their defensiveness. By combining a clear Assertive Statement with Reflective Listening, you can gradually deescalate the defensiveness until the two of you can reach a collaborative solution.

- **Repeat their words (and feelings):** Even slightly rephrasing or repeating someone's words (and feelings) back to them can be an effective way to demonstrate that you're listening. Write out three ways you could rephrase the following defensive statement:

"I can't even look at
you right now."

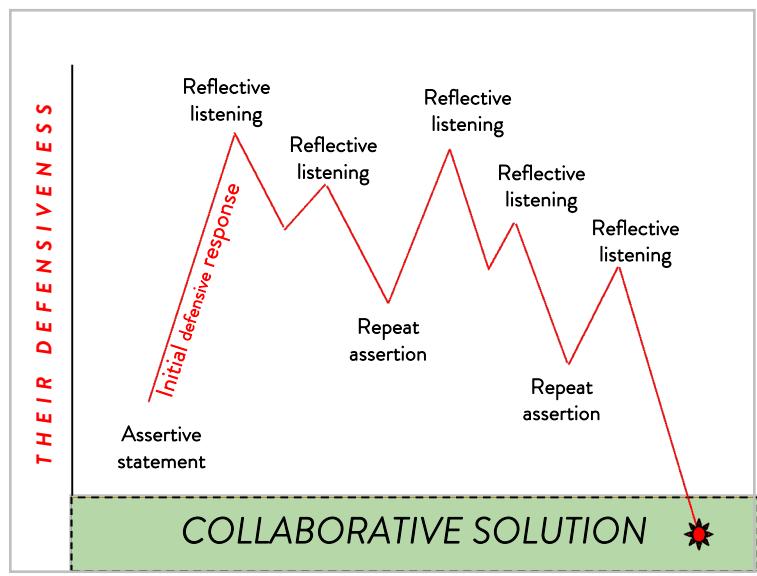
- **Rephrase questions as statements.** Asking questions puts a demand on the other person to respond. For people already feeling defensive, this demand might be too much. Instead, phrase your question as an educated guess or observation.
- **Acknowledge their intent:** Likewise, a defensive person might throw questions at you. Try to look past the question itself to the intent underneath. Then frame your answer to address that intention instead.
- **Highlight their wants and needs:** This can show people you understand what they need from this conversation, too. If you hear "I need _____" be ready to reflect that back. What are some "want" or "need" phrases you expect this person to say?
- **Prepare to Re-Assert:** Be ready to begin this process all over again. Because they were defensive and unable to understand the situation from your point of view, it typically takes **3-10 repetitions** of making an assertive speech and combining with reflective listening for this process to work. Take notice how each assertion induces a spike in defensive response.

Are you feeling upset?

You're feeling upset.

How could you think that of me?

You feel I'm not giving you enough credit.





Rudhir Krishtel is an executive coach and facilitator focusing on leadership, well-being, and workplace intensity.

Prior to becoming an executive coach and facilitator, Rudhir practiced law for 15 years as a federal clerk, patent litigation partner at Fish & Richardson, and then as senior patent counsel at Apple. His lawyer days led him to train as a teacher for yoga (Baptiste Institute) and mindfulness meditation (Warrior One), and as a certified professional Co-Active coach and leadership instructor (Coaches Training Institute), to serve as a support for the legal community.

TESTIMONIALS FROM COACHING

"In a few months, I received new perspective on approaching my career and overhauled the trajectory of my practice. I kickstarted my business development engine and have a better framework for managing challenging workplace politics. I liked having the experience of both an in house and outside counsel law firm partner on my side. If you care about your career path and goals, and has little time to focus on them, please enlist Rudhir."

AMLAW100 PARTNER

"I've practiced in large firms and large companies and have learned so much more from Rudhir in a few months about my management style. Moving up in later stages of your career can require a greater self awareness and often a fundamental shift. Working with Rudhir gave me a direct pulse on this and how to make those changes. I recommend enlisting Rudhir in your corner for real growth."

SENIOR IN HOUSE COUNSEL, BAY AREA TECH COMPANY

TESTIMONIALS FROM TRAINING AND WORKSHOPS

"I appreciated having the time and space to intentionally consider and plan my career goals."

"This is the best leadership program I've been to in terms of content/substance that I Can take home with me and make a direct impact in my goal planning and execution. The program really raised my arenas to move/work on my advancement in the workplace (and community with more urgency.)"

"Highly recommend the training, exceeded my expectations."

"The program was an eye-opening experience for me."

"Rudhir was absolutely amazing. His presence and presentation was so calming and powerful. The information provided was extremely thought provoking, and I loved how at the end, we were able to exercise what we learned with the group meditation."

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