



Understanding Defensive Behaviors at Work

Understand the real reasons teams shut down or resist and how psychological safety transforms the way people communicate and collaborate. Discover the hidden dynamics at play and what they reveal about your team culture.

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🕒 Understanding Defensive Behaviors at Work

Inspired by: Harvard Business Review “6 Defensive Behaviors That Show Up at Work, and How Psychological Safety Can Help”

Many leaders misinterpret tension, silence, resistance, or over-compliance as performance issues. But global research, including insights from Harvard, shows that these reactions are often **automatic human defense responses** triggered when people feel psychologically unsafe. When individuals sense judgment, uncertainty, or disproportionate consequences, the nervous system shifts into protection mode often without conscious awareness.

Psychological safety, described by Amy Edmondson as “a shared belief that the environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking,” is the most reliable antidote to these reactions. Teams with high psychological safety share ideas faster, recover from challenges more effectively, and collaborate with greater trust.

The Six Defensive Behaviors Leaders Should Know

These instinctive responses appear when individuals feel threatened, exposed, or unsure:

- **Fight:** Pushing back, arguing, or asserting dominance to regain control.
- **Flight:** Retreating, going silent, avoiding conversations or visibility.
- **Freeze:** Indecision, paralysis under pressure, “I’m not sure.”
- **Appease:** Agreeing quickly, pleasing others, avoiding any sign of conflict.
- **Attach:** Frequent reassurance seeking, escalating small issues.
- **Collapse:** Burnout, emotional withdrawal, cynicism, presenteeism.

These patterns are not personality flaws. They are diagnostic signals showing leaders where the environment lacks clarity, safety, or psychological space



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Mashar Perspective

In the region, where respect, dignity, and relational harmony carry deep cultural weight, defensive behaviors often appear more subtly. People avoid saying anything that could embarrass someone, disrupt relationships, or be perceived as disrespectful. This means psychological safety must be intentionally cultivated, it does not happen by chance.

Leaders who understand these defenses patterns can distinguish between resistance and fear, silence and uncertainty, and agreement and appeasement. The shift begins when leaders stop judging behavior and start examining the atmosphere that produced it.

Mashar's Psychological Safety & High-Trust Teams Program helps leaders build environments where authenticity replaces fear, where people feel seen and heard, and where they can take interpersonal risks without hesitation. When leaders model transparency, invite diverse opinions, and normalize questions, teams gain the confidence to contribute fully, reducing defensive behaviors naturally over time.



Learn More

Explore the original research and insights that informed this article, published by Harvard Business Review.

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