

Origin of Defensive Maneuvers

By George M. Prince and Kathleen Logan-Prince

Meetings between two or more people are the primary tool for getting things done in life, including life in the business world. The authors were both in the business of studying meetings from different points of view. One of us, a psychotherapist, worked with couples and individuals who were having difficulties with their meetings. The other, doing research into the creative process in business, studied individuals and small groups attempting to solve problems and invent new products.

In the study of meetings in business we used audio and videotape to record the action and then studied the results to identify those actions that seemed to aid the purpose of the meeting and those that seemed to hinder. An early observation that has proven extremely significant was that any action that was perceived as disrespectful produced a later revenge reaction. At first, we thought this was simply a sign of immaturity, but after hundreds of examples, with no mature reactions, we recognized it as a universal response. We called this the Discount/Revenge Law. The reason this is significant is that every one of the actions we identified as hindering the purpose of the meeting is, to some degree, disrespectful, and therefore a discount with a consequent revenge reaction.

In psychotherapy we focused on behaviors that were creating problems for the individual or couple. It is evident that the law of Discount/Revenge is operating at full force in these relationships. Dr. John Gottman conducted research with couples over a thirty-year period. The couples spent weekends and other times in a special apartment equipped with video cameras. In addition the participants were wired to measure their heart rates and blood pressure. He learned that if the ratio of discounts to appreciations exceeded one discount to every five appreciations, the relationship would fail and the couple would divorce. He identified five discounts that caused trouble: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling, and aggression.

My experience with couples supports Gottman's conclusion.

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One of the characteristics shared by patients and business people is their difficulty in applying what they 'learned'. It was consistently the case that a person would recognize that a behavior was destructive, decide not to behave that way, and in a similar situation *would* behave that way. In other words, a rational decision to change did not seem to be effective.

It is as though many people are sensitized to challenge from early years. When in any situation where they are challenged emotionally, these inclinations to differ, dispute, and rebel are triggered automatically and out of awareness.

Enter Brain Research

In the 1990's Joseph LeDoux, scientist at NYU, Michael Gazzanica, Daniel Siegel and colleagues began to unravel the specific ways the brain deals with fear and anxiety. Incoming information from the senses is routed through an organ called the amygdale and its system. The information is scanned for two things: threat and possibilities for nurturing—danger and love.

When the signal says danger, the system goes into emergency. It virtually bypasses the thinking part of the brain and goes into emotional fight, freeze or flight mode. Anxiety is triggered and an electrical/chemical neural cascade in the brain produces a defensive action.

This defense system begins to develop in infancy. When the infant is left alone too long, it senses that it has been abandoned and goes into an emergency display of screams and wriggling to get attention. Nature, knowing that abandonment will lead to death and meaninglessness, has sensitized the infant to defend itself.

This alarm and defense system does not discriminate, at the *slightest* threat and it goes into action. Any abuse or neglect triggers the cascade to defensive action. As instances of abuse or neglect are repeated, the neural cascade becomes hard-wired. The threat occurs, the behavior happens without thought. As the infant matures, the brain continues to react to threat with anxiety, but this is a painful feeling and the brain develops 'foresight function'. It perceives threat and to avoid the dread feeling of anxiety it substitutes a defensive action. In the case of an infant, the initial defensive action is screaming and wriggling. This gradually evolves to going numb. When the 'more experienced' infant perceives threat of abandonment, its brain bypasses the screaming and goes directly to numb.

Defensive maneuvers develop largely out of conscious awareness and we are often unmindful of what triggers a defensive reaction. Most of us have experienced the surprising rush of anger when, as we attempt pay for a purchase, the salesperson ignores us. Road rage and wife battering are other examples of inappropriate responses to a perceived threat to meaningfulness.

Meaningfulness

To understand the fundamental nature of defensiveness, we need to be aware of its significance.

"...what an organism does is organize; and what a human organism organizes is meaning. Thus it is not that a person makes meaning, as much as that the activity of being a person is the activity of meaning-making."¹ "Meaning, understood in this way, is the primary human motion, irreducible.... not meaning, by definition, is utterly lonely. Well-fed, warm, and free of disease, you may still perish if you cannot 'mean'". (Ibid)

¹ Kegan, Robert, *The Evolving Self*, Harvard University Press, September 1983

The original motion is to survive abandonment—which means death and becoming meaningless. While we are all extremely sensitive to threats to our meaningfulness, we are not conscious of anxiety about death being the source of the power behind this threat.

To give you a sense of how sensitive are the antennae to detect any threat to meaningfulness, it is instructive to examine some experiments with children. The children were kindergarten and second graders. Five and seven year olds.

The experiment was designed to observe the effect of reducing instances of power-over. Every effort was made to have the children self-governing. Every problem of organizing and procedure was solved by a problem-solving meeting of the class. In effect, other than general rules, the children were not ‘ordered around.’ We were focused on the effect on learning, and the unexpected consequences were a surprise bonus. They eliminated bullying in their groups, they were quiet in the halls, they did not jostle each other to get on the bus (they problem-solved boarding order), the traditional battles at lunchtime stopped. There was a marked contrast between their behavior and that of the ‘traditionally’ treated child when teacher is not present. Four special needs kids who had been getting outside help, stopped needing it and were independent at the end of the year.

We theorize that the careful self-governing removed many of the usual threats to meaningfulness that come from teacher/parent control/discipline.

Knowledge of the unconscious defenses of the brain suggests that much of the disorderly, uncooperative behavior of kids is triggered by their feeling disrespected, and resorting to rebellious actions to defend their need to feel meaningful.

The development of a person’s defensive armament against meaninglessness proceeds out of awareness. Initially, the defensive action tends to be extreme: violent anger, striking out, screams, convulsions. As the child, teen, and adult experiences the consequences of the hard-wired reactions of aggressive defensive actions, the hard-wired reaction continues to occur, but it is modified to avoid retaliation, which suggests that most defensive reactions can be modified if the original abuse or neglect has not been too severe.

Brain studies make it clear that a child’s brain develops through experience modifying genetic proclivities. Scientists repeatedly describe the way a child learns interacting through his own interactions with a caregiver and others. If these are nurturing, empathic and respectful, the child’s brain develops to produce that kind of behavior. Her ways of relating are respectful and caring about the other. They grow up recruiting others to them. With ideal parenting, the child matures to be recruitable—available to respond in kind. With neglectful or abusive parenting, the child becomes a non-recruitable adult, largely unable to relate to others in mutually rewarding ways. These are the people whose defensive maneuvers are extreme. Our prisons are full of them.

Below is an attempt to chart the outcomes of the three types of parenting.

Spectrum of Attitudes Parenting

Reflects more neglect and abuse				More nurturing		
Anxiety Driven				Consciousness Driven		
Aggressive	Antagonistic	Passive Aggressive	Neutral	Positive/Courageous		
Disobedient	Adversarial	Distracted	Undermines	Attentive	Receptive	Supports confusions/ uncertainty
Quarrelsome	Opposes	Listless	Neglectful	Supportive	Responsive	Temporarily suspends disbelief
Combative	Controlling	Bored	Mistake-prone	Listens	Hospitable	Builds
Dominating	Contrary	Unresponsive	Misunderstands	Approves	Non-restrictive	Deals as equal
Hostile	Squabbly	Ignores	Careless	Credits	Open-minded	
Angry	Competitive	Oblivious	Disinterested	Connects	Optimistic	
Litigious	Cynical	Unconscious	Pessimistic	Jumps to favorable conclusions	Shares risks	
Contemptuous		Doesn't get it			Listens approximately	
Critical					Protects vulnerable beginnings	
Non-Recruitable		Recruitable		Recruiter		

It is significant that the 'decision' to employ a defensive maneuver is purely emotional and automatic. The positive relating actions on the right are the result of conscious decisions.

What to do about it

Since the anxiety driven defensive maneuvers are, without exception, destructive to relationships and to the purpose of most businesses, it is important to design steps to reduce defensiveness. The problem is that the mechanisms that produce defensiveness are 'built in', and go into action without conscious thought. In helping people operate at maximum effectiveness in invention groups, we use videotape review to make participants very conscious of the destructive behaviors. The process includes a facilitator who curbs the impulses to slip into defensive actions.

This is effective in the group sessions, but we have been disappointed in the carry-over to everyday work. It is the rare person who continues the carefully respectful behaviors of the session. Now brain research informs us that these defensive maneuvers are emotionally controlled and intelligence plays only a small part.

One of the difficult parts of the puzzle is that some, perhaps many, of these actions have a purpose that is constructive. For example, pointing out flaws in a new idea is a way of avoiding possible future problems.

Given this new information about the unconscious aspect of defensiveness, there seem to be two ways to reduce the impulsive actions that are destructive: create an interpersonal field that is totally respectful so that no defensiveness is triggered, and educate people about their own defensive proclivities. The fundamentals would be, methods to create “foresight function” to bring destructive actions into awareness *before* acting, and to substitute constructive actions that accomplish the intended purpose.

An example, to make this concrete, is a procedure used in invention sessions. It seems that any suggestion of an idea triggers defensiveness in most of us and we immediately think of reasons the idea will not work. It seems important to point out these flaws. Even when it has been made clear that in the early stages an idea needs protection, the impulse is strong. We train participants that there will always be an evaluation period. At that time, we will look at all the positives and all the negatives, *in that order*. We learned that by appreciating the positive aspects of an idea first, it avoids the possibility of discounting the originator.

It is interesting to speculate why a new idea elicits such anxiety. Is it that, as a member of the group, I will be held responsible for this idea? Or perhaps I unconsciously feel the idea proposer is getting too much attention and I will declare my own meaningfulness by pointing out a flaw.

Whatever the reason for the impulse, it is widely felt and is a good example of the way a defensive maneuver can get in the way of accomplishment.

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George M. Prince

Is the retired co-founder of Synectics®, Inc., the company that initiated research into the creative process and then became the leading teacher of inventors for business and industry.

As long time Chairman of Synectics, he and his partners originated the idea of videotaping invention groups to learn how the process of invention occurred. Based on their discoveries, they developed courses in creativity and innovation that have been taught all over the world. In 1970, Prince published one of the early books about the process: *The Practice of Creativity*, Harper and Rowe, 1970. It became a best selling trade book.

Mr. Prince grew up in Rochester, New York and went to Exeter and Williams, where he graduated with honors. In World War II he was an officer in the navy and served in a Destroyer Escort in company with an aircraft carrier on anti-submarine operations in the North Atlantic.

After the war he joined an advertising company in Rochester and rose to be Executive Vice President. He became fascinated with the process of getting ideas and when he heard of a creative experimenter in the Arthur D. Little Consulting Company, he joined ADL as co-manager of their Invention Design Group. In 1960 he, together with three other members of the Invention Design Group, left ADL to start their own company, focusing on research into the creative process.

Mr. Prince lived in Winchester with his first wife, the former Marjorie Morrison of Winnetka, IL, and their three children, Jonathan, Winthrop and Victoria. Mrs. Prince died in 1974.

In 1989 he married Kathleen Logan and they moved to Weston, where they live at present.

Kathleen Logan-Prince

Mrs. Logan-Prince grew up in Quincy, MA where her father was an attorney. She attended Thayer Academy, The College of New Rochelle and Boston College where she was awarded her MSW.

She has two children from her first marriage: Victoria, and Joshua. She is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker, and is trained in marriage and family therapy. She is a Diplomate in clinical social work and an associate faculty member at McLean Hospital, providing supervision to interns in the Human Sexuality Program of the Couples Institute.

From 1987, in addition to her practice, she worked with Mr. Prince running experiments in the development of the Mind-Free® program in creativity. It is out of this work that she and Mr. Prince produced the book, *Your Life as a Series of Meetings – Getting Good at Life*, 1st Books, Bloomington, IN, 2002.