

How to Explain Without Defensiveness

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Have you ever been accused of being defensive when you tried to provide your perspective in a discussion? Maybe you intended to have a conversation while the other person just wanted you to listen? Or maybe your boss wanted to give you some feedback and didn't want to hear any "excuses". Or your spouse wanted you to understand what you did and you responded by explaining why you did it? Or someone asked you to do something and you wanted to convince them to try a different way instead of just doing it?

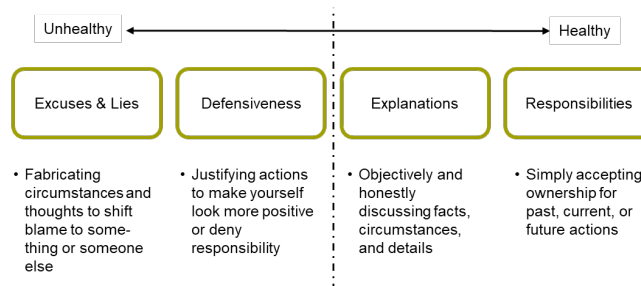
There can be an almost indiscernible difference between explaining and defending. Perhaps a key difference is in how they are interpreted. In one situation, the feedback provider might see a feedback receiver's explanation as part of a conversation where in another the explanation could be perceived as making an excuse. Or one person sees the response as a review of the circumstances while another sees it as an attempt to deny responsibility. Whether a person's response is an explanation or a defense, it is often interpreted as an attempt to justify an action or get out of trouble.

Of course the difference between being interpreted as explaining versus defending can also be the responsibility of the person doing the explaining. When receiving feedback, many people are quick to defend themselves. Rather than understand the feedback, they turn their attention to justifying themselves or changing the other's perception. Some defend themselves unintentionally. They subconsciously default to defending and justifying because they fear being viewed negatively. They might be insecure and depend on external affirmation. When their external sources provide correction rather than affirmation, they feel their core identity being attacked.

An even less appropriate response when receiving feedback is fabricating excuses. This is generally viewed as nothing more than lying. These people go beyond justifying themselves and resort to distorting the truth. They create fictitious circumstances they hope will justify their words or actions. They blame someone who is innocent or something that never happened. Or worse, they go on the attack. They might even project their own shortcomings onto the feedback provider in an attempt to blame them for an issue.

At the other extreme when receiving feedback is simply taking responsibility for what was said or done. Rather than making excuses, defending, convincing, or explaining, the person might simply say "You are right. I will take responsibility for doing that and take action to address it." Or when someone tells another to do something, they simply respond with "Yes, I'm happy to do that." These responses are most appropriate when a person agrees with what is being asked of them and there isn't anything achieved by discussing it further.

Here is a graphic showing four ways a person can react to feedback. It shows the continuum of responses with the least healthy on the left to the most healthy on the right:



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Healthy feedback receivers, as with great listeners, receive others' opinions and perspectives without interruption. They even allow others to vent, at least for a reasonable period of time. They ask questions, show empathy, and seek to understand the feedback provider before offering their opinions. They clarify and paraphrase with the intent to understand what they are hearing. Even after understanding the feedback, they withhold their opinions when they know their opinions aren't helpful or the timing isn't right to offer them.

What about situations where a person feels disregarded, disrespected, or falsely accused? Or when being told to do something at odds with their values? Or when receiving feedback that challenges their character such as being told they are dishonest? Is it okay for a person to defend themselves then? Is it okay to push back when a person is asked to do something they disagree with? Is it okay to provide an explanation when a person is given feedback that is clearly not accurate?

Yes, explanations are part of good communications. But the timing and method of explanation can make it come across as either appropriate or inappropriate. There are many variables, enough to fill a large book, but explanations are most often appropriate only after first understanding what is being said and accepting the appropriate level of responsibility.

If you want to have a conversation after receiving feedback or being told to do something, without appearing defensive, listed below are principles to consider. Use these as a checklist to see how well you do at not coming across as defensive:

- Adopt a mindset that forgives people who are not very good at giving feedback. Feedback is often worded poorly, contains exaggerations, and is based on incorrect assumptions.
- Accept that others are entitled to their perceptions, whether right or wrong from your perspective. Don't deny others of their perceptions.
- When receiving feedback, listen with the intent to understand what the other person is really saying even if they don't say it very well.
- Look for and admit the kernel of truth in what people say. There is probably something valid that they really want you to know and take responsibility for.
- Empathize with and relate to others' perspectives. Validate their feelings. To the extent you agree with, also validate their thoughts and opinions.
- Let people know what you heard. Paraphrase and clarify to the extent needed to gain their agreement that you accurately understand what they are conveying to you.
- Error on the side of taking more responsibility than less. If possible, in the spirit of preserving the relationship, do whatever is being asked rather than sidestepping it.
- If convenient, take notes. Note taking lets others know you are serious about hearing them as well as helps you capture what was said for later reference.
- Hold back any explanation until others feel completely heard. You may need to withhold your response for a later conversation when you've had time to process what was said.
- Don't use honesty or facts as excuses to stop listening or be rude. Even when others might not have the facts right, let them say what they want to say.
- If after being a good listener you feel wrongly accused or are told something you disagree with, try to let it go unless what you heard is:
 - At odds with your core values and identity
 - Preventing you from having a good relationship with them
 - Causing repeated issues
 - Falsely and negatively impacting your reputation with others
- Before responding, assess your motives. Objectively assess what is driving your desire to respond and what you hope to accomplish. Intercept and control any desire you might have to avoid the truth.
- After you've had a chance to think about what was said to you, and calm down if needed, calmly and constructively offer your response.

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- Start your response by admitting whatever bit of truth might exist in what you heard. Then offer your opinion including any explanation of your actions and motives behind them.
- Provide any relevant background information, but keep it brief. The longer the explanation, the more defensive it comes across.
- Stay factual. If something is merely an opinion, be careful not to present it as fact. You might say something like “based on what I knew at the time, it seemed to me that [this] was happening.”
- Stay on topic. Save any tangential thoughts until after you’ve discussed the ones currently being addressed. Create a “parking lot” for the additional topics you would like to discuss later.

Keep these principles in mind the next time you feel the need to defend yourself or convince someone to change their perspective. Maybe these will help you come across as understanding and responsible rather than defensive and closeminded.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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