

For Permanent & Positive Change

# The Exchange

FEATURED TOPIC: DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY

## Reduce Defensiveness

Therese Padgett

Some personalities just rub us the wrong way! They may or may not mean to create this response from us, but it happens nevertheless. Before you jump to the conclusion that the problem lies exclusively with those "rubbing" personalities, let's look, first, at ourselves.

When we have confidence in ourselves and we operate from a foundation of love and goodwill, we instinctively recognize that we have choices as to how we respond to situations and people. By self-confidence, I do not mean we are know-it-alls, thinking we are always right. Rather, we are secure enough to accept criticism and are aware that we may be wrong. We are open to other possibilities and free to explore those options without bitterness or prejudice. We seek the truth, and when we find it (having gathered all the facts and examined the possible consequences) we can decide to change or to keep to our course.

So the first thing we do to reduce defensiveness is to **be willing** to reduce it. This willingness goes a long way toward controlling our initial personal reaction to someone who has rubbed us the wrong way and it prevents us from escalating a tense situation. Now, what else can we do to progress a mutual conversation toward resolution?

A background in **understanding communicative styles** allows us to converse with these differing people in their preferred modus, which increases the possibility that they will more quickly comprehend and actually hear what we are saying.

Properly **utilizing the pitch, volume and rate of our speech** can lower defensiveness and actually help us to control the conversation. Also, carefully **choosing words** and avoiding the use of certain negative words accomplishes a similar result. Watch your **facial expressions and body movements**, too, as they convey empathy and/or sincerity (or the lack thereof). Combining these three things can do wonders to disarm defensiveness!

Accessing and conveying information are the ultimate goals once we have disarmed the initial defensiveness. We access information by **asking questions**. The more open-ended the questions, the more the responder will provide meaningful information. Therefore, make sure your questions do

not solicit a simple yes or no or one-word answer. Rather, begin your questions with "what" or "how".

Conveying information means just that: giving and receiving information and not opinions. We talked about soliciting information above by asking the right kinds of questions. Once our question has been answered, we respond by saying something like, "I understood you to say, (and here rephrase in your own words what you heard)." And then ask, "Did I understand what you said?" You can use this **clarifying technique** also when someone has given you unsolicited (you didn't initiate with a question) information. It assures the other person that you actually listened to what they said and it gives them the opportunity to correct any misinterpretations. When you are giving information (facts and not opinions, remember) do the same thing by asking them to clarify their understanding.

These ideas may seem so simple to you until you start trying to put them into action. The next time your hackles are raised by someone who rubs you the wrong way, STOP. Take a deep breath and apply these suggestions to the best of your ability. If you experience any difficulties, **call TLC for help**. Our communication experts can teach you how to adjust your attitude under fire, to communicate with different styles, to modulate your voice, to select the right words that prevent defensiveness, to read and apply body language, to use different kinds of questions that accomplish different goals, and to give and clarify information both about facts and feelings.

TLC uses different modules to help you accomplish your communication goals. We conduct small group seminars where there is time for limited practice of new skills. Individual coaching, concentrating on individual goals and more practice, is also available. If you are having problems with some of the people on your team, TLC also can moderate for you and assist with defeating defensiveness and eliminating miscommunications.

Call TLC today at 1-888-BECAUSE (1-888-232-2873). We will help you rub those irritants into polished gems! ❖

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### Looking Forward

Our next issue will focus on Negotiations.

### Looking Back

You might also be interested in our July 2007 edition: [Meetings](#) or read other [previous issues of The Exchange](#).

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*"Swifter is speech when the heart is hurt."*

Amen Em Opet I,  
1991-1962 B.C.

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*"Revolutions are not about trifles, but spring from trifles."*

Aristotle, 384-322 B.C.

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## For Permanent & Positive Change

### In The News

#### Our CEO Goes to China

Beverly Inman-Ebel will be the keynote speaker at the Third Annual Conference of US-China Women Business Leaders held in Beijing, China September 26-28, 2007. The theme of the conference is "Women Enterprise On a Global Scale." TLC's CEO will speak about leadership and the skill sets necessary to succeed in a global economy. Her presentation is entitled, "Small Change - Big Results!"

Speaking abroad is not new for Beverly. She has been a keynote speaker in Egypt, Libya, Belarus and several European countries. For details on this conference, go to [www.acbwa.org](http://www.acbwa.org).

#### Closer to Home

Beverly Inman-Ebel will be the keynote speaker in Dalton, GA for a homecoming celebration at the Church of God Union Assembly on Sunday afternoon, August 26th at 3:30 p.m. Beverly will speak on the importance of a positive attitude and listening. The event will be held at Ryman Hall. For more information contact Regina Rogers at 706-428-9130, or TLC at 423-622-8255.

### Under Your Skin

If you allow something or someone to offend you personally, you let them get **"Under your skin."** But what does your skin and something under it have to do with this month's TLC theme of not taking things personally?

The earliest written form of this expression is in 1936. American song songwriter, Cole Porter, created a love tune entitled, "I've got you under my skin." Originally he described the irritation of an insect getting under someone's skin and it causing a rash or itching feeling. He later put a poetic twist on that notion and said the love for a young woman was like an enjoyable irritation that he translated to, "I've got you under my skin."

Although he meant that expression in a positive way, to use this idiom is considered to mean something unpleasant that you wish would go away.

Much like this song illustrates, whether bad or good, avoid taking things too personally. Keep them from getting under your skin! ❖

### Talk About the Behavior, Not the Person

You have probably been told sometime in the past, "Don't take this personally, but..." Regardless of this warning, it is likely that you indeed did take it personally. How do we run departments and companies filled with people and leave the "person" out? Should we?

When a manager is responsible for the performance of an employee, it is important to praise correct behavior and correct poor behavior. In both cases, it is the behavior that is getting the attention, rather than the person. At TLC, we call this Informative Corrections and Informative Compliments. In both cases, the focus is on what the person has done rather than who the person is.

To give an Informative Correction, use the ATA Process: Ask. Tell. Ask. After doing your homework, ask the person what happened. Listen carefully. You may learn something new. You may just learn the level of responsibility that your employee is willing to accept. After listening, tell this person informatively what the consequences are for that behavior. Informative statements contain data (names, times, places, numbers, references) rather than opinions. An opinion is easily identified when any form of the verb "is" is used followed by a description (This is wrong. They are lazy.). Immediately following the informative tell, ask a question that searches for solutions, such as, "What can be done to ensure this doesn't happen again?"

When you informatively compliment someone (and please do not compliment them at the same time you are going to correct them), describe what the person did as specifically as you can and tell him how it helped. These two simple parts educate the person so he knows what he did and he will likely do it again.

There is a time and place to get personal at work. During breaks, travel, or down time, ask questions that begin with "how" or "what". Then sit back and listen. You can encourage them to share with small head nods and non-emotional noises such as, "uh-huh". Refrain from offering advice or sharing your opinions. Simply listen. They will take that personally in the best sort of way. ❖

#### Helpful Hints

- ✓ Pause 2 to 3 seconds before responding when you feel yourself getting defensive.
- ✓ Ask for clarification on vague terms before defending your point of view.
- ✓ Keep your volume, pitch, and speaking rate low and slow to sound calmer.

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*"It is not necessary to understand things in order to argue about them."*

Pierre Beaumarchais,  
1732-1799

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*"If you want to get at the truth - hear both sides and believe neither."*

Josh Billings, 1818-1885

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*"If God lived on earth, people would break His windows."*

Belfast Maxim

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*"Progress flows only from struggle."*

Louis Dembitz Braneis,  
1856-1941

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*"I do not resent criticism, even when, for the sake of emphasis, it parts for the time with reality."*

Winston Churchill,  
1874-1965

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## For Permanent & Positive Change

### What's In A Word?

In Beverly Inman-Ebel's book, *Talk Is NOT Cheap*, a chapter is devoted to words that cause defensiveness. It is important to understand that all words are not created equal. Some words are taken quite personally. TLC calls these TroubleWords because using them will likely get you into trouble.

**You.** A very common word, yet when used as the subject in a negative sentence, it creates defensiveness. Instead of saying, "You said..."; exchange it for "I heard..."

**Always/Never.** These all-inclusive/exclusive words reduce believability. Instead of saying, "Bob never calls in advance", replace it with data, such as, "Bob has not called before the meeting the last 4 times."

**But.** Grammatically it is a conjunction, yet this word does not join two thoughts. Instead it tells the listener to ignore what comes in front of the "but" and focus on what comes after it. Just omit the "but" and use two separate sentences.

**Should.** This word evokes guilt. Replace with "could" or better yet, ask a question. Instead of, "You should have known better", replace with, "What could you do differently?"

**No.** No one likes to hear it, yet there are certainly times that it needs to be said. Simply state the reason after the no. "No, because..."

**Try.** This word reduces commitment. Instead of saying, "I'll try", tell the person what you will do, such as, "I will call Mr. Smith and follow-up with an email."

Avoiding these TroubleWords can reduce people taking what you say so personally. ❖

### Don't Get Defensive, Get Information

Vincent Ivan Phipps

Sixty-eight percent of our work culture are people oriented. This means that nearly 7 out of ten people have a need to connect with others, and to establish relationships. They also will be sensitive to emotional needs. Considering we have so many people focusing on the feelings of others, it makes sense that we often are offended easily and take things personally.

If 68% are people-focused, then of course that leaves the other 32% who are task-focused. These people are concerned with the facts more than feelings. They also lean more toward accomplishing results rather than establishing relationships. Task individuals speak without a social filter. These are the people who might deliver their feelings with the subtlety of dropping a ton of bricks!

If a poor suggestion is made in a meeting, a task person may blurt out, "That's dumb! We tried that before and it failed."

If the person who made the suggestion was people focused, he or she might get their feelings hurt, thinking the task person was calling the people-person "dumb" or that that person, "made no sense." The people person might take offense personally and possibly defend her viewpoint. The task person means nothing personal about it and is only attacking the suggestion.

As a result, both sides could get disgruntled and fail to listen to each other. Defensive people are lousy listeners! Instead of getting defensive, get information in three steps:

**1. Clarify ambiguity:** Ask for specifics about dates, timelines, and amounts. Instead of saying, "We've tried that before." Clarify "before" and "that" by saying, "In October of last year, we lowered cost by 10% hoping to increase sales for the 4th quarter. We showed no increase in sales. If we repeat this effort, what will we do differently to get a different result?"

**2. Ask open ended questions:** Asking questions containing "what" and "how" can keep you from taking things personally. Asking questions such as, "What are your thoughts?" and "How do you feel about this suggestion?" get you information to separate facts from opinions. The more you can recognize a person's mindset, the more you can avoid becoming unnecessarily offended.

**3. Avoid defensive wording:** Find alternatives to confrontational words, such as wrong, slow, expensive, failure, waste, silly, etc. Perceptions are one of the biggest catalysts to taking things personally. Use accurate and descriptive words in place of these potentially volatile terms.

Your ability to remain calm when in defensive situations can make the difference in your professional image. Be positively remembered rather than negatively remembered. Take the higher road, remain polished, stay cool, and get information instead of getting defensive.

The one who angers you, controls you. ❖

### What Our Clients Are Saying

"This is the best resource for people dealing with people I've ever encountered. Great information!"

John Sebastian, Adrian MI

#### Remember To

- ✓ Use "what" and "how" questions to get more information.
- ✓ Find alternatives for defensive words like fast, cheap, and better.
- ✓ Describe behavior and situations with measurable terms using amounts, dates, percentages, and times.

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*"When your argument has little or no substance, abuse your opponent."*  
Cicero, 106-43 B.C.

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*"Deeds of violence in our society are performed largely by those trying to establish their self-esteem, to defend their self-image, and to demonstrate that they, too, are significant... Violence arises not out of superfluity of power but out of powerlessness."*  
Rolo May

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*"It is impossible to defeat an ignorant man in argument."*  
Williams Gibbs McAdoo

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*"He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster."*  
George Wilhelm Nietzsche, 1844-1900

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## For Permanent & Positive Change

### Happy Birthday!

TLC wishes a Happy Birthday to clients celebrating in August:

- » Melinda Sublett
- » Chris Mayo
- » Michaela Driver
- » Karen Whaley
- » Russell Martin
- » Buck Gentry
- » Jill Robertson
- » Don Bates
- » Larcenuia Hills
- » Christopher Rownd
- » Carla Akhlaghi
- » Charles Stiner
- » Danny Camp
- » John Stamps
- » Tony Ray
- » Donna Wong
- » Gordon Morehouse
- » Larry Samuels
- » Jeff Miller
- » Andrew Hunt
- » Matthew Dobson

### Dear TLC

My team has monthly brainstorming sessions. Lately all we do is aggravate each other. Our team leaves feeling offended and each person takes criticism so personally it destroys our morale and we just feel emotionally drained. What can you suggest to keep us from getting so angry and having our emotions prevent us from working as a team?

Signed  
-Upset Eddie

#### Dear Upset Eddie,

Establish the following three guidelines in your meetings to prevent hurt feelings:

1. No commenting on ideas until everyone is finished sharing.
2. During commenting session, only positive or solution focused comments are allowed.
3. A person is allowed to say an idea will not work or that they dislike something only if they have at least two alternatives.

Implement these suggestions and you'll see the negativity slow down and the efficiency increase.

### CEO Corner

Beverly Inman-Ebel

#### Chief Executive's Opinion

You can tell me that you prefer cats over dogs and the canine loving me will be perfectly fine. You can share data with me proving the intelligence of the feline members of our planet and I will be impressed. Tell me that you think my dog is dumb and those are fighting words. You have thrown down the gauntlet.

It is not so much what we think that people take personally, rather it is how we present it. I have spent a lot of time sitting in meetings watching people and analyzing their presentations of opinions. Most people do not edit their thoughts to consider how their opinions will be received when spoken. Far too many will repeat part of what someone said, usually taken out of intended context, and then give a monologue on the reasons this idea will not work.

The result is that people take the opinion personally. Some jerk, others frown, roll their eyes, or feel the need to whisper to the person sitting next to them. Too often it divides people into warring camps or sides of the fence.

To prevent this division, be sure to speak of events rather than people. Insert data into your sentences. Reduce the number of opinions that you give, and when you do give them, announce them by saying something like, "In my opinion" or "I think". Then give the data that you have that led you to this opinion. If you do not even realize that you are being opinionated, one quick way to uncover opinions is if you use the word "is" or any form of it (are, was, were, am) followed by an adjective.

If you are on the receiving end of an opinion that you do not agree with and you feel yourself getting a little riled, ask for information such as, "What information led you to that conclusion?" Stop revisiting old hurts by replaying them in your mind. This only causes you to focus, and thus convince yourself, on how you were treated poorly. Change the channel from WiiFM (What's in it for me) to InaAM (It's not always about me!).

In my opinion, most of us make too big of a deal about minor offenses. Let's get over ourselves and on with our lives. Live your dreams!



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*"Anger is never without an Argument, but seldom with a good one."*

George Savile, 1633-1695

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*"Handle people with gloves, but issues, barefisted."*

Dagobert D. Runes

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*"Quarrels would not last long if the fault was only on one side."*

Francois de La

Rochefoucauld, 1613-1680

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*"I understand a furry in your words, But not the words."*

William Shakespeare,  
1564-1616

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