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The Third Practice – Overcome Defensiveness

'Humankind cannot stand very much reality'.

T. S. Eliot

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins sets out what it is that differentiates great from mediocre companies. His research identified 11 companies that had gone from being mediocre to excellent, outperforming the stock market by between 4 and 18 times over a period of 15 years. He then compared them to companies in the same industry that started in similar positions but failed to manage the breakthrough. One of the six qualities he mentions that differentiates the great companies is the ability to 'confront the brutal facts'.

It appears then, that confronting the brutal facts differentiates the great from the mediocre. But why should it be so unusual to confront facts? Why do people shy away from confronting facts? Is this not self-defeating? Is not confronting facts one of those logical and rational things that businesses and organizations do best?

Collins quotes Fred Purdue, an executive interviewed from Pitney Bowes, one of the 11 'great' companies:

> *'When you turn over rocks and look at all the squiggly things underneath, you can either put the rock down, or you can say, "My job is to turn over rocks and look at the squiggly things", even if what you see can scare the hell out of you.'*[1]

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[1] Collins, J. (2001) *Good to Great*. London: Random House, p. 72.

And here is the nub of the issue. Facts can be like the squiggly things underneath rocks – unpleasant and scary. And, generally speaking, we do not like to feel uncomfortable emotions, so, in order to regain our equanimity, we put the rock down and pretend we never saw the squiggly things in the first place.

We have seen this on innumerable occasions already. We saw it with Barings and the Bristol Royal Infirmary. We saw it with our diarists, who avoided painful evidence and denied that 'facts' were true. This fear of the 'squiggly things' is a powerful source of blind spots in leaders and their organizations.

Collins focuses particularly on the problems that *visionary* leaders have in confronting facts. Writing of one of the comparison companies that failed to achieve breakthrough performance (in fact it filed for bankruptcy), Collins refers to the role played by its visionary leader, Roy Ash. Whilst he acknowledges that Ash was a visionary who tried to inspire his company to achieve great things, he points to the fact that Ash refused to acknowledge mounting and compelling evidence that indicated his vision was going to fail.[2]

It is difficult for visionary leaders to spot when resistance to their vision derives from unjustified pessimism, simple discomfort with change or from a balanced and sympathetic examination of the facts. The danger for visionary leaders is that they can become 'happiness junkies' – people who only want to hear good news. These types of leaders generate 'good news' cultures, where people feel it is only acceptable to present information that confirms senior executives' 'visions' and makes them feel good. To dwell on problems is considered negative and unacceptable; as a result, problems are avoided until it is too late to do anything about them.

Of course, this avoidance of difficult facts is the exception rather than the rule – otherwise we would not have the thriving, successful organizations that we do. But these defensive blind spots can creep into organizational cultures like a virus, undermining the organization's effectiveness and inhibiting its ability to recover. Once the virus sets in, the more things go wrong, the more difficult it is to

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[2] Collins, J. (2001) *Good to Great*. London: Random House, p. 72.

summon the courage to face them. The more we avoid the squiggly things, the bigger and scarier they get. Then it is highly tempting to focus one's attention elsewhere, pretend the problems don't exist or rationalize them away – it was just a one-off, it will go better next time. Moreover, there is some sense in responding in this way.

First, it is very difficult to make sense of a situation in the presence of high levels of negative emotion. When in the grips of 'hot cognition', we are likely to catastrophize the situation – that was a disaster – rather than learn rationally from it.

Second, one of the problems with handling setbacks is that we fail to put them in perspective. We dwell on them, blaming ourselves, rubbing the wounds of our embarrassment and failure. Before you know it, we become depressed, our thinking becomes distorted (I'll never make it, I'm no good) and we sink into learned helplessness (there's nothing I can do to change my life or situation, I'm useless . . .).

Both of these are problems of interpretation. We fail to interpret our setbacks effectively. We overpersonalize them, attributing them to our personal weaknesses and failures of character, rather than seeing them simply for what they are – steps on the journey of learning. These problems of interpretation can lead to emotional disorders, phobias and obsessions. More commonly, they lead to stress, heightened anxiety and poor self esteem.

This is why it is so important to 'learn' how to handle setbacks and frustrations effectively, particularly if you are in a leadership position. Leaders often battle with the challenge of facing difficult information and interpreting it correctly. As Collins puts it:

> *'There is nothing wrong with pursuing a vision for greatness. After all, the good-to-great companies also set out to create greatness. But, unlike the comparison companies, the good-to-great companies continually refined the* **path** *to greatness with the brutal facts of reality.'*[3]

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[3] Collins, J. (2001) *Good to Great*. London: Random House.

And, of course, refining the path to greatness with the brutal facts of reality is simply another way of saying 'they continually learned'. It is also another way of saying that learning is painful. But in the 'great' companies, leaders managed their emotions so that their fear of the squiggly things did not overcome their duty to look at them, think of them, analyse them, interpret them and act on them.

If leaders do not do this, the anxiety never goes away, it just pervades the organization, creating a defensive, anti-learning culture. People are aware of problems but know that it is not acceptable to refer to them. In defensive organizations, people do not question anything. Unrealistic budgets are put together – no-one questions them. Expensive projects fail but success is claimed and behaviour justified. At all costs avoid talk of failure. Never criticize, never evaluate or suggest that results are disappointing. If something goes wrong, find a powerless individual low down in the hierarchy and blame her.

Defensive cultures are characterized by fear. And fear triggers the well-known fight/flight response. This consists of a collection of physiological and behavioural reactions intended to protect us from physical danger. These reactions have their origins deep in our evolutionary past. In the presence of a physical threat, such as a wild animal, our bodies need to be prepared for action – either fighting off the threat or fleeing from it. Hence, the body automatically prepares itself so that:

- the pupils dilate and the mouth goes dry;
- the muscles tense and sweat is produced;
- the lungs breathe faster;
- the heart beats faster;
- our blood pressure rises as blood moves from our internal organs to our muscles;
- adrenalin and noradrenalin are released.

In effect, the body is readying itself for the physical exertion of defending itself. Once the threat is fought off, the energy is released and the body returns to its normal state.

The problem is that the fight/flight response is triggered whenever we experience a threat to our more intangible, existential needs at work. Moreover, the perception of threat does not even have to be conscious:

> 'the system operates independently of consciousness – it is part of what we called the emotional unconscious . . . Interactions between the defence system and consciousness underlie feelings of fear, but the defence system's function in life, or at least the function it evolved to achieve, is survival in the face of danger'.[4]

Anxiety not only triggers a physiological response but also a range of behavioural, cognitive and emotional responses. These are commonly known as *defence mechanisms*. These defence mechanisms are also generated in the presence of a threat to our existential needs – goals, values, self esteem, psychological comfort, etc. We saw in the last chapter the cognitive distortions that often result when we experience a threat to our needs. The following list describes further defence mechanisms that are commonly found in organizations.

1. *Denial* – refusing to perceive or face unpleasant realities. Denying that unfavourable situations/facts exist. This can involve reverting to alcohol or drugs in order to dull the pain rather than deal with it.

2. *Blaming* – refusing to take responsibility for one's actions; blaming others for outcomes for which you have some responsibility.

3. *Verbal aggression* – criticizing, belittling, mocking and ridiculing others. Arguing and not listening to others. Dismissive and hostile. Shouting, threatening, bullying and intimidating others.

4. *Flippancy* – becoming childish; being flippant and facetious. Using humour to deflect criticism and avoid serious discussion.

5. *Conformity and Self censorship* – absorbing the values and beliefs imposed by others. Suppressing doubts about the group's ideas

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4 LeDoux, J. (1998) *The Emotional Brain*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, p. 129.

or beliefs. Deferring to others, particularly more senior people, in order to protect oneself.

6. *Rationalization* – denying the emotional drivers of your actions by supplying logical reasons for your behaviour.

7. *Withdrawal* – going into your shell. Reducing involvement and withdrawing in order to protect oneself from hurt. Aloof, closed to others; refusing to show one's emotions.

8. *Playing victim* – not taking any responsibility for anything that happens to you. Seeing yourself as a victim of circumstance and helpless to respond.

9. *Dependency* – being self critical to elicit pity or reassurance from others. Sending out dependency signals in order to elicit protection from someone else.

10. *Illusion of invulnerability* – exaggerated belief in one's abilities. Believing that nothing could go wrong or that you could never make a mistake. Belief that you are always right.

11. *Cynicism* – channelling one's anger, bitterness or disappointment into overly negative assessments of the situation or people around you. Ridiculing more positive interpretations of the situation.

12. *Excuses* – denying personal responsibility for events. 'Yes butting'.

13. *Harmonizing* – suppressing conflict by soothing people's feelings; asserting that people's interests are in complete accordance. Denying that conflict exists.

14. *Avoidance* – avoiding disagreements or conflict, avoiding risk, being passive.

All of these forms of defensiveness corrode organizational performance by inhibiting dialogue and eroding trust. The role of leadership is crucial in exacerbating or preventing this. Leadership plays a number of important roles with regards to defensiveness – leaders can:

• spread it by being unable or unwilling to control their own defensiveness;

- enable it to flourish, either by not recognizing it or by fearing to confront the individuals that spread it;

- prevent it by encouraging a culture of openness and by being ruthlessly disciplined with their own behaviour and confronting those who spread defensiveness.

The following two case studies show just what can happen when defensiveness takes root in a person and/or organization. The first case shows how a leader becomes defensive with regards to a particular issue over which he feels vulnerable. This then becomes a blind spot for the whole team, and indeed the whole organization. In this case, people recognize the blind spot but cannot do anything about it, because the leader vetoes further discussion.

In the second case, we have an individual in a leadership position who has developed a 'defensive personality'. Defensive leaders can do terrible damage. The main reason that they are able to do such damage is because everyone – from the Chairman down – is petrified of them.

Andy – Defensiveness and Self Awareness

Andy has worked for ACI, a European food retailer, for over 15 years. He joined having graduated from university with a first class degree in Business and European Languages, and rose rapidly through the hierarchy. With a phenomenal facility for understanding complex systems, he has an enviable knack of knowing just what to do in order to deliver the required goals and outcomes – often gaining the respect of others by doing some of the most complex work himself. He is fascinated by business systems and has spoken at a number of industry conferences in this area. His last post was Head of Operations, where he had been involved in a comprehensive business re-engineering project that had saved the company millions of pounds.

It was no surprise when Andy was promoted to head up a large division over 2½ years ago. However, what has

surprised some people is the difficulty that Andy has had establishing his control and leadership. Recently, he received some feedback via the 360° process that suggested his direct reports were unhappy with his refusal to delegate and his tendency to get involved in too much detailed implementation. The feedback implied that he was not leading the division as effectively as he could.

Andy was not expecting this feedback and became furious with his direct reports. He felt angry and betrayed. He made it clear that he would not tolerate criticism of his management style, particularly in an area where he was considered an industry expert. His direct reports were both surprised by his outburst and intimidated. No-one said anything and the issue of Andy getting too involved in implementation was never raised again. The functional heads withdrew to their functions, and what had once been a good team began to weaken. The functional heads competed to 'please' Andy and a sense of insecurity and distrust invaded the team. There was a sense that Andy favoured operations over and above any of the other functions; those outside operations felt that he neither understood nor valued what they did.

Andy began to feel increasingly out of control. Suddenly, he had to rely for implementation on other people – people who, he felt, were not as good as him. People did not understand as clearly, act as quickly or implement as decisively as he did. He often lost patience with them and did not care to hide it. He started to blame his people for being incompetent.

However, nothing he did would get rid of this background feeling of anxiety that continued to gnaw away at him. And the more he felt this anxiety, the more snappy, impatient and intolerant he became. The division was yielding acceptable results, yet, at some deep level, he felt uneasy and it would not go away. Andy found himself drinking more heavily and, for the first time in his life, found it difficult to sleep.
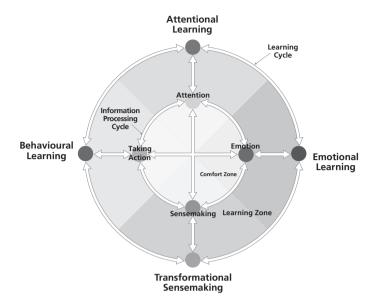
Figure 7.1   Information processing and learning.

It is easy to see exactly where Andy's learning falls down. Andy's 360° feedback provides him with some new information about himself that contradicts his existing self concept and challenges his high self esteem. This generates strong emotions – as he moves from the comfort zone into the learning zone. The emotions are painful and intense, consisting of anger, disappointment, self pity, fear and a sense of betrayal. Looking at our learning cycle, his attention has been grabbed by the 360° and he is experiencing new emotions.

At this point, he has a choice. He can continue round to the sense-making phase to try and make sense of what is happening using new constructs and beliefs. If he does this, he will have generated new insights about himself, his direct reports and his situation. However, the pain of the emotions he is experiencing, and particularly the fear that he might, for the first time in his life, fail in a job, drives him back toward the comfort zone. He does not want to engage in this painful sensemaking as he does not know what he might find out. He is drawn back to the comfort zone, and the primary aim of his sensemaking and actions is to maintain his existing beliefs, behaviours and to maintain his self esteem. His learning journey stops at

this point, and he makes sense of his situation using his current constructs. But, whilst he successfully defends himself against uncomfortable learning and change, the knowledge that all is not right remains in his subconscious, waiting to be let out. It is this knowledge that continues to nag him in the form of a background anxiety, drawing his attention to important information he needs in order to survive. In order to suppress this voice, Andy turns to drink.

This is how defensiveness operates. It interrupts the potential learning journey in order to preserve emotional comfort, existing beliefs and current behaviours. It draws people back to the comfort zone. But, despite the denial, the knowledge will not go away. Andy's subconscious mind is picking up the signals – it knows something is wrong, but Andy won't focus on his emotions to allow the insights to bubble to the surface. As a result, the anxiety stays and Andy has to develop strategies to cope with it.

This example shows leaders manifesting defensiveness with regards to a particular event, relationship or decision. But it can happen that leaders live their whole lives defensively – they become defensive personalities. They focus their attention on one or two deep-rooted needs or fears, and have learned methods that appear to get them what they most want. In effect, these people learn that their defensiveness 'works'. Of course, it is questionable that these defensive personalities are 'leaders'. They are more likely to be senior managers occupying leadership positions. The next example shows us what can happen when defensive people get into senior, 'leadership' positions.

Claire – The Defensive Personality

Claire was recently appointed as the head of a local government department responsible for providing services for disadvantaged young people in the area. Rumours suggested that she had a forceful, no-nonsense management style and could be quite intimidating. When Claire came into the department, she found that, on the whole, it was functioning fairly

efficiently. However, there were some elements that, according to Claire, needed to be changed. First, she found that the department had developed a fairly cosy relationship with the schools in the area. She found that numerous informal decisions were being made, which, whilst not against the rules in any way, meant it was difficult to control what was happening. Second, she found that her staff were working with the schools and not recording their costs properly. This meant that schools were gaining access to all sorts of informal services that they were not paying for.

Claire immediately put a stop to the provision of uncosted services. From now on, she announced, all contacts with schools were to be monitored and accounted for. She also decided that notes of all relevant meetings should be taken and sent to her. She had already decided that one decision should be vetoed, as it was not in the interests of the department.

The staff were outraged at this intrusion into their working practices, but when a case worker called Jo complained, everyone discovered what lay at the root of Claire's reputation. She erupted. She shouted at and criticized Jo. She asked Jo what right she had to question her decisions and accused her of looking after her own vested interests at the expense of the department. She made it clear to Jo that she would be watching her with great interest over the next few months. Jo left the encounter with Claire and promptly burst into tears. Soon, the story of Claire's outburst had spread throughout the department.

The individual officers were petrified of Claire. They never quite knew when she would start screaming and shouting at them. Claire's decisions were erratic and often could not be anticipated. Individual officers were placed in highly embarrassing positions, unable to operate or deliver their promises to clients until Claire had deigned to give them her attention.

Whilst those reporting to Claire were sometimes astonished at the decisions she made, they felt they could do nothing about

it. Claire's boss was preoccupied with putting together a strategic plan for the region, and they rarely saw him. If he had heard about the goings on within the department, he did not seem to show any concern, and certainly was not doing anything to manage Claire. Claire seemed to be completely in charge. She made all the most important decisions and no-one dared challenge her.

All attention was focused on personal survival, and the officers knew that the people who were suffering were the disadvantaged children themselves. Before Claire, everything ran smoothly and activity was focused on the children's needs, even if it was all rather informal. Now, however, all attention seemed to be focused on Claire and the insecurities, fears and anger that she bred around her.

In the meantime, Claire's boss, the head of the department, had heard some rumours regarding Claire's behaviour and management style. But the work was being done and no deadlines had been missed. As far as he was concerned, it was up to her how she ran her department; he had to focus on more important, strategic aspects of his job.

In this case, then, we have two leadership blind spots – Claire's blind spots about herself, her motivations and the inappropriateness of her behaviour, and her boss's blind spots regarding his need to performance manage and confront Claire.

Claire's manager is not in control of the situation. There may be a number of reasons for this, but two common reasons are:

- senior managers are too interested in promoting their careers upwards to take a real interest in what is going on below them;

- many managers are frightened of confronting unacceptable behaviour – the Claires of this world are adept at intimidating not only direct reports and peers, but also those senior to them, including their own bosses.

This is an important source of blind spots in organizations and a reason why many 'values statements' are derided and ignored. Many leaders are not prepared to defend the company's values (or even their own) by confronting behaviour that undermines them. Many leaders are wary of and dislike performance managing people. Yet, performance management is a vital tool for delivering values, especially in situations where defensiveness is rooted within an organization. The outlining of objectives, the clarifying of priorities, the communication of values and the provision of feedback are all vital parts of the leader's toolkit. It is surprising how many leaders are nervous of using them. They are wary of facing an employee's defensiveness and potentially difficult emotions. They may be frightened of hurting a person's feelings or of undermining their confidence.

Some leaders are wary of adopting a 'directive' style with their people. They have learned that it is not acceptable to 'command and control' people. They have to persuade and influence. With managers like Claire, however, the command and control style is necessary. In fact, a directive style of management is always appropriate if used to defend the values against those who would undermine them.

Nor is Claire's case so unusual. It is surprising how many defensive managers gain positions of significant responsibility. Like Claire, they usually manage through fear, which can be a highly effective management tool – certainly in gaining compliance. In our example, Claire has excessive needs for control and has developed a style which gets her what she wants – total control and compliance.

The question is what do you do about a 'Claire'? It is clear that Claire is not going to change herself. The key to this situation is the director of the department – he needs to recognize the implications of his own blind spots and accept that now is the time to overcome them. He has to confront Claire with the inappropriateness of her behaviour. He needs to learn how to performance manage his people.

However, in the absence of a proactive and skilled boss, what can her direct reports do? They have a limited number of choices:

- reason with her;
- reassure her and gain her trust;
- comply and keep a low profile;
- be assertive – show that her methods do not work;
- collectively bring Claire's behaviour to the attention of her boss or other relevant individuals.

Reason With Her

This is the preferred option taken by many. Many people simply feel that this is a complete misunderstanding on Claire's part, and that if she only realized that she was jeopardizing the department's goals, she would desist. In every case I have come across, this never works. This is because the defensive person develops their own logic. First, they rationalize their behaviour, claiming to be acting in the best interests of the organization. Second, whether consciously or not, they are highly attuned to meeting their needs and extremely sensitive to any perceived threat to these. Also, they have learned over time that their methods work for them. Claire has learned that her methods help to meet her control needs, they get the work done (according to her criteria – notice she focuses on costs, she is not interested in outcomes for the children) and what's more, they appear to get her promoted. She has learned that her methods are highly effective – for her. And no-one is going to tell her anything different. You will also notice that the defensive personality lives in their own hermetically sealed world – they do not listen. Defensive personalities are trying very hard to make the world fit their needs – they want to make the world what they want it to be – in this case, completely controllable.

They are immune to reason, because your reason does not resonate with their reason. They are asking themselves different questions, such as 'how can I meet my needs for control in the current environment?' If you start to talk about meeting other stakeholders' needs, Claire will always find a way of explaining how she is meeting those needs by adopting her preferred strategies.

Reassure and Gain Trust by Meeting the Underlying Need

Defensive people are driven by fear. If you can gain an insight into what is feared, then it is sometimes possible to reassure them that you will not do anything that will give them any cause to fear your actions. In Claire's case, she has excessive needs for control. In order to reassure her, you could give her what she wants – minutes of meetings, e-mails and voicemails keeping her updated on what you are doing and any decisions that need to be made. In effect, you help her meet her control needs and in time she learns to trust you. If everyone does this, eventually Claire may learn to 'relax'. Of course, there are disadvantages to this approach – it reinforces and colludes with her behaviour. With some defensive people, who have high power and status needs in addition to control needs, they may glory in the extra power that this gives them and may misuse it further.

However, in some circumstances, this can work. Particularly when a manager first comes into position, they can be very nervous about being successful. In these early days they can be quite defensive and on guard, unsure who to trust. The placating strategy works well in these types of circumstances, when the defensiveness is more context or even relationship specific. In the case of specific relationships, where you find that individuals are being defensive to you, the placating, trust-building approach works well. In effect, you are showing that you are not a threat; in fact, by going out of the way to help someone who is wary of you, you can eventually build a relationship of trust and mutual respect.

Comply and Keep a Low Profile

This is effectively what is happening in our example. It has the advantages that no risks are taken – you can be sure that you will not be fired. However, this approach has a number of disadvantages:

- it reinforces Claire's behaviour – she is learning that, once more, her particular strategies are working for her;

- the clients (in this case the schools and the disadvantaged children) continue to suffer;

- the stress that her behaviour is causing in the department will continue to build, causing people to leave and to be more susceptible to illness;

- the long-term relationships that the department relies on for its effective operation will be damaged.

However, when a manager like Claire gets into position, attention tends to narrow down to one thing – personal survival. People tend not to worry so much about other stakeholders in their work. This tends to be the preferred option of many.

Be Assertive – Show That Her Methods Do Not Work

The only reason people like Claire operate like they do is because it works 'for them' – not others, but for them! We have seen that, in this case, the main tool is fear. The people in her department have to learn to overcome their fear and begin to stand up for themselves. All they need to do is make a simple, uncontroversial statement, in a calm tone of voice, such as: 'do not shout at me Claire' or 'I will not be sworn at, Claire'. The statement must be focused on particular behaviours. Accusing Claire of being 'aggressive' will not work – she will simply deny it. You have to focus on something they cannot deny – e.g. 'raising their voice', 'shouting', 'swearing'. Her direct reports can take this further and refuse to talk to Claire until she speaks in a reasonable tone of voice: 'I will not be shouted at Claire. I will come back and talk to you when you are polite to me'.

The reason that people do not stand up for themselves is that they are scared – exactly as Claire wants. But what are they scared of? This is an interesting question. In Claire's case, the last thing she wants is to draw her senior's attention to her operation by sacking someone. The reason she is getting away with her behaviour is that no-one is monitoring it. If she were to sack someone, her boss would be involved and

there would have to be some type of enquiry where all sorts of allegations might be made. What's more, Claire would start to lose control – her nightmare scenario. So, people like Claire operate by the inculcation of a non-specific climate of fear – through the tacit suggestion of threat rather than by carrying the threat out. The direct reports need to sit down and think – what precisely am I scared of? If I were to stand up for myself in a calm, rational manner, what would happen? As soon as they start to confront their fears, they start to realize that many of them are unfounded. Of course, this is best done collectively in a group, where mutual help and support can be given. This brings us to the next point.

Do Not Get Hooked!

It is easy to get hooked by the defensive person, because they always seem to know just what to say to trigger people's personal fears and insecurities. If someone is insecure about their looks, the defensive person will mention their appearance. If someone is new and insecure about their performance, the defensive individual will imply that someone made a comment about their poor performance. Once an individual is hooked, it is easy to lose control of the situation.

In dealing with defensive individuals, the first step is to acknowledge one's own feelings and insecurities. In particular, it is important to face your fears and examine them rationally. Provide rational responses in your own mind if the individual mentions your weak spot. For example, if someone criticizes your performance, provide a rational response in your own mind:

> *'She is saying that simply to make me feel bad. I **am** finding it tough, but this is entirely normal as I am new. I will go and speak to my boss about this tomorrow to get some support. In no way, however, does this justify her behaviour to me'.*

It is sometimes helpful to recognize the process that is taking place. If you are feeling fear, then it may be that the defensive individual is feeling fear. Fear is what she wants you to feel (consciously or not). Simply acknowledging this, pausing and taking a deep breath

and then saying to yourself something along the following lines can help:

> *'if I am feeling fear, so is she. I will not allow her to manipulate me through my fears. I am strong and powerful and I will not be manipulated.'*

You can then voice what you are feeling:

> *'you know, I feel as if I am being criticized'.*

Defensive people often work through the manipulation of emotions that exert their influence secretly, below the surface. The articulation of these emotions reduces the power they are trying to exert. You can then deliver the message you want to get across – e.g., your refusal to tolerate a certain kind of behaviour.

Another way of getting hooked is by 'arguing' or debating with her. Never do this; you will not win, as there is no rational answer that will satisfy her. Simply focus on your core message and repeat it, using typical assertiveness skills such as the broken record technique (the repetition of a simple message over and over again).

Collectively Bring Claire's Behaviour to the Attention of her Boss

This is a more risky decision. By going above Claire's head, the direct reports are simultaneously jeopardizing Claire's control needs and potentially threatening the senior manager. In effect, their actions imply that the senior manager has not been doing his job, and might, if they came to anyone else's attention, jeopardize his standing in the organization. In defensive organizations, where everyone is out for themselves, there is a tendency for the senior managers to look after their collective interests – clubbing together in an alliance which says effectively, 'it's a dangerous, lonely world at the top; you look after my interests and I'll look after yours'.

This is what we saw in the Bristol Royal Infirmary case. Stephen Bolsin found that not only was he 'frozen out' when he questioned

the competence of the surgeons at the Bristol Royal, he was criticized, his competence was brought into question and, most significantly, he could not find another job in the NHS in the UK. This is not uncommon in professionally led organizations. In a professional culture, there is often a tacit agreement not to question or challenge senior professionals; in fact, challenging a senior professional can be one of the deepest, darkest, most tacit taboos. In a defensive organization, once you put patients'/clients'/users' interests *above* the interests of the most powerful people in the organization, you have broken a taboo and you will be punished.

Going back to Claire's case, whilst it is risky going above her head, it might, of course, work. The senior manager's lack of attention might be inadvertent – perhaps caused by an inordinate amount of pressure on him in his role. However, if the inattention signals something else – a lack of interest in what is going on at 'lower' levels in the organization – this action could well provoke a defensive response.

We also have to hope that Claire's boss is prepared to handle her behaviour. As we have mentioned previously, many senior managers are wary of confronting difficult behaviour in the workplace and do not know how to do it in a skilful manner.

The alternative, safer, option is, of course, to talk to HR, either in an informal chat over coffee or ultimately to have a more formal conversation.

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Claire's case is both instructive and important. It shows that once a defensive person gets into a leadership position, it is very difficult to do anything about it. It also demonstrates how a defensive 'leader' tends to generate a defensive culture. This leads to massive blind spots, as everyone's attention is focused on one thing – their own survival. Patients' interests, clients' interests, users' interests and a whole range of stakeholders are ignored in the struggle for survival.

This is why it is critical that all managers learn the skills of performance management, are able to recognize defensive behaviour (in themselves and others) and learn how to handle it at all levels.