

Defensiveness

Looks like:

- The organization spends significant time and energy trying to protect power as it exists and covering up abuses of power.
- The structure and procedures of the organization are optimized to protect the organization as is and to prohibit or dissuade growth and change.
- Criticism of those with power is viewed as threatening, inappropriate, or rude.
- People respond to new or challenging ideas with defensiveness, making it difficult to raise these ideas. People are not listening to each other or helping each other feel heard.
- A lot of energy in the organization is spent working around particular defensive individuals (often those with power). Ensuring that their feelings are not hurt is prioritized over thinking and working through important changes that need to be made for people with less power.
- **White people spend energy defending against charges of racism instead of examining how racism might actually be happening and how their behaviors could be adding to organizational racism.**
- Lashing out, wherein people seeking emotional control adopt a defensive attitude and respond to any opinion contrary to their own as a personal attack.
- Organizations rooted in defensiveness can unwittingly encourage the role of a solution giver: those who give a response or solution before others have had a chance to contribute to the exchange, or before the problem has been given adequate time and consideration.

Defensiveness is connected to the idea of 'white fragility.'

On this topic, Robin DiAngelo writes: "White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility."

Defensiveness (cont.)

Antidotes:

- Recognize the link between defensiveness and fear (e.g. fear of losing power, losing face, losing comfort, losing privilege). **Name defensiveness** when it is a problem.
- Foster a culture of **self-reflexivity** in which people are supported and challenged to work on their own defensiveness.
- Develop an organizational culture of caring and direct critical feedback—people are frequently **capable of handling more** than others expect, especially when there is a foundation of trust and care.
- Discuss the ways in which defensiveness and resistance to new ideas get in the way of the organization's mission.