Chapter 18.   Defenses and the Need to Know

Introduction

"Defenses and the Need to Know" was published in 1963, midway through my six years as an Assistant Professor at Yale University. It was a milestone for me, because the writing of it signaled the end of a writing block that plagued me during my early years at Yale. Not coincidentally, it is the first paper I wrote that was neither empirical nor experimental, but was about the practice of what we at that time called "applied behavioral science." My lack of interest in experimental and quantitative work was the main reason for my deciding not to pursue my original academic ambitions. It took me quite a while to find my voice as a writer, and when I did, it was as a philosophic and reflective practitioner, rather than as an academic psychologist.

The paper itself reflects my heavy involvement at that time in the practice of group dynamics and T groups. As a T group trainer, I wanted to create conditions for maximum learning in the group with which I worked, and that sometimes meant that people were confronted quite strongly. At the same time, I had experienced enough psychological pain and anxiety myself that I wanted to keep the groups safe for the participants. This paper presents a way of thinking about that dilemma that I found helpful in keeping balance and safety in my groups.

I believe the work is relevant today on a larger scale, when so many organizations are undergoing radical change and subjecting their members to trauma and loss. I have recently revisited the "Castle and Battlefield" model put forward in this paper, incorporating it into new work on organizational learning and healing

(Harrison, 1984*; Harrison, 1992; Harrison and others, 1991). The model is quite serviceable in understanding any situation that involves threat, pressure and stress, along with the need to learn new behaviors and ways of thinking at the same time. In that sense, of high demands for learning and change, the world of business has now become one great T group!

Defenses and the Need to Know

The purpose of this piece is to discuss the ways we have of protecting our views of ourselves and others. Specifically, it is intended to rescue the concept of "defensive behavior" from the ostracism in which it is usually held, restoring it to its rightful place as a major tool of humankind in adapting to a changing world, and considering how defenses may help and hinder us in really profiting from a learning situation.

Let us consider how we understand the world we live in, and particularly those parts of it concerning ourselves and our relations with other people. First of all, we organize the world according to concepts, or categories. We say that things are warm or cold; good or bad; simple or complex. Each of these concepts, may be considered a dimension along which we can place events in the world, some closer to one end of the dimension, some closer to the other.

Actually, we can't really think without using these categories or dimensions to organize our thoughts. Any time we consider the qualities of ourselves, other persons, or events in the inanimate world, we have to use categories to do it. We are dependent for our understanding of the world on the concepts and categories we have for organizing our experiences. If we lack a concept for something which occurs

in the world, we either have to invent one, or we cannot respond to the event in an organized fashion. How, for example, would a person explain his or her own and others' behavior without the concept of love and hate? Think how much behavior would simply puzzle or confuse him or her or, perhaps, just go on by without really being perceived at all, for lack of this one dimension.

Concepts do not exist in isolation; they are connected to one another by a network of relationships. Taken all together, the concepts we use to understand a situation, plus the relationships among the concepts, are called a conceptual system. For example, we may say, "People who are warm and friendly are usually trusting, and hence, they are often deceived by others." Here we have a conceptual system linking the concepts friendly warmth, trust in others, and ease of deception. Because concepts are linked one to another, the location of an event to one concept usually implies something about where the event is located on each of a whole network of concepts. It is thus almost impossible to take in a small bit of information about a characteristic of a person or event without its having a whole host of implications about other characteristics.

Images and stereotypes operate this way: when we discover that a person is black or white, is a PTA President, a social scientist, a wife, a husband, the category to which the person belongs evokes in each of us a complex set of associated qualities, characteristics, stereotypes, prejudices and memories. We have beliefs, attitudes and expectations about the person's behavior which are in part conscious, in part below

the surface of our attention. Most of the time we then operate on the basis of that mental network, or *conceptual system*, without thinking too much about it

The study of defenses, like the study of stereotypes, is the study of the processes which protect the organization of conceptual systems in the face of information and experiences which, if accurately perceived, would tend to disconfirm, break down or change the relationships among concepts in the system.

Why should conceptual systems be resistant to change? Actually, if they were simply intellectual exercises, they probably would not. In real life, conceptual systems come to have value attached to them. The values seem to be of two kinds: one kind I will call competence value. By the competence value of a conceptual system, I mean its value for helping us to be effective in the world. After all, the conceptual systems we have were developed because we needed some way of making sense of the world; of predicting what kinds of results would follow from what kinds of causes; of planning what kinds of actions we needed to take in order to accomplish some desired result.

People have the conceptual systems they have because in some important situations the systems proved adaptive for them; by seeing the world in just this way they were able to get along better, to be more effective, to prepare better for what was coming next. For human beings conceptual systems are, in a very real sense, very nearly the most important survival equipment we have. Animals have instinctual patterns of response, complex systems of behavior that are set off without thinking in response to fairly fixed patterns of stimulation. Humans have to do it the hard way, by

developing systems of concepts that make sense of the world and then using these systems to make decisions as to what to do in each situation. Those conceptual systems that pay off over and over again tend to become parts of our permanent equipment for understanding the world and for deciding what to do in it. If we were to lose these systems we would become like ships without rudders; we would have lost our control systems and, with them, our chances of acting in an organized, intelligent fashion to meet our needs. This is what I mean by the competence value of conceptual systems.

Unfortunately, no conceptual system fits the world perfectly. In the interests of economy we simplify and leave things out as being unimportant: for example, we act as though relationships which are statistical (they are only true most of the time) are necessary, and hence hold true all of the time. On the rare occasions when the relationships don't hold, we tend to overlook the inconsistency, rather than trying to understand why things didn't go as expected. We may, for example, conceptualize the qualities of warmth, lovingness and femininity as incompatible with a ready ability to express anger. This conceptual system may not change even in the face of strong anger on the part of a woman about whose warmth and femininity we have ample evidence in the past. We simply pass it off as, "she's not herself." or, "she's not really that mad." or even "deep down inside she isn't as warm and feminine as she appears to be." We go through a lot of mental gymnastics to avoid seriously questioning a conceptual system which has proven useful in the past. So, frequently, the last alternative explanation we consider is, "it is perfectly possible for a woman to express

deep anger readily and still be warm, loving and feminine." Such an alternative would mean the significant alteration of a conceptual system.

The trouble is, you can't just alter one little conceptual system at will, and let it go at that., The links between concepts are too complex and too closely linked to change one or two relationships in isolation. One change leads to another, and pretty soon a major reorganization is going on. It may be, of course, that the reorganization may lead to substantial improvement in our understanding and effectiveness in the world, but in the meantime there may be considerable turmoil and confusion as we question relationships that once seemed solidly established, and before new ways of seeing the world have been adequately tested and confirmed.

Of course, the more important the particular conceptual system in question is in making it possible for us to meet our needs, the more strain and upset is involved in changing it. For example, one might believe that heavy objects fall more rapidly than light ones. The disconfirmation that would follow upon learning that all objects fall at the same rate would perhaps be uncomfortable but only moderately so. Consider, on the other hand, the anxiety and stress which could be produced by the discovery that complying with another's demands does not always make the other like you and may, indeed, have the opposite effect. For a person who has put much reliance in their interpersonal relations on the techniques associated with such a conceptual system, its disconfirmation may have the dimensions of a major crisis in life.

So, much of the time we hang on to our not-so-accurate conceptual systems because they work for us most of the time, and to give them up would plunge us into

mild or severe confusion without any real promise of eventually attaining a more accurate, effective reorganization. The picture does not look so good for improvement, and before I finish, it will look even bleaker.

There is another kind of valuing that goes on when we place events into conceptual systems, and I will call it evaluation. This is the well known process of believing that some states of affairs are better and some are worse. For most conceptual systems, there is an element of evaluation: most concepts have good end and a bad end, and we would rather see events come out on the good ends than the bad.

Again, it is less important to see events come out well in some areas than in others. When we consider the conceptual system, "Red sky at night, sailors' delight: Red sky in the morning, sailor take warning," we may indeed prefer that the weather come out on the "red at night – delight" end, rather an the "red morning – warning" side, but if on a given occasion it doesn't, we don't ordinarily get too upset, nor do we feel responsible for our failure to predict the weather.

The closer we get to conceptual systems that are concerned with our self perceptions and our important relationships with others, the more important evaluation becomes, and the more uncomfortably responsible we feel when events don't fall on the valued ends of the concepts. Thus, if we value love as against hate, and intelligence against stupidity, it becomes important to protect conceptual systems that organize events so we can see ourselves as brilliant and loving. When maintaining the valued perception becomes too important, people may desperately

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protect quite maladaptive, ineffective conceptual systems in order to maintain a favorable perception of self or others.

Sometimes, competence value and evaluation compete for influence on the conceptual system. For example, some persons have led such difficult childhoods that it is only by seeing themselves as bad, worthless people that they can seem to make sense out of the awful things that people they trusted have done to them; at the same time, they have needs for self esteem, and for seeing themselves at the valued ends of concepts. These people may experience considerable conflict between these two motivational influences on their conceptual systems.

These, then, are the "defenses." They serve to keep us from becoming confused, upset and rudderless every time something happens contrary to our expectations. Frequently, they protect our liking for ourselves and others when we and they fail to live up to our ideals. Defenses give life as it is experienced more stability and continuity than could ever be justified by reference to the contingency and complexity of real events alone. Defenses keep our relations with others more pleasant and satisfying, protecting us from our own and others' anger, and helping us to go on loving people who are usually less than perfect and sometimes less than human.

At the same time, these same defenses block our learning, often dooming us to make the same mistakes over and over again. They make us blind to faults of our own we could correct, as well as those we can do nothing about. Sometimes they make us turn the other cheek when a good clout on the nose would clear the air and establish a new and firmer footing for an honest relationship. They can, in extreme cases, make

so many kinds of information dangerous to our conceptual systems that we narrow and constrict our experiences, our feelings, and our thoughts, becoming virtual prisoners of our own protection.

I believe there is in each of us a kind of counter force which operates in the service of learning. Let's call it a need to know, or a drive toward competence. We are used to thinking about physiological needs, and we recognize there are probably social needs, such as needs for love; but we often overlook the need for competence and knowledge. Yet it is in operation all around us. We see it in the baby who begins to explore as soon as he or she can crawl; we see it again in the 'battle of the spoon," where the child actually gives up the certainty of getting the food in his or her mouth for the less effective but exciting experiment of "doing it myself." We see this need again as the adolescent struggles to carve out a life that is uniquely his or her own; and we see it reflected in our continuing efforts to understand and master the world as adults. People who read history for pleasure, who have creative hobbies, or who attend personal growth experiences are all manifesting this drive to competence and knowledge.

The need to know is the enemy of comfort, stability and a placid existence. For its sake we may risk the discomfort of examining and revising our assumptions about groups and people; we may expose ourselves to the anxiety-provoking experience of "personal feedback," in which we often learn others do not see us quite as we see ourselves; we place ourselves in groups where we know in advance we will be confused, challenged, and occasionally scared. Some of us expose ourselves to such

situations more than once; to me, there could be no more convincing proof that the need to know is frequently stronger than the desire to maintain the comfort and stability of accustomed conceptual systems.

The sensitivity training laboratory thus frequently becomes a battleground between our desires to increase our competence and understanding, and our defenses. In this battle, we tend to take the side of the need to know and, like partisans everywhere, we malign, attack and propagandize against the other side. Sometimes we forget that both sides are parts of a person, and that if either side destroys the other, the person loses a valuable part of him or herself. This is particularly true in the case of defenses. We know from clinical practice and, I think, from personal experience and logic, that when a our first line of defense becomes untenable, we drop back to another one, a sort of "second string" defense. Unfortunately, since we usually put our best and most adaptive defenses out in front, the second string is apt to be even less effective and reality-oriented than the first. To put it strongly, the destruction of defenses does not serve learning; instead, it increases our anxiety that we will lose the more or less effective conceptual systems we have with which to understand and relate to the world, and we then drop back to an even more desperate and perhaps realistic defense than the one destroyed. Though it may seem paradoxical, we cannot increase learning by destroying the defenses which block it.

What we can do is create situations where people will not need to stay behind their defenses all the time. We can make it safe to sally forth from behind the moat, so

to speak, secure in the knowledge that while we are exploring the countryside no one will sneak in and burn the castle.

People need their defenses most when they are most under threat and pressure. To make a mistake or become confused or admit to oneself that the world, ourselves , and others are not quite what we thought they were means that while we are revising or building new conceptual systems we will not be able to cope as well as before with the "slings and arrows" of difficult situations. If we need every bit of competence we possess, we simply can't afford to give up conceptual systems which are tried but not perfect, in favor of exciting new ways of looking at things that are untested.

It is for this reason that I do not believe we can really begin to learn deeply from one another in a sensitivity training group until we create relationships of mutual support, respect, and trust. When we know that others will not place us in situations where we need every bit of our competence to cope with what is going on; when we know they will respect our own personal rate of growth and learning; when we know we have friends to help if we get into difficulties exploring new relationships, understandings and behavior; then we can begin to look hard at the inadequacies in our ways of making sense of the world. We can examine those "exceptions to the rule" that we've always half-expected might prove the rule inadequate; we can afford to really explore why ways of behaving that used to work fine are for some reason not producing satisfactions for us the way they used to, or why they seem to work with

some people but not others; and we can really listen to the things people say that indicate they don't see us quite the way we see ourselves.

Out of this kind of exploration can come new and more effective conceptual systems, new ways of behaving that go along with them, and the excitement and pride that accompany increases in competence and knowledge. And when the excitement is over, the new ways have been tested and integrated and have become habitual ways of seeing and behaving, I hope we will not be surprised to find that under conditions of stress we defend them against new learning just as strongly as we did the old. For these two partners go hand in hand: the need to explore and learn, and the defenses against disconfirmation and confusion. We need them both; the challenge is to know how we can create conditions under which we can suspend one to enhance the other.