

How Can PNDC Make it Possible for People to Drop Their Defenses—Often Instantly?

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This Article is based on the *Powerful Non-Defensive Communication™ (PNDC)* process outlined in Sharon's book, *Taking the War Out of Our Words*.

The Physiology of Defensiveness

Imagine a cat, hissing, back arched, hair standing straight up. Faced with a threat from another cat, a dog, or raccoon. Our cat is now poised for flight or fight—just as we are when we feel a threat. While thankfully, all the hair on our head doesn't stand up straight when we react defensively, people do sometimes say things like, "I was so angry, I could actually feel the hair on the back of my neck standing straight up." Such reactions, along with flushing red in the face, shallow rapid breathing, and perhaps starting to shake are symptoms most of us are familiar with. They come from the flooding adrenaline rush that we feel when we have an urge to protect ourselves, another adult, or a child.

In times long past, living closer to nature—with physical danger a real threat at any moment—most of our human drive for protection was, like our cat, focused on physical survival. Now, we are more likely to protect our feelings from being hurt, our beliefs and ideas from being challenged or negated. It may not seem like getting our idea put down by team members at work, or our feelings being hurt by someone we love would cause the same degree of defensive response as being physically attacked. And I certainly have experienced defensive reactions that feel distinctly more or less intense. However, current research on the brain suggests that, in fact, we can have the same intensity of adrenaline rush due to an insulting remark as we would have to physical danger. I think that's pretty incredible and, at the very least, it says a lot about why we have so much trouble getting along, even with the people we love most.

Lots of times we feel embarrassed after having some kind of defensive reaction, especially when it is witnessed by people other than the person we had the conflict with. How many times might we have said to ourselves, "Why didn't I just keep my mouth shut?" Or "That was so stupid. I know better than to let myself get triggered like that."

However, in reality, we often do not have *any* ability to control whatever we blurted out!

Our defensive impulse is controlled by our *autonomic nervous system*—often even called the *involuntary nervous system*. Once we're triggered, the neurons in our brain fire straight past the complex problem-solving part of the brain and go charging into the amygdala, our reptilian brain, which functions in part to control fear responses. It does its job by stimulating fight, flight, or surrender impulses. Our reactions can range from full-out aggression to the frozen, deer-in-the-headlights, passivity—an inability to respond at all.

Many times we get just as upset with ourselves for *not* saying something as for spouting off when another person acts in hurtful ways. In either case, we can replay a scene over and over in our minds, re-fueling the defensive response. How many of us have thought for days, weeks, months, or even years about what we “could have” said to someone.

Interestingly, the amygdala also stores the memory of times when we felt afraid, hurt, or angry in response to how others treated us. One of the messages I took from Dr. Joseph LeDoux's research is that:

All it takes for any of us to get defensive is for anyone to do anything that anyone else ever did that ever made us defensive.

I think this means that all of us are standing at the edge of an abyss—just waiting to fall into our defensiveness. And our defensiveness always fuels power struggle and can too easily lead to passive or overt aggression, even violence. Virtually all the information we've historically had access to has suggested being defensive is “just human nature”—a common human reaction that is simply beyond our control.

Identifying the Communication Issues that Fuel Adrenaline Charged Defensiveness

Back in the 1970's I was teaching communication classes and people started commenting that what I was teaching was so “disarming.” People didn't often use the word “disarming” back then and almost never in reference to how we talk to each other. I had no clue about what I was teaching that would be described as “disarming.”

Ultimately, I realized that I was teaching a method of communication where there was no bottom line at which you had to get defensive to protect yourself. A second insight followed the first. It dawned on me that we had been using the “rules of war,” not just as a metaphor, like football, but as the entire infrastructure for how we talk to each other.

I had to ask myself, “What am I teaching that is prompting people to “disarm” — like taking a rifle off and laying down on the ground at the end of the war?” I started thinking about how we use our basic communication forms: *questions, statements, and predictions (limit setting)*. I started by going to the dictionary and looking up the word “question”. I was shocked to find that it was never once defined with the word, “curiosity,” but over and over again with the words like “doubt” and “mistrust.” The most common word used to define it was “interrogation.”

The very *definition* of the word “question” reflected how war tactics are used to get information from captives. War tactics were apparent in the definitions of statements and predictions also. Statements were used for “argument,” to *win* debates and/or to *convince* others to see our position as the “right one.” Predictions were used to threaten and control others and/or punish them for not making the choice we wanted them to make.

Clearly, our communication methods weren’t just somehow failing to reduce conflict. They were *designed, taught* and *modeled* as a tools for manipulation and control.

About that same time, I had a fortuitous conversation with Ami, my then 4-year-old daughter. She was expressing her opinion about something in a raised voice, both fists planted on her hips, looking up at me with an intense glare, while stomping one foot. I said to her— *very non-defensively of course* —“I hate it when you look at me that way!”

Ami looked startled and was silent for a moment, then said in a voice that was innocent and pensively slow, “But Mommy, you look at me like that *a lot.*”

I too, stopped cold for a moment, then tried to freeze-frame my face and took myself into the bathroom mirror. There it was. That same look.

This conversation merged with my thoughts about the dictionary’s

message—that to question is to interrogate. I realized that interrogation has four aspects:

First, if you are my captive, during a war, my *intention* in asking you questions is to break you, make you confess to what I want to know.

Second, my *body language* is hostile. I'm "in your face," leaning forward aggressively, frowning, glaring, threatening. I often shake my head in disbelief when you don't give me the answer I want.

Third, My tone is intense, my voice raised at the end of every question. "Do you think you can get away with *lying* to me?"

Fourth, the phrasing conveys mistrust rather than trust, so the question is not pure; it becomes leading or accusatory. "Do you think you can get away with . . .?" The message in this question is, "You ARE lying and you are STUPID if you think you can get away with this deceit."

After my conversation with Ami, I started watching people everywhere, and noticed that even in friendly conversations, people frowned and shook their heads when they asked questions. It is still extremely common, even today. I now call it the *defensive shimmy*. Most people are completely unconscious of doing it until it is pointed out.

While millions of us are working to communicate in more constructive ways, and we've made great strides, these problems with our intention, voice tone, body language, and phrasing are still rampant. I find this is true also among those of us with relatively sophisticated communication skills. In many cases, it is just more subtle.

In almost every language, it is standard practice to come up at the end of the question. I started to notice that "up" tone at the end of people's questions often had a "push" to it. However, a linguist told me it is common to people in every culture. Her conclusion was that coming up at the end of a question therefore must be normal and not have any inherent negative impact. I think it is only *human nature* through the *lens of the war model* for communication.

I asked the linguist if she'd be willing to do an experiment and ask the group any question and come up at the end and see how various people responded. She asked, in what I think was intended to be a light, friendly tone, "Do you live in New York?" and half the group

thought she liked New York and the other half thought she didn't. The significance here is *not* just that half of the group thought she didn't like New York. It is also that both halves *interpreted* her question to mean *either* that she *did* like New York or that she *didn't* like New York.

The people hearing the question were reacting to their own assumption about how the linguist felt about New York. That probably got mixed up with how each listener felt, him or herself, about New York. Some would identify with the speaker, while others might interpret her reaction as different from their own and feel irritated or make some judgment about her taste in cities. As I've seen happen again and again, a question that comes up at the end usually sends a message that *overshadows* curiosity. Genuine curiosity is lost.

We also often still phrase things in ways that convey mistrust or judgment. "Do you *really* like the present I gave you?" "Did you *really* think I'd do that?" In the first case, insecurity may be prompting the doubt; in the second, the person may be conveying irritation. In both cases, the single word, "really" transforms the question into a message.

The same issues with intention, tone, body language and phrasing impact how we make *statements*, whether we are giving someone feedback or stating our own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. "You ought to try it, it would help." Here possibly well-meaning feedback is, first, a directive (you ought to) and a statement of *opinion as fact* (it would help). Not to mention the fact that I am trying to convince the person that my viewpoint will be helpful. We might encourage a client, family member or friend by saying, "I *know* you can do it!"

In a tone that seems gentle to us, we might say, "I'm concerned about how much your smoking is impacting your health." While that might be an honest statement it is still most likely to have *some* intention, however unconscious on our part, to get the person to smoke less or stop smoking.

When it comes to making *predictions*, limit-setting is still almost always—from what I see—done with the intention of getting the person to do what we want. It is common for parents who are just beginning to practice non-defensive limit setting to say, "I tried it and it *didn't* work." When I ask, "What was it that didn't work?" The parent then says, "Well, I told my son he couldn't go out tonight if he didn't mow the lawn, and he just said he didn't care and went to his room."

Here, the parent's intention was clearly to get her or his son to mow the lawn.

Any time we have an agenda about what the outcome should be, we will prompt the person's defensive mechanism to kick into gear. And people will give up a lot to win a power struggle.

The issues don't exist only when we have an agenda. We may be open and curious, with no desire to control another person, but still unconsciously be using our body language, tone, and/or phrasing in ways that make others feel manipulated or controlled.

Changing Intention, Tone, Body Language & Phrasing

Here are the changes we can make that I have experienced give me and others greater ability to communicate without being defensive. In response, those with whom we communicate will also be far more likely to drop their defenses too. I call the effect on others "a side effect," because if it is our *intention* to get them to drop their defenses, then we're stuck in the old game of manipulation, no matter how genuine our concern may be for the person. I'll identify changes in *intention, voice tone, body language for each form of communication, and some aspects of phrasing.*

Applying the Changes When Asking Questions:

1. Intention-Pure Curiosity: The goal I see in asking non-defensive questions is to ask a question with the sole purpose of gathering information. My intention is simply to understand your experience. It's a way of walking in the other person's shoes. It's as if I live in Nevada and you live in California and I've never been there. So I ask you to describe the terrain, the weather, the city you live in, the community of people you care about. I call it the *purely curious question*. My questions can focus on any aspect of your experience including feelings, beliefs, reasoning, and behavior.

2. Facial Expressions-Relaxed: The goal here is to be very present with the other person and in a relaxed way. It's not a frozen, robotic look, but one that is receptive, open, curious.

3. Voice Tone-Come Down at the End: When asking the question, it has a natural rhythm. You might say it starts in a middle range tone, goes softly up just a bit in the middle of the sentence and then comes down and rests firmly, but gently at the end. It's said in the same

basic tone as a calm sentence.

4. Phrasing-Eliminate Words that Send Covert Messages or are Leading; Phrase Questions Neutrally: Instead of “Do you like the idea of going to this restaurant?,” you might ask, “Would you like to try the restaurant we just discussed, or would you prefer to go to a different one somewhere else? A single question with these seemingly small changes can dramatically alter the outcome of a conversation—even after years of conflict on around a certain issue.

When Sally and Marcus first met, they felt like kindred spirits. Marcus was open and warm and responsive. After they got married, he began to change. When he seemed upset and Sally would ask what was the matter, he’d say, “Nothing!” She started coaxing, then began to get quickly angry and accusatory. He became more withdrawn and sullen, still and gray as a rock.

At some point, after realizing her anger and blame was contributing to the problem, she set about to learn some new skills. Then, one day when Marcus was in a sullen mood, she asked gently, “Are you going to refuse to talk to me if I ask you what’s wrong.” She said Marcus sat silent, unmoving for a while, and then “it was as if the stone melted and tears streamed down his face.” They had the best talk they’d had in years. The wall of alienation between them vanished.

Applying the Changes When Making Statements:

There are two parts to a statement: giving feedback to others and stating our own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

1. Feedback & Stating Our Own Position: Intention-Descriptive:

A social worker, Hannah, shared with her supervisor that she was upset because an elderly person was losing part of her welfare money due to a loop-hole in the system. Martha, the supervisor, said, in a judgmental tone, “It’s not good to get too involved with your clients.”

Hannah was taken back, and after a moment asked Martha, “Do you ever feel upset when someone loses money they need pretty desperately?” Martha said, “Yes, but I don’t let it get to me.” Hannah said, “What I hear you saying is that it does affect you, but you try not to think about it. What I believe is that when I show my worry for a person, my clients feel it and it helps them to feel cared about and

know that they matter.”

Moments earlier, Hannah was talking to someone who was judging her, then learned that Martha also has similar feelings, but tries to push them away. Hannah was also able to say why she valued showing her concern and the positive impact she felt it had on her clients. She did not withdraw in defeat or resentment. Nor did she try to prove anything, perhaps saying, “Well, I can do my job *better* when I show that *I care* about my clients.”

Hannah may or may not have had an impact on Martha’s thinking, but she can walk away with integrity and confidence.

Voice Tone, Body Language and phrasing: When giving feedback the voice tone and body language are neutral, because if we add in emotion, it is likely to convey judgment. When stating our own reactions, we can speak with full emotion as long as we don’t cross the line and start to convince or point-prove. Phrasing, like intention, is simply descriptive in both parts of the statement.

3. Applying the Changes to Making Predictions

Intention-To Create Security Through Predictability:

Rather than making predictions to control others, we can make them to create the security we need to make wise choices. By analogy, it’s like being a wilderness guide who tells us what to expect if we take one path or another. The following story came from Janice, a therapist who was taking care of her grand daughter:

I picked up Betsy, who is now 3 years old, from the house where she had been playing with her neighborhood best buddy, Kelly. She did not want to leave Kelly as they had been having a great time. We go to violin lessons every Monday (which is where we were headed) and Betsy is usually excited about going. As she came down the steps, she was protesting quietly at first and then with each step the protest got a bit louder and she began to cry. As I buckled her into her car seat, she began to cry in earnest and then to wail. I took a deep breath and got into the car and started down the street, thinking *this is not going to go well*.

Meanwhile the wailing continued. Any other time I would have said, "Betsy calm down. You love going to violin. Miss June will

be very happy to see you. Please stop crying." Or something like that. Then, I thought, why not try making a prediction? I must say that I was not expecting much as the crying had reached a fevered pitch. I took a deep breath and said, "Betsy, if you continue to cry, then you will just feel worse; if you take a deep breath, then you will feel better." The backseat went dead quiet IMMEDIATELY. I was shocked! When I started breathing again, a smile crept across my face. Betsy was quiet for the rest of the ride and actually had a good violin lesson."

Voice Tone, Body Language and Phrasing:

The tone and body language for the prediction is also relaxed and neutral so that it will not convey any need to control or punish. The phrasing in a prediction is *always* in the format of "If-Then," outlining two opposing choices and the potential consequence for each one. When making predictions at first, people often still state them as fact. Janice said, "If you keep crying, then you will feel worse. If you take a deep breath, then you will feel better. My only tip for Janice is that I would recommend saying, to Betsy, "You *might* feel . . ." Fortunately, Betsy contemplated the choice anyway and made the decision that made the remainder of her day happiest.

While people often think of limit setting primarily belonging in the realm of parent-child relationships, setting clear boundaries is, I believe, essential to the health of any kind of relationship: managers and employees, co-workers, professionals and their clients, couples, and friendships.

The Impact of Changing Intention, Tone, Body Language and Phrasing

For decades, I've listened in awe to story after story from people in all walks of their respective personal and professional lives, as they transformed interactions and relationships with a single question, statement, or prediction. Stories that have run the gamut of issues: out of control children and teens; impending divorces; bullying at school; harassment in the workplace; demanding, critical clients; divisive employees; harsh managers. I've seen people come out of a state of impending psychosis. Nervous breakdown. Rage. Right in front of me. In less than 60 seconds.

I'm not naïve; I know that there are always times when no matter what we do, someone we know will take a path that is extraordinarily painful to watch. At the same time, the rate of spontaneous change I

have seen personally and had reported to me goes far beyond what we would normally expect.

Over the years, I have come to trust how much impact changing our intention, tone, body language and phrasing could have. But, for a long time, I still didn't understand what was happening at a physiological level to make people, virtually instantly, able to transform an adrenaline rush that was already going full force, into a state of calm and openness—into a willingness to make wiser decisions and take accountability.

Once Triggered, How Can Adrenaline Fueled Defensiveness Instantly Dissipate?

Even if we change intention, voice tone, body language and phrasing, how can our physiology change so fast? Why didn't Marcus get his buttons pushed and go into his typical defensive reaction the second Sally started to ask him *anything* about being willing to talk. That button had been pushed daily for years. Why didn't Sally lose all ability to ask a gentle question when she saw him glowering in his chair—again.

Why didn't Hannah have the adrenaline rush that triggered an automatic defensive response to her supervisor's criticism? How could 3- year-old Betsy stop dead cold in the middle of a crying jag that had reached tantrum proportions and process a seemingly esoteric prediction about a choice that might make her feel better or worse? We already know that anything anyone does that anyone ever did can prompt automatic, uncontrollable defensive responses. So what is happening here?

Current Scientific Research Gives Us a Significant Answer

The core question here has been focused on how PNDC can prompt the *physiological* changes needed to instantly dissipate adrenaline and defuse defensive reactions. A few years ago, I finally got an answer that satisfied me. Dr. Joseph LeDeux and other researchers have discovered that, first, we can't talk others out of being defensive. We know how that goes.

"Don't be so defensive!"

"I'm NOT being defensive!!"

At the same time, current research on the brain proves that everything changes if we communicate with another person in a way that prompts her or him to move into a *feeling state outside of the realm of defensiveness*. Then, the fight or flight adrenaline rush can dissipate as instantaneously as it flooded the person to begin with when she/he got triggered. It's like magic.

Do you recall sometime when you felt really defensive and someone said just the right thing to make you laugh, and suddenly you didn't feel any of the charge any more? Or someone said something that prompted you to feel your sadness about a loss instead of walling it off.

These four changes—in intention, voice tone, body language, and phrasing—very consistently make it more likely that others will feel safe, so they can access what they are feeling behind the defensive barrier. Not everyone. Some people may never feel safe enough to open up. At the same time, audience members consistently say to me that when I make these simple changes when asking a question, making a statement, or offering a prediction, they no longer feel manipulated, judged, or controlled. They often use the word “safe” to describe the difference in feeling from when I've used the old, more common tone and body language.

One little six-year-old boy had been crying every morning, saying he didn't want to go to school. When his mom stopped reassuring him and asked, “Do you not want to go to school because you'd rather be at home? He said, “No, Mommy, I miss *you*.” She said, *I miss you too, honey*.” They hugged, then he ran off, got dressed, and now, months later, has never again cried before going to school.

The first step in enhancing our ability to defuse defensiveness with far greater power is to call upon ourselves to become ever-more conscious of every molecule of our intention in any conversation, then to focus on our facial expressions, tone and any covert messages in our phrasing. Of course none of us concentrate all the time. But what if, by working at it over time, we could begin to resolve 10% of the problems we face with such greater ease, or 20% — or more? I believe we can.