

Defense Mechanisms in the Coaching Process

by **Brian Nichol**

An understanding of the defense mechanisms of human personality is important to the coach for two reasons. The first is to be aware of our own defenses so that we can guard against the way we affect the coaching process when we feel threatened by issues and material that arise in the coaching situation. Our defenses cause us to distort reality or avoid issues which threaten us, and that is not helpful to our client. The second reason is for the coach to be sensitive and respectful of the client's mechanisms of defense when they feel threatened by their experience. The regular supervision of our coaching practice is one way to avoid the distorting influence of defense mechanisms in our work. It can be argued that there is an ethical imperative that as coaches we become aware of our own defenses and attempt to avoid their consequences for our clients. For example, if we feel threatened when we talk with other people about conflict and anger, or sexuality, we impose a restriction on our clients' ability to range freely in our coaching sessions. It is, therefore, important for us to become aware of what threatens us so that we can either, work it through, or acknowledge with our client that we have difficulty with working with such issues. Becoming aware of our defense mechanisms is an objective for our personal growth and development.

The Self

The self is the unique integration of the parts of the personality of an individual. It embraces the organization, conscious and unconscious, of the individual's needs, goals, abilities, and the associated feelings, values and prejudices. It includes the individual assessment of his or her abilities. It also includes the individual's capacity for empathy, the sensitivity for understanding him or herself and others.

(Argyris, C., 1970)

The sense of self develops in early infancy and progressively becomes elaborated as the individual matures. It serves as a framework with which to make sense of experience. New experiences are either:

- accepted and integrated with the sense of self, or
- ignored because they don't make sense, or
- denied and distorted because the experience is inconsistent with the self.

New experiences have the potential to challenge or threaten the sense of self. This threat can be reduced by accepting the need to change the sense of self in some way. An alternative response is to defend the self by denying or distorting (consciously or unconsciously) what is threatening and holding on to the self-concept. The former process is about learning and development, the latter is to behave defensively and not change in response to the experience.

Individuals differ in the type of defense mechanism they use when they feel threatened. Everybody has their particular set of defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms are not to be

regarded as 'bad' or 'good'. Even the most open and well-adjusted of individuals will be, at times, thrown back on their defenses. Our defenses may be thought of as a protective cocoon which preserves our integrity for a period while we gradually adjust to the new situation. It is important that as coaches we respect people's defense mechanisms. It is generally counter-productive to challenge and push against defense mechanisms when they have been provoked. Plunging interventions which cut through a person's defenses can cause great personal distress. Creating conditions of safety and allowing time to play its part can help the individual to adjust to the new reality.

Defense mechanisms are related to the experiences of anxiety, conflict, frustration and failure.

Anxiety is a painfully unpleasant affect characterized by physical manifestations of autonomic discharge (sweating, tachycardia, etc.) and a subjective, often not completely describable, apprehensiveness. This is in contrast to fear which is a reaction to real external dangers and is appropriate to the stimulus. Anxiety is a response to an inner affect or thought that is frightening because of the consequences, real or imagined, that would ensue if the individual acted upon the affect or thought.

Conflict arises when the individual is not able to act in a specific situation, usually because opposite needs are in tension. For example, a child cannot decide whether to buy the candy bar or the ice cream cone. Or conflict exists when a person has a choice between doing two things, neither of which he likes doing. For example, a person who hates his job but cannot risk unemployment by quitting. Frustration is a special case of conflict in which the person is not able to overcome some barrier in order to reach his or her goal. Failure occurs when individuals live in a world in which they are not able to define their goals in relation to their inner needs and where the barriers are perceived to be too great to overcome.

Defense Mechanisms

Psychologists have characterized numerous defense mechanisms. Here are some of the more common ones:

Projection is a process through which we 'see' in other people a quality which we unable to accept in ourselves. For example, a person watching a person get up on to a stage to give a speech might say, 'I bet he is scared'. In fact, it is the person watching the speaker who is experiencing the fear.

Regression is the turning back from a mature or adult pattern of behavior and thinking to an organized pattern of behavior and thinking from an earlier phase of development - a process often serving as a mechanism of defense. For example, a supervisor throws a temper tantrum in the work place.

Repression is the involuntary exclusion of drives, feelings and ideas from conscious awareness by a psychic force opposing their emergence into consciousness, or by which mental phenomena, once conscious, are involuntarily made unconscious and maintained in that state.

Suppression is the deliberate, voluntary attempt to control, inhibit or keep from communicating a conscious drive, feeling or idea.

Denial is the remarkable way in which the mind denies the existence of mental representations of drives, feelings or fantasies. For example, it is quite common for some people to be completely out of touch with their feelings of anger. Although it would seem to others that it is entirely appropriate for them to be angry (indeed there are indications through their behavior that they are angry) they deny any such feeling.

Avoidance is to avoid of objects or situations that as a result of the phobic mechanism provoke anxiety.

Sublimation is the displacement of an instinctual drive in conformity with higher social values. It is the most advanced and mature defense mechanism, allowing partial expression of conscious drives in a modified, socially acceptable and desirable way. For example, erotic impulses may be expressed through a life devoted to painting or dance.

Reference

Argyris, C., *Personality and Organization: The Conflict between the System and the Individual*, Harper Torch, New York, 1970.

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