Facing Attack Challenge

Group stuck in defensiveness or self-judgement? This tool can help loosen them up by giving them a chance to practice handling attacks -- making visible the invisible process of judgementalism and offering a chance to work with it openly. This tool unsticks a group from the patterns that make it hard to learn anti-oppression and offers new behaviors to help out.

**GOALS**

- Gaining skill in facing attacks with increased flexibility;
- Practice choosing one method to respond to attacks; and
- Increase confidence in facing and handling attacks.

**How to lead this tool**

Put participants in pairs. Have them spread around the room and face each other. Ask one person to be an ?A? and another to be a ?B.? Make sure each group has an A and a B.

Explain to participants that there are different ways to handle the attacks. Explain the four methods of handling an attack. Have written up, for the visual channel, the names of the four methods.

- **Defensive**: disagreeing with the content of the attack and saying the attack is baseless;
- **Attacking Back**: going on the offensive and challenging the attacker?s status, credibility to make the attack, or misuse of their rank;
- **Accept**: accepting the attack, perhaps followed by getting advice from the attacker on how one should use this information;
- **Assist the Attacker**: the attacker may need more information about you to know how to be more accurate or may need a hand getting more specific and less general (Can you give me an example of where you have you seen me acting in a racist way? That may help me understand you more clearly?).

Everyone will practice these different methods since each might be appropriate in a different contexts.

Brainstorm out loud some possible attacks people may face. After a good sample, explain that ?A?s? will first practice handling attacks from the ?B?s.? ? Give the B?s a chance to either think of some attack that A?s might face or find out from A?s if there is an attack they have in mind.

The process is simple: B?s will start an attack. A?s will respond first by being Defensive. After a minute or so the facilitator will call time and read the next method on the list. B?s will restart the attack and A?s, in turn, will respond with that method.
Three minutes should be enough per method. Watch for laughter as people may get uncomfortable or people getting a little silly. Give only a brief moment and then read the next method from the list for them to try.

After A?¢s have tried all four methods, take a few minutes to debrief. Note if any were hard or if people slipped from one to another (for example, commonly people will slip from accepting to defensive ? ?I agree with you. But ??). Brainstorm options where people were getting stuck.

Next give A?¢s a chance to attack while B?¢s handle the attacks with the four methods using the same process as before.

Debrief in the large group about handling attacks including theory (below).

**Theory behind this tool**

Attacks happen. They are natural and should happen. The problem is that many people respond to confrontations without success. People in the mainstream, for example, often try to defuse or reduce the attack, attempting to minimize or manage the attack. Other responses may be mixed, for example ?I agree with what you?re saying, but?? ? a mix of accepting and defensiveness. And still others may ignore the attack entirely.

This tool originated as a way to teach a privileged group increased flexibility in handling attacks ? previously they were responding only with defensiveness.

The idea, inspired by Arnold Mindell?¢s *The Leadership as Martial Artist*, is that individuals may respond to an attack in at least four ways:

- defensiveness;
- attacking back;
- accepting the attack; or
- assisting the attacker to be even more accurate in their attack.

Each can be useful at a given moment and each may result in greater understanding. But when they are combined without awareness, it is very hard for the attacker to make a clean attack. I.e. if someone is both accepting the attack and simultaneously attacking the attacker back, how does the attacker respond? Glad to have the attack accepted or defensively? Choosing one fully and trying it out is important.

And just as important is being able to choose another methodology if that style does not work. For example, if someone is accepting the attack but the attacker keeps on with the attack, maybe there attacker is not quite clear about what they are attacking about, and therefore assisting the attacker may be more useful. They might see a point the attacker missed that?¢s worthy of attack or offer some elicitive questions to the attacker to help them get clearer.

Bottomline, this tool is about increasing flexibility, awareness, and tolerance of attacks. It is a pro-awareness and pro-conflict practice session for handling confrontation and attacks.

**Cross-cultural note:** Some cultures and subcultures have strong associations with the term ?attack,? such as associating it with physical attacks or only a high level of confrontation. Consider what terminology will most carry the appropriate meaning to the group, e.g. confrontation, challenge, or resistance. This theory is widely applicable to different types of challenges to the leader.
Where this tool comes from

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