



# Denial, Deception, and Distortion

Working with Psychological Barriers to Resolve Workplace  
Conflicts

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# + Turner McNabb Consulting, LLC

- Kiban Turner, Ph.D., M.B.A. is a clinical psychologist working with executives and managers in the workplace
- Specialty areas within workplace consulting include conflict management, dealing with difficult employees, working with teams to improve performance and morale, and executive coaching
- Also serve as a psychological troubleshooter to organizations
- Works in-person or by telephone or videoconference
- Full description of services available at [www.tmcoaching.com](http://www.tmcoaching.com)

# + The Problem

- Person accused denies everything – even when confronted with objective proof of wrongdoing. Despite this, seems absolutely convinced of his version of events.
- Complainant has a reasonable complaint, but has very unrealistic expectations on what compensation should be – and will not budge one inch.
- Two otherwise reasonable people can not find a *single* point of agreement when brought in to resolve a conflict between them.

# + The Problem (cont')

- What is the truth? (and who is telling it?)
- Who is not telling the truth, and how do I get them to see things differently?
- Impact on mediators and others working with conflict
  - May feel angry, judgmental, confused, frustrated!
  - May feel helpless to resolve the situation
  - Case may become more involved than necessary – taking more time and effort on your part

# + What can we do in these situations?

- Assess what's going on, and why it's happening.
- Given your assessment, can you do anything to be effective?
- If movement is possible, what to do to move the discussion along
- If the situation seems impossible – how to handle it and what to do next.

## + Assessment – first step

- We need to differentiate between psychological defense vs. an attempt to avoid punishment/accountability
- In other words, is this person
  - ... distorting the truth
  - ... in denial
  - ... or are they just lying to me?

# + Why do people tell “untruths”

- Those who deliberately deceive
  - Manipulate to get something (money, attention, power)
  - Manipulate to avoid negative consequences (to stay out of trouble)
  
- Those who stay with a distorted or untrue version of the truth for psychological reasons
  - To protect the core sense of self
  - To avoid extremely negative or unbearably painful emotions

# + Sociopaths and Weasels

- Sociopaths (and those along that continuum)
  - Want to win (against other people)
  - Excellent liars – very believable
  - No remorse or empathy for others
- Weasels
  - Very focused on avoiding negative consequences – will lie to avoid punishment
  - If negative consequences are reduced (i.e. immunity) will then tell truth
  - If presented with incontrovertible evidence, will admit truth

# + Brief Primer in Psychological Defenses

- The purpose of ego defense mechanisms is to protect the mind/self/ego from anxiety, social sanctions or to provide a refuge from a situation that is emotionally intolerable
- Defenses are as important to our well-being as our immune system.
- When a person is under significant stress, their defenses will become more prevalent and visible.
- Some defenses are more primitive than others. We see those in children, in adults with arrested development or those under extraordinary stress.

# + The Distorters

- Distorters misrepresent the truth to be consistent with their self-image or self beliefs
  - “I’m a fair-minded person, I couldn’t have discriminated against someone.”
- Cognitive dissonance
  - An uncomfortable feeling caused by holding conflicting ideas simultaneously.
    - An idea in conflict with a fundamental element of the self
    - This gives people motivation to reduce dissonance – perhaps by changing their beliefs about past events, or by blaming others



# + The Distorters

## ■ Confirmation Bias

- People favor information that confirms their preconceptions – *whether or not the information is true.*



- As a result, people gather evidence and recall information from memory selectively, and interpret it in a biased way.
- Appears more for emotionally significant issues and for established beliefs.

## + How do we recognize a distorter?

- They say things like “I could never do that” , “I have African American/Jewish/women friends” ,
- Will protest in a way that shows it is inconsistent with image of self. Will stay “defensive”
- If they are complaintant, they may ask for extreme remedy and then refuse to compromise their demands
  - To compromise may have a high negative meaning for them, such as “I’m a victim”, “I’ve been taken advantage of again”, etc.

# + Distorters: How to Intervene

- Give them an opening
  - “Sometimes even fair-minded people may misspeak, make an occasional mistake”
  - They will respond to more of a “misunderstanding” explanation
- Clarify that action does not mean they had intent to be unfair
  - Intent is very important to these folks. Accidents can happen and their self-image stays intact.

## + Distorters: How to Intervene (cont')

- Never take away their self-identification
- Let them know that you heard it
- Ask them to explain their self-identification to you, and then use that to try to reframe the situation for them
  - “As a fair-minded person, how would you approach this situation if you weren’t in the middle of it”
  - “So you’re a fighter – it’s really important to fight. How have you typically fought? What other ways to fight would be effective? What fighters do you look up to? How did they effect change? How might you approach this situation differently so you are still fighting, but are more likely to get an outcome that is good for you?”

# + Denial



# + Denial

- Denial defends the self(ego) from annihilation.
- Denial protects people's core vision of themselves – if it is disabled, we can see total mayhem.
- When do we see it?
  - With children and teens
  - In adults who do not have a strong sense of self
    - The ego as a house of cards
    - Personality disorders – borderlines, narcissists, others

# + Denial – How to recognize

- People in denial will be absolutely convinced of their position, and will not entertain any alternative explanations.
- If deniers are confronted repeatedly and pushed to acknowledge a difficult reality, they will decompensate
  - Become extremely upset, may have to leave session
  - May see physical signs of emotional distress – trembling, flushed face, shallow breathing, clenching
  - Will expect to see anger, perhaps even angry outburst
  - If core aspect of self is under attack, decompensation may be severe.
    - Complete emotional breakdown
    - At extreme, could see suicidality and/or homicidality

# + Denial – How to intervene

- If you notice someone getting visibly upset – take a break from the meeting. Check in with them 1:1 to assess.
- If escalation continues after meeting restarts – stop the meeting.
- With true denial, you are not going to be effective at changing the other person's position without doing significant damage.
  - Back away from the denier!
  - This is no reflection on your abilities – you just ran into someone else's limitation

# + Denial – How to intervene

- If in a mediation, check in with the other party
  - They will feel lied to and need your support
  - Assure them you're neutral, that you expect divergent views
  - Goal is to understand each person's perspective whether we buy them or not

# + Red Flags

- When discussing the topic under discussion, subject gets incredibly distraught, and is unable to calm down – even after a break
- Subject gets intensely angry when confronted with “reality” - to the point where others in the room feel threatened and are frightened.
- Subject starts to say things that don’t make sense – usually this is accompanied with high levels of emotion.

# + Red Flags

- Individual is visibly paranoid – when there is little to no cause for it.
- Individual becomes very shut down – won't speak, participate in conversation, make eye contact – even after repeated attempts at engagement.
- Individual refuses to engage in process from the outset, or flees early in the process – refuses to return to the meeting.

# + What to do when red flag behaviors arise

- Take a break from the proceedings
  - Within-meeting break.
    - Try to get subject back to baseline before reconvening. *~ ~ ~* if there is improvement.
    - If person does not return to baseline, check for safety before they leave (if possible).
  - Agree to reconvene in a few days/weeks.
    - In the interval, work with the difficult party 1:1
    - May want to have an expert evaluate subject and work with them around relevant issue before bringing them back to the table.

## + What to do when red flag behaviors arise

- Check in with the other parties to the meeting, make sure they feel safe, supported and heard – despite the actions of the problematic person.
- Consult with other mediators or experts on the case. Together come up with alternative approaches/interventions.
- Refer the case to someone expert in abnormal behavior and personality disorders
  - Often these cases will take longer to resolve, and will require someone specifically trained to work with these types of people

# + Case Discussions

- What situations have stumped you in the past?
- What behaviors do you find interfere the most in mediation? How do you handle them?
- Real and hypothetical case questions

# + Contact information

- I am available for consultation and direct intervention, by phone or in person.
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