

REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



Communicating on the Defense Without Being Defensive

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Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

In a previous episode, I talked about counternarratives, which are narratives that refute or alternatively explain dominant narratives in an organizational sense. Counternarratives represent offensive tactics, ways to refute another actor's narrative or in turn, these their narratives used by opponents to attack or discredit the organization. The obvious implication is that organizations defend themselves in some way from these counternarratives. But notions of defense is not well represented in the literature. So there is some room for asking what does defense mean in the communication sense? How do organizations defend themselves strategically?

My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.

Let me recap a couple of episodes, because in a previous episode, last season, I talked about the meaning of narrative, which was based in or at least the construct of narrative which I proposed, is one very closely tied to identity and image. And then counter narratives in which were alternative narratives were basically directed against an organization's own narrative is essentially either arguing against what the organization does or in a way or again arguing against what the organization is essentially saying that the organization should not exist or should exist in a different way. That was what I've covered so far.

Now what I'm doing is I'm turning to the defense. And when I talk about defense, I'm talking about just defending against an opposing message, not counterattacking, which is to say the organization issuing a counternarrative against the opponent. Which I would argue is is vastly different. One thing I want to open with is this fact that the literature doesn't really like defense all that much. There's a seminal article in defensive communication which conflates it with emotional defensiveness. And this is something that's considered undesirable. Emotional defensiveness is absolutely a defensive mechanism. Yes, it is a way of trying to counter an attack or some sort of a argument against you that you're having to endure. But it's not really the same thing is as what I'm I'm talking about. I mean, emotional defensiveness is not really a strategic response. That's more of a tactical response. It's more of a individual message countering another message. What I'm talking about is, say, an organization that coordinates a defensive campaign against attack.

If you are an organization in a naturally competitive environment, you are obviously going to be under attack in some way, shape or form continuously. That was kind of my point earlier this season when I discussed counter narratives. And so if the attack has a narrative structure, a story behind it that says that the organization is either incompetent or improper or should, you know, whatever it is that's wrong with the organization. It only makes sense that unless you want to go around playing

whack-a-mole, negating every single message as it appears in the environment, which in today's social media context could be forever. And, well, you ought to have a defensive story of your own. One that basically tells you how you respond to a known counternarrative.

An example is from the case study that I did on the creation of the United States Africa Command, which I talked about in the previous episode. So in attacking narrative or a counter narrative against the creation of the command was the notion that this was an act of neo-colonization of the U.S., basically trying to impose its will militarily on the African nations? The defense was pretty straightforward, and it was through demonstration of action that that counter narrative was false. So the first actions of the command, which, you know, the command was promoting its narrative of being a helpful partner to develop African partner militaries.

Well, the defensive strategy against the counternarrative was essentially to point to the activities that were being performed and say, "No, you have it wrong. Your message is wrong. This is what we are really doing and this is what we are about. OK, so we do not come in with an intent to take over what it is that you Africans want to do. We are here to help. OK."

There's definitely a potential to have a narrative structure to what is essentially a defensive message. And there's no question that the example that I just gave does not in any way resemble the sense of emotional defensiveness. Emotional defensiveness would probably be more like a knee jerk reaction to such arguments [where you] just sort of stand there and say, "You're wrong and nobody's listening to me." Let's face it, it's hard. That is sometimes the reaction that individuals and organizations may take. But that was definitely not ineffective. You know, what Africa Command did was definitely a far more effective strategy.

What I would like to do is sort of use ... A sports analogy in a way which, I think, kind of helps us with the thoughts about offense and defense and what it really kind of means. As I also talked about in counternarratives, counternarratives can be friendly. They don't have to be adversarial. They just simply have to be alternative explanation[s], alternative stor[ies]. So we ought not think about defense as trying to blunt an attack, but just simply to us to assess and to respond to an alternative idea.

This kind of means like, for example, in soccer, you know, there's a term called the 50/50 ball. OK. And you assume that one team has the ball. So they're on offense. The other team is on defense. They're defending against the offensive movement. And then at some point, a pass is successfully contested or something happens. An offensive player makes a miscue or whatever. And basically now the ball is not in anybody's possession or anybody's clear possession. It's a 50/50 ball. And then the other team gets control of it. And now all of a sudden they're on the offense. So what I am kind of proposing is this idea about offense and defense being fluid.

You know, when we think about fencing, here's another example for you. When you think about fencing, you know, you have the defensive move of a parry and then you can have, you know, a very rapid switch to a counterattack. ... You're now in an organization. You receive an incoming message that ... you feel is wrong, that wrongs you, that attacks your identity. Then the idea is that you parry it prevents that message from impacting your narrative. And then once that's done, you then counter - you may go after the opponent and launch a counternarrative against that opponent,

sort of like counterattack, sort of like how, you know, what happens when you steal the ball away from an offensive or the opposing soccer team. This exchange of messaging -- what is it ultimately supposed to accomplish? Promoting the narrative is really what your team wants to do, ... you're trying to promote the narrative.

And who are you promoting the narrative to? Obviously, you're trying to overcome your opponent that's in front of you, but you're also trying to influence everybody who's in the audience watching this exchange. And this is kind of a useful point, because when I think about what was going on -- every single time that Africa Command defended itself against a message about, you know, alleged U.S. neo-colonialism. The response always had the broader audience in mind. So they weren't pointing just to the opponent and saying, "You know, look here, your message is wrong. This is what we were really doing." The finger pointing to what we were really doing was also kind of done in such a way that we made sure that everybody else around knew that same message. And the idea was to find ways to weaken and ultimately make it relevant, make useless the counter narrative. OK, this is kind of why I think that it's important to think strategically about how an organization defends itself, because the leader may have this defensive strategy in mind, may have a natural way of dealing with attacks and criticism just about any successful leader does, I'm sure. But this the challenge for an organization is to have them understand the organization and the environment enough that they can carry on this defensive strategy without having to be constantly told. Would that be the desire if the organization is being attacked? We don't want the leader being the sole lightning rod all the time.

Others should be able to carry the same defensive message forward and not do so blindly. We're just, you know, just ignoring what it's what's being said and just, you know, reading off of a pre-approved message -- the sheet that says very little doesn't address the criticism. It's got to be artful and it's got to draw from some sense of what the organization is trying to do to diffuse the opposing messages to that aspect.

I'm basically proposing a construct which I call the *counter-counternarrative*, or probably more simply a *defensive narrative*. Their purpose is to negate a counter narrative without attacking the issuer of the opposing messages. So what I'm saying is, is that defending against an opposing message is different from launching a counter narrative against an opponent. That's an offensive act. And we're concentrating on the defensive act. The two [could] probably be spoken together in the same sentence. But the sentiments and the stories that are drawn from I'm arguing are from two different sources. One of them is your desire to attack an opponent. The other is the desire to negate the opposing message.

Counter-counternarratives, I'm going to argue, come in three forms. And I have examples of these in my case study of U.S. Africa Command, which I don't have time to get into here, but just kind of understand this in terms of thinking about, say, the red line of an organization and what I mean by red line -- This is something that is non-negotiable in the part of the organization. You can think of it as the organization's identity. The organization is definitely not going to change anything that attacks its identity lightly, but there are different ways of dealing with it. So one of them is what I call a *refutation* defense. And this is essentially where your bread line is, your red line. It's not moving. And what you're going to do is you're going to basically negate whatever it is that the

opposing message is, says, OK, this is this is a message back to the opponent saying that, "Your message is wrong. It is wrong for the following reasons. It can make an organization appear to be very confrontational, but it doesn't have to.

I mean, it's this is also kind of a you can imagine that this happens a lot in civil discussions as well, polite discussions, where basically the organization know the leadership is very firm on what it is that they want and they're going to they're going to listen, but they're ultimately not moving the red line. We're not going to change what we do. We can't. We shouldn't. OK, so that's reputation. Their red line doesn't move.

[But] what if the red line moves? What if we are willing to move the red line? That's a form of what I call an *accommodation* defense. OK, let us say that, you know, in instances where a counter narrative emerges because of a definitely attributable mistake that an organization made, the organization did something wrong. The counternarrative or the emergence of the counternarrative as fallout. OK, well, it is entirely possible that the organization is going to admit that it needs to change its identity in some way. It needs to shift its red line. But there there's a but there is a but there is a amount that the organization is probably going to allow the red line to move will accommodate some aspect of it. But we're going to do it on our own terms or we're only going to do it so much, some sort of a constraint on that move. And the idea is to ensure that the organization maintains the freedom of action to, you know, sustain its own identity, adapt it as necessary, but not let other organizations, other actors have total influence over over the how the organization sees itself. That's accommodation.

And then the third one is *mitigation*. This one, I think, is going to be the most common and it's also the most irritating. It's the basically the narrative equivalent of 'talk to the hand.' Mitigation is essentially the organizations responding to a counternarrative by saying it is irrelevant. We will not discuss it. We will not now acknowledge it. We will not even pretend it exists. We will ignore. We will redirect. We will basically push back without direct acknowledgement. And there are times in which this is probably very, very useful because, you know, if you're dealing with counter narratives that when you really get down to it are are just not worth the effort because they're are so far off base. They make absolutely no sense. Addressing them only drags you into the mud. Well, mitigation is a perfectly acceptable way to do it. But it still requires a narrative strategy. It still requires a narrative structure, because in order to ignore it successfully, you have to understand and everybody has to understand why it's being ignored. Otherwise, people are just going to think you're being evasive. People are going to think that you are being emotionally defensive.

So now when we I bring this to kind of a conclusion, but I want to offer is that, you know, there's there are the goals of a strategic defense. If you're going to be in a large organization, you're going to deal with counternarratives. Then you have to think in terms of what are the outcomes that you want from the defensive strategy. It can't just be to constantly be able to beat back opposing messages.

You want to use your defensive capabilities to shape relationships. One of them is obviously too in is to impede the counter narratives of the opponents, to ultimately render them so weak that nobody will listen to them anymore. And then your opponents are merely talking to themselves. There is a certain level of persistence involved in that. Now, another thing is to be able to enable a

return to the offense or enable you to return to promoting your narrative, which is ultimately what you want. You don't want to spend time defending yourself. You want to use the defense in order to be able to make room for you to be able to promote what it is that you want to be able to say. To the extent to which you can do that efficiently makes for a good strategy.

And then ultimately the goal is to prevail, to win in the competition of ideas. Sometimes I think what we wind up doing too much is devolving our competition of ideas into whatever is more shocking or whatever is said more loudly wins. That may be true for a particular message for a period of time, but when I talk about the U.S. Africa Command case, we're talking about two and a half years to change the minds of some actors in the environment. Key actors in the environment -- two and a half years.

This is indeed something that has to be done persistent, consistently, and well-coordinated within the organization. And so it does take a strategy, it takes a lot of thought and it takes leadership. My bottom line in this is [that] the next time we start thinking about defensive communication or defending oneself, let's not just default to the idea of defensiveness and say that that's a bad thing. It's actually a good and necessary thing if we think about it.

... And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.

ALL THE BEST!

TOM GALVIN