

## Building A Supportive Climate

Helping to create safety and a supportive climate are important tasks for everyone in the group but the facilitator has particular responsibility for leadership in this area and for dealing with any difficulties that crop up. The work of Gibb (1961) is a particularly useful resource for creating and maintaining a supportive climate, reducing defensiveness to manageable levels when it does appear, and restoring safety and a supportive climate when they are temporarily compromised.

Based on the eight-year study of audio-taped recordings of interpersonal discussions, Gibb (1961) identified six categories of behavior, which are characteristic of supportive climates, and six categories of behavior, which are characteristic of defensive climates. The following information is useful for learning groups, other task-oriented groups, therapy and support groups as well as for interactions involving only two people, such as veterinarian-client interviews or one-on-one teaching.

Table 1: Categories of Behavior Characteristic of Supportive and Defensive Climates in Small Groups

<u>SUPPORTIVE CLIMATE</u>	<u>DEFENSIVE CLIMATE</u>
1. Description	1. Evaluation
2. Problem orientation	2. Control
3. Spontaneity	3. Strategy
4. Empathy	4. Neutrality
5. Equality	5. Superiority
6. Provisionalism	6. Certainty

Source: Jack R. Gibb, "Defensive Communication", Journal of Communication, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Sept., 1961), P. 143

1. **Description:** Non-judgemental presentation of feelings, perceptions, events; genuine requests for information; descriptively reflecting opinions and direct observations back to the other person, avoiding terms like good and bad.  
**Evaluation:** Passing judgment, blaming or praising, questioning motives or standards.
2. **Problem Orientation:** Collaboration; mutually defining and solving problems rather than telling someone what to do.  
**Control:** Doing something to the other person; telling him what to do or how to feel or think.
3. **Spontaneity:** Freedom from "hidden agendas" or other deceptions; straight-forwardness. (Spontaneity should not be construed to mean lack of organization or absence of plans and structure).  
**Strategy:** Manipulating through the use of tricks or hidden plans; hiding intentions.
4. **Empathy:** Willingness to become involved with the other person; identifying with, respecting, accepting, understanding the other.  
**Neutrality:** Indifference, detachment; "person-as-an-object-of-study attitude".
5. **Equality:** Willingness to participate with the other person, to mutually define and solve problems; de-emphasis of differences in power or ability. (Equality does not deny differences in talent or knowledge rather it recognizes the contribution and worth of each individual).  
**Superiority:** Failure to recognize the worth of the other person, arousing feelings of inadequacy in the other, communicating that one is better than the other.
6. **Provisionalism:** Tentativeness, open-mindedness, willingness to explore alternative points of view or plans of action.  
**Certainty:** Dogmatism, resisting consideration of alternatives, emphasis on "proving" your point rather than solving the problem.

This, along with the acknowledging response is the framework we turn to *first* whenever we are starting with a group and when difficulties of any kind arise that we aren't sure how to handle.

We recognize that creating a supportive climate is more complex than simply using supportive climate behaviors and avoiding defensive climate behaviors. Consider, for example Haney's (1967) qualifications on Gibbs's classification: "the perceptions of the perceiver rather than the intentions of the perceived will be the final arbiter as to how defensive or supportive the perceiver regards the climate;" the level of defensiveness already present in any given situation influences the degree to which the various categories will generate defensiveness or supportiveness; and the behavior categories are interactive, one influences the impact of another. Along the same lines you probably have noticed that the definitions of the defensive climate constructs focus uniformly on the negative aspects of each. We do not mean to imply here that the categories of behavior that generate defensiveness are inherently inappropriate or that these behaviors must never be used. Regardless of the defensiveness that may result, certainty or indifference or control are appropriate under some circumstances. Evaluation is useful and necessary from time to time.

On the other hand, we have found that in general, we are able to develop climates more conducive to learning (and accuracy) by consciously gearing our behavior toward description, problem orientation, spontaneity, empathy, equality, and provisionalism and by avoiding inasmuch as it is possible evaluation, control, strategy, neutrality, superiority, and certainty.

*Haney, W.V. Perception and Communication. In Communication and Organization, revised edition., Homewood, Ill: R.D. Irwin Inc., 1967. In Riccardi, VM & Kurtz SM (1983) COMMUNICATION AND COUNSELLING IN HEALTH CARE. Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, IL*

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### **Common errors facilitators make that learners have tagged:**

Thinking you (as the facilitator) have to know it all instead of assuming role as collaborator  
Trying to cover everything possible  
Becoming defensive or contributing to development of a defensive rather than a supportive climate  
Not accepting people where they are  
Trying to find the one 'best' answer or way to do things instead of working at expanding the repertoire of skills  
Lecturing too much instead of coaching and encouraging group to think

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### **First Response Skills for Conflicted or Defended Situations**

1. Check perception: view conflict as positive tension
2. Listen carefully
3. Use acknowledging/accepting response – incl. 'full stop pause' after you acknowledge
4. Re-establish common ground (basis for trust)
5. Use Gibb strategies for supportive climate
6. Think of conflict as a helical process

From: Kurtz S, Silverman J, Draper J (2005) *Teaching and Learning Communication skills in Medicine (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*. Radcliffe Publishing: Oxford and San Francisco

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