OFFENSIVE VS DEFENSIVE STRATEGIES FOR IT LEADERSHIP



You probably associate the terms “offensive strategy” and “defensive strategy” with sports more quickly than you would with leadership in the workplace.

You might also wonder whether leadership in IT is any different from general leadership. The short answer is yes, but the better answer is both yes and no. Working in IT, whether you manage the help desk or oversee teams of developers, one thing is clear: IT-inclined employees rely on logic, not nuanced emotional responses, to get through their work.

That means that leading IT folks can require some tweaks or changes from standard leadership tenets, but a good leader is often a good leader regardless of the team or the product, especially when offensive leadership strategies are involved.

What’s defensive leadership?

Defensive leadership is what it sounds like: leading from a place of defense. Being defensive, or defending, is using a close-minded approach to management. Close-minded leadership can result in failing to hear others when they offer feedback or challenge you, even if they aren’t confrontational. Defending can also rear its head when you blame other people or factors when you or your team fails or makes a mistake. (Other than in sports, when is being defensive ever a compliment?)

This approach, or lack of approach, hurts your professional life by impeding your vision and ability to learn from mistakes, accept and benefit from accountability as well as varied perspectives, and build strong relationships.

Defensive leadership also hurts your team, who want to be led successfully and positively. If you're leading from a defensive place, you're detracting from "learning agility", a mindset that anyone can use to improve the way they approach problems, both professionally and personally. Learning agility includes practices like striving for improvement, questioning the normal way of things, and evaluating your experiences. Combine these with adopting new skills and taking on challenging projects where success isn't assumed, and you've reached a new level of open-mindedness.

Research indicates that leaders who are learning-agile are demonstrably more successful, both in contributing to company revenue and their overall employee/manager ratings. Leaders who aren't so agile fared worse, as direct reports rates them less effective in several categories including communication, adaptability, ability to meet business goals, and overall self-awareness.

Being defensive also obscures the reality of what you're doing, making opaque both your goals and transparency within your team – which are particularly unhelpful when working in IT, where clarity is essential.

Is offensive leadership the opposite of defensive leadership?

While we can pinpoint closed-mindedness as a keystone of defensive leadership, offensive leadership goes far beyond simply relying on, and promoting, open-mindedness. Time and again, employees indicate what they value in their leaders: the desire to seek feedback and the challenge of learning from past experiences. Leaders who show both these tendencies were rated more effective at managing teams *and* implementing change.

Change is particularly useful in IT because information technology never stays in one place. While leadership of any discipline relies heavily on people management, leading IT teams is particularly tricky for two reasons: IT changes so rapidly and managing IT is nothing like it used to be. As such, special skills for IT leadership may be necessary.

Responding to change, let alone promoting change, is a difficult mindset to cultivate, but it can be done with intention and practice. Here are some tips on switching from defensive leadership towards offensive leadership:

- **Embrace self-awareness.** As your former defensive traits try to emerge, pay attention to the accompanying physiological signs, like sweaty palms, increased heart rate, or narrowed vision or hearing. Manage your emotions by asking yourself if you are communicating exactly what needs to be communicated or if you're expressing a lot more than that.
- **Promote an environment where failure is inevitable.** This does not mean you won't succeed; instead, by recognizing that failure, especially in development, is part of the process, you can focus more on how you *and your team* respond to mistakes. Using inclusive pronouns, like *we* and *us*, helps people see that you don't seek to accuse or blame, but that the success of a product is incumbent on the entire team.
- **Cultivate reflection.** You can do this yourself by speaking less: when someone comes to you with a problem, listen more, ask questions to understand the problem (ask what happened and why instead of seeing a scapegoat), and then let them know you'll respond soon once you've thought about the problem. You can also cultivate reflection in your employees by pausing before responding to feedback and thanking people for their insights, even if you disagree or feel uncomfortable. Letting people know that you hear them is vital.

Offensive leadership in IT

Of course, IT leadership isn't simply about being positive and tuned into your emotions. A fast, pressure-full IT environment often relies on quick decision making and tactical approaches. Here are additional ways to improve leadership specifically in IT.

Know your people. It's unlikely that your direct reports have the exact same interests or career goals. For some, they may want to stay on the cutting edge of every technology, while others might prefer to specialize in a particular language and framework. While you will certainly need flexibility from every employee, knowing what they prefer individually will help your team respect you and trust that you know them.

Know your customers. In this case, your customers are both the company's end uses as well as anyone in the company who uses IT (hint: it's everyone). Non-IT employees are often skeptical of IT folks, so taking the time to understand each department's individual needs creates an overall feeling of trust towards IT. Whether it's sales, marketing, finance, or HR, prioritize time to know your customers and encourage your engineers, devs, and help desk to get to know them as well

Hone your IT knowledge. As a leader, you should never be so far-removed from IT skills, frameworks, and emerging technologies that you don't know what your team is doing day to day. As systems change, cybersecurity grows, and automation succeeds, IT managers must have working knowledge of these shifts, and this requires a pro-active approach.

Promote collaboration. You're collaborating with your team and other SMEs and other managers, so promoting that among your team is beneficial. This is especially hard with IT folks, who are often opposed to working with other people because it can feel inefficient

Get creative. IT is about solving problems, so it's rare that you'll fight the same issue over and over again. That's good, but it also means that each problem requires its own unique solution. This is scary, sure, but it's also fun because people can be creative and it's likely that your employees welcome this challenge.

Make your decisions clear. Because IT is the engine for the business, there are times when a speedy decision is necessary, even if you want more time to make the right decision. Make your decision, make it clearly, and make it logically. If decisions don't make sense logically, your employees will figure it out.