Working With Angry Adults: Ideas to Manage Conflict and Still Achieve Good Outcomes

Teachers, administrators, and school support staff often find themselves interacting with adults who are unhappy and are not afraid to show it. For example, a teacher may have sharp disagreements with colleagues about how to run an inclusion team, a principal may have a tense meeting with irate parents who believe that their child was suspended unfairly from school, or a multi-disciplinary team may argue about whether a child with significant special needs requires a one-to-one paraprofessional to be academically successful. There are specific strategies that educators can use that will achieve more positive outcomes with angry adults and experience more productive and harmonious meetings.

This handout contains ideas to calm others when they are angry, to reduce one's own tension and stress in the face of anger, to set up meetings that are more relaxed and less confrontational, and to negotiate with others in a manner that is most likely to result in 'win-win' outcomes.

Calming an Upset or Angry Adult. When faced with an angry adult, people often make the mistake of becoming defensive or even confronting the other person in a hostile manner. Resist the temptation to react negatively toward the other person, even if you think that he or she deserves it. A harsh response can escalate the conflict, undermine your position and make it less likely that you will resolve the issue in a positive manner. Instead, use techniques to preserve your calm and deescalate the other person's negative emotions. Once you have reduced the level of anger in the interaction, you are more likely to engage the other person in a real dialog about the concerns.

Try these calming techniques when encountering a hostile or angry person:

- *Use reflective listening*. Listen to the person and make note of important details. At an appropriate pause, step in and paraphrase the person's concerns in a calm and respectful tone of voice. Some reflective-listening phrases that you might find useful are: 'Let me summarize your concerns to be sure that I heard you right…", "So from your point of view, it seems that…", "So what you're saying is…".

- *Acknowledge the speaker's emotion.* If you note obvious signs that the speaker is angry (e.g., facial expression, tone of voice) put a label to that person's emotion. For example, you might say to the person, "You seem upset" or "I can see that you are angry about this issue." Acknowledging the speaker's emotion can help in one of two ways: (1) The speaker may not have realized that he or she was showing obvious anger. If this is the case, your feedback may come as a surprise, prompting the person to calm down and act in a more civil manner toward you. (2) The speaker may not have felt safe telling you that he or she was angry, relying instead on body language to convey that message. Once you name the emotion, the other person may be satisfied that you recognize the anger and thus soften his or her non-verbal response.

- *Speak slowly and calmly.* Emotional responses tend to be contagious, with one speaker unconsciously adopting the other's affect. Once you are aware of this phenomenon, you can use it to your advantage. By speaking slowly and deliberately and adopting a positive tone in the face of

another's anger, you can ratchet down that person's emotional state to a manageable level. After all, it is hard for an agitated individual to maintain a high state of anger when conversing with someone who remains calm and unruffled.

- *Use affirming statements.* In situations in which you believe the other person is reacting in anger because he or she is frustrated or embarrassed, consider using an affirming statement to convey understanding and acceptance. A parent may call you, unhappy because her son has been suspended from school for chronic misbehavior. In response, you might say, "Thank you for calling me. You are a concerned parent and I appreciate that."

- *Offer an apology.* In some situations, you may realize that you inadvertently did or said something to trigger the other person's anger. If you realize that you are in the wrong, consider an apology—but apologize only if you can do so with sincerity. A well-placed apology can have an almost-magical impact, potentially turning a confrontation into a conversation.

Maintaining Your Cool During Stressful Interactions. You can manage stressful interactions with others more effectively if you are able to maintain a calm demeanor. Some ideas for keeping your cool are to:

- *Find a simple relaxation technique that works for you.* When in the midst of a potential confrontation, use a quick relaxation method to help you to defuse stress. One common strategy is to take several slow, deep breaths, exhaling slowly after each one. Another relaxation idea is to 'go to the balcony' (Fisher & Ury, 1983). Before responding to a provocative comment, mentally remove yourself from the situation for a moment to allow yourself to detach from the situation and collect your thoughts.

- *Mentally rehearse difficult situations.* While you cannot predict when angry individuals will confront you, you *can* imagine likely interactions that might take place between you and an agitated or hostile adult. A principal knows, for example, that she will probably have a number of tense meetings with parents about their children's behavior during a school year—and can picture vividly how those interactions will typically unfold. A useful approach is to imagine likely scenarios in which you would face an angry person and to mentally rehearse the techniques that you will use to positively manage that interaction. Mental rehearsal is a good way to practice your conflict management skills in a safe, controlled manner.

- *Schedule a meeting at a place and time of your choosing.* If you are juggling a full schedule and an angry person shows up without an appointment to demand a meeting, beware of being pressured to resolve the issue right then and there. If you feel rushed, you are likely to experience greater stress and to problem-solve less effectively. Instead, communicate that you do want to resolve the person's issue but need to set aside sufficient time to fully understand his or her concerns. Then schedule a meeting at a more convenient time (Kosmoski & Pollack, 2001). Postponing the meeting can also buy you time to pull together any information that you might need to respond to the individual's concern. NOTE: A good rule of thumb is to schedule the meeting promptly--within 24 hours of the first contact, if possible—to prevent the other party from feeling that he or she is being put off (Kosmoski & Pollack, 2001).

Creating a Relaxed Meeting Setting. Meetings go more smoothly when you 'engineer' the environment and circumstances to reduce stress among participants.

- *Select a non-threatening setting.* If you select a location for your meeting that puts parents and others at ease, your meeting will probably go more smoothly. After all, when a setting is familiar, people tend to feel less 'on-edge'. Consider allowing the participant whom you are attempting to put at ease to select the meeting setting. If the meeting must take place in a predetermined location such as your school, you might invite parents or other participants to stop by a few minutes before the meeting for a brief tour. Their early arrival will allow participants new to your school to adjust a bit to the unfamiliar setting and be more relaxed at the meeting. Further ideas that can lower the anxiety threshold of participants are to select a meeting site that has enough room so that people don't feel crowded and to set aside plenty of time for the meeting so that your participants are not rushed.

- *Encourage participants to bring a supporter.* When parents or others are invited to school meetings at which contentious issues will be discussed, they may feel vulnerable and alone when facing a room full of educators. If you think that a participant may be calmed at a meeting if they have the support of a known and friendly face, encourage that participant to invite a relative, friend, or advocate. In most instances, having a supportive ally at their side helps parents and others to feel less defensive and participate more fully in school meetings.

- *Introduce meeting participants.* People can become anxious or uncertain at a meeting when they don't know each other's names and positions. So don't forget to have everyone attending the meeting introduce themselves and, if necessary, state why they are at the meeting. Another good idea is to let all participants know in advance who will be attending.

- *Start the meeting by reviewing the agenda and stating shared goals.* Make sure that participants understand the reason that they are meeting, their role, what is to be accomplished at the meeting, and when the meeting will end. A structured introduction will reassure those participants who were uncertain of what to expect and will help the meeting facilitator to keep all members of the group on task.

  If a meeting is called to iron out differences, the facilitator may wish to set a positive tone by framing the purpose of the meeting in terms of shared interests that all participants can agree with. Consider the example of an instructional team from an elementary inclusion classroom that met with the principal, the parent and a child advocate from an outside agency to discuss the increasingly aggressive behaviors of Ricky, a student with special needs. The principal allayed tensions right away when she opened the meeting by saying, "Everyone in this room wants Ricky to be successful in his current program. Our purpose for meeting today is to put together the best plan in school and outside of school to help Ricky to do well. To create that plan, we will need the best ideas from everyone around this table."

- *Use strategies to ensure that each person has a voice.* When one or two strong personalities dominate a meeting, other participants may not feel comfortable in freely giving their opinions. Yet problem-solving meetings tend to be most successful when all viewpoints are heard. The facilitator

should call on participants who have not said much at a meeting to be sure that they have an uninterrupted opportunity to speak. Here are two other simple meeting strategies to give all participants an equal opportunity to contribute: (1) The facilitator goes around the table, permitting each person several minutes to address the group without interruption. (2) The team uses a talk-token (e.g., a colored slip of paper). Each participant must be passed the talk-token before he or she can speak.

Negotiating to Achieve a 'Win-Win' Situation. Negotiation takes place all the time in school settings. Teachers negotiate with administrators about how they will implement the curriculum. Special education staff negotiate with general-education teachers about how they will work together to accommodate a student's special needs. Parents negotiate with a school district to obtain additional special-education services for their child.

When negotiations are 'high-stakes', emotions can run high and participants can easily become locked into adversarial positions. *Principled negotiation* (Fisher & Ury, 1983) is an approach to group problem-solving that increases the level of cooperation between parties—and has become an extremely influential framework for positively managing conflict to bring about mutually acceptable outcomes. Principled negotiation uses several techniques to build rapport and understanding between negotiators, including (1) Separating the problem from the people, (2) Focusing on positions and not solutions or interests; and (3) Using objective criteria in reaching agreement.

- *'Separate the problem from the people'*. When parties are negotiating with others over an issue about which they feel strongly, it can be very easy for them to personalize the issue and even to feel personally attacked when others disagree with their views. Unfortunately, disagreements are much more difficult to resolve when personal feelings intrude to cause the participants to dislike or distrust each other.

  'Separating the problem from the people' is a strategy that can put relationships on a more positive footing, even during tense negotiations. In this approach, individuals involved in the negotiation first *define* problems to be solved in a manner that all can agree on. Then the negotiators *work to find mutually acceptable solutions* to those problems. Separating the 'problems' (reasons for disagreement or issues to be worked out) from the people involved in the situation allows negotiators to unite and vigorously explore mutually acceptable solutions without fear of offending others or putting them on the defensive.

- *Focus on interests and not solutions or positions*. Participants in negotiations frequently come to the table having already made up their minds that they will accept only specific solutions or outcomes. As negotiations continue, they may stubbornly refuse to budge from these positions--even if a better solution is available--because they believe that negotiation is a zero-sum game and that giving ground on a demand represents retreat or surrender.

  A strategy that can prevent people from prematurely selecting overly narrow solutions is to 'focus on interests, not positions.' Each party publicly shares those interests that they would most like to see protected or advanced through the negotiation. The act of cataloguing each participant's vital

interests is valuable because it gives all parties a very clear understanding of what motivates their fellow negotiators. Discussing each party's interests also invites negotiators to identify *shared* interests that may help them to reach a mutually acceptable agreement. Most importantly, by focusing on interests rather than settling too quickly on specific solutions, the parties are free to consider a wide range of creative options and to be more objective in deciding which options will fulfill the widest range of shared interests.

Consider the following school scenario in which 'identifying interests, not positions' helped to resolve a teacher concern. A general-education teacher approached the principal, demanding that a paraprofessional be assigned full-time to a student with autism as a condition of mainstreaming that student in her 8th grade math class (*specific solution or position*). The principal met with the teacher to discuss her concerns and discovered that the instructor is worried that the student's sometimes-unpredictable verbal behaviors might distract other students and interfere with group instruction. The principal and teacher agree that they have a *shared interest* in (1) *promoting the inclusion of all learners in the general-education setting* and (2) *preserving the quality of classroom instruction.* Once the principal and teacher identified their shared interests, they were able to create a plan in which a special educator familiar with the student with autism would meet with the math teacher to give her ideas to manage that student's classroom behaviors. Additionally, a paraprofessional would be present for the first week that the student was mainstreamed in the math classroom to assist the student in learning the classroom routine. Finally, the principal assured the teacher that he would also be available to intervene if a significant behavioral incident occurred. The teacher was satisfied with these supports and the student made a successful transition to her classroom.

- *Use objective criteria*. When parties negotiate, they should rely on objective criteria instead of subjective opinions whenever possible to resolve disagreements. When all parties agree to objective criteria to define the dimensions of a problem, they reduce the likelihood that any negotiators will attempt to support their case through anecdotes, emotional appeals or unverifiable opinion. For example, teachers on a building Disciplinary Committee differed with the principal about the severity of behavioral issues in the school. After some discussion, the two sides decided to analyze office disciplinary referrals to tabulate the frequency and severity of student misbehavior. They also agreed to accept this set of 'objective' school-wide disciplinary data as an indicator of the school's behavioral climate. The group set a date to reconvene after the disciplinary data had been collected to review it and create an action plan for dealing with misbehavior building-wide.

References

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