

Building Bridges Between Home And School

The Educator's/Teacher's Guide To Dealing
With Emotional And Upset Parents



Robert Bacal

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Building Bridges Between Home And School: The Educator's/Teacher's Guide To Dealing With Emotional And Upset Parents

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And Upset Parents

Robert Bacal, M.A.

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BACAL & ASSOCIATES
722 St. Isidore Rd.
Casselman, Ontario, Canada, K0A 1M0
(613) 764-0241

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Preface — 2013

It's been seventeen years since "Defusing Hostile & Volatile Situations For Educators" was published, or really, made available in a crude photocopied format. In that time we've seen huge changes, and events that have reshaped our views on life, security, education, almost everything. In 1996, social media didn't exist. In 1996 we were years ahead of the tragic events of 911. Since then, we've seen natural disasters, floods, earthquakes, and hurricanes in New Orleans, New York, Albert, Canada, and many other places. We've even seen the U.S.A unable to keep its government "open for business".

If anything the world changes have increased the burdens, however happily carried, on teachers, school administrators, school board officials and non-teaching staff. School shootings have meant teachers now need to be alert to security issues. Budget cuts at all levels have made it tougher and tougher to juggle the responsibilities of schools in our society, at the same time as more responsibilities are added to the educator's collective burden. Decisions are made on school priorities. At every step, both micro and macro, someone is angry.

Yet, one thing remains constant. **It takes a village to raise and educate children.** Educators already know that the more parents are constructively involved in the education of their children, the better the outcomes. Administrators need to interact with and embrace the community, their constituents.

These constituents are often angry. Or, often frightened. Parents, whether informed or not, fight for what they want for their children. Schools, and school staff have the additional responsibility of looking after the welfare of ALL children, not just one, pitting parents and teachers against each other as they both try to maximize the pursuit of their understandable concerns.

It's with this in mind that I decided to revive the original book project, and re-write the earlier book with the aim of helping teachers, school administrators and school staff deal more effectively with the demands made upon them by angry, frustrated, and yes, frightened parents and tax payers. In effect, to build bridges, not just with the "easy to work with parents", but with the most difficult.

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The Original Preface

Our society is, indeed, a strange one. While people talk about wanting respect, many people expect it to be forthcoming from others, without conducting themselves in ways that show respect. While people don't like to be demeaned and insulted, they often do things that actually create situations where demeaning comments and insults are likely to occur.

One only has to look at television (situation comedies are great for this) to see that verbal abuse and sparring are considered humorous ... where the person who wins is the one who is quickest or best at insulting the other. It is unfortunate that people know how to conduct themselves aggressively, but very few people know how to communicate in ways that reduce verbal aggression.

In the past years, I have trained thousands of public servants/government workers to deal more effectively with verbal abuse directed at them. In the course of these seminars I have learned a great deal from participants. In addition, I have published a book, "Defusing Hostile Customers Workbook", written for those in government organizations.

It occurred to me that the school/educational context is both similar to the public sector, and different. It also occurred to me that teachers, administrators, trustees and other school staff often have to deal with irate parents or members of the public, and like almost all of us, have never had help in developing the language skills needed to defuse these situations.

Who Is This Book For?

We think that the skills discussed in this book are applicable to anyone working in schools or school boards, including teachers, principals and other administrators, school trustees, and support employees. As you read the book, keep in mind that most techniques discussed will be useful to all school personnel, even if this is not stated specifically. When we refer to teachers, or administrators, we include any other personnel that deal with difficult or volatile situations.

Will The Techniques Work With Everyone?

The techniques and skills we describe are almost always appropriate to use, but you should be aware of a few things. First, every hostile/volatile situation is unique, so a cookbook approach is simply not possible. The techniques we discuss should be considered as tools in your toolbox. You need to use your judgment to choose the best tool for the job. Some tools you won't like, or feel comfortable with. That's fine. It isn't necessary to use them all.

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Something else is important. We feel very confident that the skills and tactics discussed in this book will work with most adults. They won't work all the time ... nothing works all the time when it comes to human interactions. While we talk a good deal about dealing with irate parents, you may also find that the techniques we present to you can help you at home, and to deal with colleagues, staff and "bosses".

We SUSPECT that many of the tactics will also be effective with students, but we don't claim that they will work as effectively as with adults. We welcome your comments about this issue.

Using This Book

We suggest that you take this book in small doses. If you are like me you like to swallow a book whole, particularly if you find it interesting or instructive. We suggest that you go through the book a chapter or two at a time, and give yourself some time to think about each chapter before moving on to the next.

Obviously when we talk about skill building in any area, we need to consider opportunities to practice. Unlike physical skills like typing, or even other skills like arithmetic, the really neat thing about learning new verbal responses is that you can practice covertly (in your head). You can rehearse the phrasings, and specific responses suggested in the book. In fact we highly recommend that you try to apply each tactic to a situation you have encountered, and "hear" yourself using the specific technique. You will find that even five minutes a day doing so will help you have the "right thing to say" available when you really need it.

If You Have Comments Or War Stories?

We are always glad to hear from readers. If you have any comments or questions, please feel free to send them along to the address above, or via internet email. We generally respond to all email, so that is the preferred vehicle. Got a story? Send it along.

Bacal & Associates

722 St. Isidore Rd.

Casselman, Ontario, Canada, K0A 1M0

Email: ceo@work911.com

Support Website: <http://parents-teachers.com>

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Chapter 1— Introduction: It Takes A Village

If you work in the educational system, and been on the receiving end of a lack of parental cooperation, or apparent verbal abuse, blaming, and manipulation, you aren't alone. Before we begin the learning quest for techniques to defuse these situations, and build better bridges between educators, parents and the community, let's look at comments from teachers and school administrators regarding parents and members of the public.

Educators Talk About Their Frustrations

"Her mother came to school walked into the front office and without asking to see me walked right into my office. She put her finger in my face and started screaming obscenities at me."

"[The student] and his mother came marching into our school with the attitude that we are all bad and her son is the 'poor injured party'. After telling us all on the team and our principal that we are incompetent as teachers and that her son is not learning anything ..."

"...I've had conferences with parents who came drunk, parent aides correct me in front of the class (when they are in fact incorrect), favor their own children, make angry, vulgar comments to students who didn't understand "quick enough" and more."

"As both a parent and a teacher, I find that teachers complain about parents not coming to school, but at the same time make it very difficult to have any kind of meaningful dialogue ... discussions are one sided, with parents clearly put in the role of passive students."

"I would like to be respected by parents. Often, parents have arrived with no appointments and expected me to be available. They often take the child's word regarding a classroom incident without waiting to hear my perspective on the situation."

"I don't consider you, the parent, my employer You have no direct power over me in the classroom. However, I always ask parents for input. Sometimes I take their suggestions, sometimes I don't, since I clearly have insight and knowledge of situations and circumstances the parent couldn't begin to know."

"Boy, do I wish parents would keep appointments with me. I would estimate that 75% of parents who request appointments with me fail to show up, or show up at a time other than requested, as if I were sitting in an office all day and could easily put aside my work."

What Parents Say

Well, every disagreement or situation has two sides. Let's look at what parents are saying.

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"As both a parent and a teacher, I find that teachers complain about parents not coming to school, but at the same time make it very difficult to have any kind of meaningful dialogue ... discussions are one sided, with parents clearly put in the role of passive students."

"Too often the public school system employees ... get this backwards, and behave in either an arrogant or condescending manner towards parents and members of the public. Dog-gone it, you public school teachers work for me, and the rest of us who pay you."

"One only has to look at the many corrosive attacks on parents ... to see how many educators look upon parents as their enemy, and as fit scapegoats for all the frustrations involved in teaching. As an actively involved parent and responsible person who has put in approximately 50 hours a week volunteering at local schools, I wonder how teachers can continue to be so defensively insulting on a daily basis and still expect parents to be supportive of them."

"We walk in with our most precious projects, thereby opening ourselves up to the very real possibility of all our hard work being criticized as bad parenting (i.e. over protective, lax, no home discipline, 'abdication of responsibility', etc.). Teachers, who are constantly evaluating students' behavior, cannot seem to stop evaluating us."

"I have found school districts are only responsive when a well documented paper trail is being created — one that could be used in a court of law. I'm not saying every parent should or could sue, I'm saying that this is a more concrete way of getting a serious response."

"Some of us have been fortunate enough to have been touched by the rare teacher who cared enough to do a good job ... We know that school counselors are, more often than not, no more than dead weights holding a desk chair in place. We know how many principals and vice principals wandered the halls of our schools with nothing useful to do, but with plenty of time to harass anyone who stands out as unusual or non-conforming."

"Oh come on... it may be stressful at times but many jobs are. Unless you teach in a prison... teaching isn't any more stressful than that of an electrician working on power lines ... Get off your pedestal!"

Pretty nasty? Even offensive to teachers who take their responsibilities seriously or feel a "calling" to educate children.

Regardless of how truthful or fair these comments are, it certainly appears that parents/members of the public, and educational personnel are not "synchronized" to create the best educational results possible.

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There are many reasons for this — reasons we will leave for the researchers and academics to discuss. Our focus in this book is to help educators and school support staff work with parents and members of the public in a cooperative professional manner, **DESPITE** the fact that cooperation isn't always forthcoming, and interactions with parents far too often involve being on the receiving end of insults and verbal abuse. **For the benefit of the children you care about and care for**, bridges need to be built between home and school. It takes a village to educate a child. And, yes, it's your job, like it or not because you care about students.

Since irate, angry, frustrated and unpleasant people aren't going away, it makes sense to learn the uncommon skills — defusing skills, that reduce the intensity of the anger directed at you, shorten the angry interactions, and "move" the parent towards addressing the problem at the root of the discussion. As an educator, you **CAN** learn the skills to create situations where abusive and difficult behavior becomes "unfun", and cooperation is more likely.

Why Is Defusing So Important?

For The Benefit Of Students

First and foremost, we know that the best arrangement for children attending schools is that the school and the parents work together to benefit the child. When a teacher and a parent are constantly engaged in confrontational arguments, the child doesn't benefit ... no how ... no way.

For The Parents

I am sure it appears that some parents are simply out to crucify a teacher or school administrator, and have little interest in the welfare of their own children. People are complex and imperfect, come with various skill levels at parenting, different values, and different life issues. Sometimes they operate in ways not in the best interests of their sons and daughters.

On the other hand, parents who **DO** care about their children have perceptions about how school staff treat them, as indicated in the quotes from parents shared earlier. They **DO** feel, rightly or wrongly that they are not being treated with respect by educational staff, that they aren't being listened to, and their needs are not being taken into account. Learning how to communicate with angry parents/members of the public allows us to prove to parents that we are indeed making an effort, that we **ARE** listening, and we **DO** care about their concerns. The truth is that most people can be reasonable if they are treated with respect and skill. You can help parents act in reasonable, responsible ways for the benefit of students, even in spite of their initial aggression.

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For Teachers/Administrators

In my seminars, I tell people that learning to defuse hostile situations is a "good" thing ... that treating hostile people with respect is the "right" thing. I spend about 45 seconds discussing what is right. I spend far more time on the benefits that will accrue when people learn and use defusing skills.

First, dealing with a difficult parent is very time consuming. I don't know ANY teachers or administrators who have scads of free time to spend on a person who is yelling, not listening, and seemingly only interested in insulting others and blaming.

Second, dealing with abusive, hostile people is stress producing. None of us need more stress. When we "face off" with an angry, difficult person, our adrenaline starts pumping, and we remain pumped up for hours after the event. One of the reasons this occurs is that we don't know what to do. By reducing indecision, we reduce stress, both during and after unpleasant encounters. We are also better able to depersonalize the situation, and remain calm and in control. The insults, verbal attacks and insinuations actually "hurt less", when we know we have the skills to turn these unpleasant discussions into constructive ones.

Third, there is incredible satisfaction associated with successfully defusing a volatile situation. It feels really good to succeed with an abusive person, calm him or her down, and solve the problem. It highlights your professional expertise and talent and it's something about which you can be proud. It is, by far, more satisfying than having a knock down, dragged out and unresolved argument where you may say things you later regret.

For School Divisions

While school divisions/boards don't usually operate in a "market system", schools and board develop reputations in the community. Some organizations develop a reputation for not listening, and being unresponsive, while others develop a more positive reputation based on responsiveness and respect. There is a very practical implication here. Organizations that have a "poor" reputation deal with more abusive people, since that reputation primes the abuse pump. People who see your organization as responsive are more likely to approach you less "ready to fight".

To be realistic, reputations (of teachers, schools, divisions) aren't always based on reality. What we do know is that you are more likely to be positively perceived if you conduct yourself well, and learn how to defuse difficult situations.

Defusing: A Neglected Skill Set

All of us know how to use language to be mean, insulting and demeaning. The nature of language learning, and the human condition is that these techniques of communication and influ-

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ence over the environment are learned by everyone during early childhood. We aren't taught how to deal constructively with angry people, and so most of us don't have the skills to do so.

Teachers and educational personnel are no worse than the average person when it comes to conducting productive discussions amidst anger and frustration. In fact, teachers are probably better at it. Defusing skills, though, don't come "naturally" and it takes an intentional effort to learn them.

Teacher training programs focus on in-class teaching skills, and don't prepare young teachers to work effectively with parents, particularly angry and distraught parents.

As you go through this book, you WILL discover techniques you already use, but you will also find that there are many more techniques you didn't know about, or don't use. That's normal. You've never had the chance to learn them. Now you can.

Educators Ask: Why Is The Responsibility Mine?

There is a question that comes up fairly often when I do face to face defusing seminars. It goes like this:

"Why should I have to put up with abuse, and insulting comments from anyone? Why is it MY responsibility to DEFUSE people who won't take responsibility for their actions?"

It's a good question. It isn't really fair, is it? Consider, though, that you can CHOOSE to defuse or CHOOSE to throw gasoline on the fire. I suggest that people make their decisions based on their values, and what they would like to happen. If you want to spend endless time defending yourself to the nasty person, and then to your "boss", and the community, then don't use defusing tactics. If you want to shorten the time you have to spend on these situations, then defusing is the way to go.

If you want to walk away from a hostile interaction feeling proud about the way you conducted yourself, then defusing is a good approach. If you want to "even the score", then feel free to whale away, but be aware that there are consequences to those actions. For you. For the school. For the children!

Finally, keep in mind that to change a relationship from adversarial to cooperative requires that SOMEONE switch to cooperative mode. If neither party is willing to do that, perhaps both parties (that includes you) want to fight, want to argue and want to spend time doing so. Quite honestly, I wish more parents and members of the public would learn the communication skills to deal with the educational system in a constructive, positive way. The reality is that this isn't going to happen. And since they aren't likely to learn these skills, that leaves ... well ... that leaves you.

It isn't fair, but then life isn't fair. The only thing we have control

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over is our own behavior. We can use our behavior to make things better, or we can choose to complain about the unfairness, and wait for other people to learn how to handle difficult situations with dignity. Mind you, if we choose to wait, it will be a very long wait, indeed.

Important Note On Safety And Violence

It is important, very important, that you consider safety as a bottom line. Your safety and the safety of other staff, children and members of the public is paramount. There will be times when it will be impossible to defuse someone, particularly if the person is prone to violence, or is mentally unstable.

These days schools all have safety and security procedures developed by experts in the field. If you come across anything in this book that conflicts with those procedures, it's best to heed the advice and guidelines provided by your employer. Always err on the side of safety!

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Chapter 2 — The Nature of Angry, Hostile and Abusive Behavior

The more you understand where angry behavior comes from, how it's learned, and how it transforms into hostile and abusive behavior, the better you will be at staying “centered” when unpleasant parental behavior comes your way. In this chapter we'll define some important terms, and explain why so many conversations end up in incivility.

Some Definitions

Anger

1. Anger refers to an internal state (feeling) experienced by the person in question. An angry person experiences various physiological changes, some invisible and some visible. Here are two important points:
2. People choose their own emotional states. That is, their anger belongs to them as do any other feelings. You cannot hold yourself responsible for another person's anger. That's not under your control, anyway. What you can do is take responsibility for YOUR OWN behavior, so that you don't knowingly or unknowingly do something that they choose to take as anger provoking.
3. You need to accept the fact that people get angry. They have a right to be angry when they choose. The anger isn't the problem. It's the way they express the anger, through their behavior that's the problem. People do not have the right to take out their anger on you in mean and nasty ways, particularly when you have treated them with respect and consideration.

It's important to make the distinction between anger, the emotion, and hostile and abusive behavior. If try to shut down another person's anger, you will end up contributing to it.

Angry Behavior

People express anger in various ways. Some raise their voices or become more animated. Some people actually lower their voices and become quieter. Others turn red. Angry people vent their emotions, or “let off steam” in numerous ways ranging from the rather benign to the use of violence. As with anger, you need to be reasonable about what offends you, and allow the angry person some latitude in behavior before you deem the behavior unacceptable. That's because when you try to stop someone from being angry, you will almost always make them angrier.

There are clear reasons for this. First, most angry people need an opportunity to “vent” before they are prepared to solve prob-

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lems. If you allow yourself to be offended every time you encounter mild angry behavior, you will be plain miserable, and ineffective in dealing with emotionally loaded situations. As you will see in a moment, our problem is not angry behavior, but hostile/abusive behavior.

Hostile/Abusive Behavior

What sets apart hostile, abusive behavior from angry behavior is that hostile/abusive behavior is intended, consciously or unconsciously to have some or all of the following effects:

- put you off balance
- manipulate and control you
- demean you in some way
- intimidate you
- cause you to feel guilty

It is this kind of behavior that causes the greatest amount of stress for educational personnel. People who use hostile/abusive behaviors tend to rant, monopolize the conversation, insult, use intimidating tactics, and simply won't go away. While you should tolerate some degree of angry behavior without over-reacting, you need to be much more concerned about hostile/abusive behavior. You want to stop these behaviors as professionally as possible and in fact, that's what the techniques in this book are designed to do.

If you can, at the same time, reduce the parent's anger, that's great. If that's not possible, recognize that the anger belongs to the other person.

Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse takes a great many forms, from very subtle, to very obvious. In this book, when we talk about verbal abuse, we refer to behaviors like the following:

- persistent swearing
- yelling
- sexist comments (both explicit and implied)
- racist comments (both explicit and implied)
- irrelevant personal remarks (e.g. about your appearance)
- threats (e.g. I'll have you fired, or I'm going to the board)
- intimidating silence
- accusations of various sorts (e.g. calling you a racist)
- comments about your competency, knowledge, dedication

These behaviors are intended to demean and control.

The “Calm” Controller—Manipulation

Verbal abuse is not always accompanied by emotional out-

bursts. If you look at the list above, you'll see two different kinds of abuse. First, there are the obvious angry behaviors, like yelling, and persistent swearing, which are clearly emotional behaviors. Then there are others that can be delivered with or without emotion. A person can accuse you of, let's say being incompetent, using an aggressive tone, or can make the same accusation in a calm way without the emotional overtones.

In fact, tone, at least on its own, does not dictate whether something is abusive. If comments are demeaning, and most importantly, designed to control you or the conversation, we classify them as abusive.

Consider this example: In a meeting to discuss a child's suspension from school, the parent can appear quite calm — no yelling, no emotional outbursts. He uses innuendo, subtle insults and other non-emotional ways to sandbag, extend the meeting, and then says, *"I'm not leaving this meeting without getting my boy reinstated"*.

Is this behavior abusive, even though there's no outright emotion expressed? Indeed, we classify this as verbal abuse and hostile behavior, because the parent is attempting to control the meeting, and is operating with no regard for the teacher and principal present at the meeting.

It's useful to know and recognize that sometimes, people who are not angry or upset in the least will try to get their own way using manipulation and attempts to control.

Fortunately, the defusing techniques in this book apply to both the person who is clearly angry, and aggressively so, and the person who is not emotionally agitated and who is manipulating the situation to get his own way.

As you go through this book, you will learn how to "counter-control" these situations, and ways to stop both angry behavior and the manipulative non-emotional attacks quickly.

Non Verbal Abuse

Non verbal abuse refers to ways a person uses body posture, facial expressions, gestures, etc.

Let's make no mistake about it. Non verbal abuse is intended to send a message or messages to you, such as "I don't like you", or, "I am fed up", or even "In my eyes you are worth nothing". When we talk about non verbal abuse we refer to behaviors like:

- standing in your personal space
- staring at you (long eye contact)
- table pounding (in some situations)
- throwing things
- leaning over you (using height)

- fearsome facial expressions
- loud sighing pointing, other offensive gestures

Non verbal abuse is not necessarily intentional or planned out. For some people physical acting out, sometimes called “display behavior”, is how they vent. However, we have to classify it as abuse, simply because of its effect on you or others present, and for that reason, it’s not acceptable.

As is the case with verbal abuse, you want to take steps to stop these behaviors. Later on we will discuss counter measures you can use to avoid being controlled by these non verbal techniques.

Violence

We can define violence as any activity that is intended to cause, or can cause physical harm to another person, be it you, a co worker, or another parent or child. Some actions involving physical contact — arm grabbing or shoulder grabbing, can sometimes be interpreted as assault under the law, so we include them in this category, even if they cause no physical harm. Other actions, such as throwing things can be considered violent behavior if there is an intention to cause harm or harm occurs. However, "acting out" behaviors, such as ripping up papers and throwing them, or sweeping things off a desk are not violent by our definition. Abusive, yes. Hostile, yes.

Just a point or two about physical violence. Generally, this kind of behavior doesn't come out of the blue, but is part of a sequence of events that involves verbal abuse. By learning to defuse hostility and verbal abuse, you are more likely to reduce the potential for physical violence.

A second point about physical violence is that your first priority is to ensure your own physical safety, and the safety of those around you. For this reason, most organizations will accept that you have a right to remove yourself from a situation, or request backup assistance in situations where you feel physically threatened. Notice that word "feel". You don't have to be absolutely sure a physical threat exists. You don't want to take chances. If your organization takes a different view, show this to your bosses!

Implications & Key Points

1. While we would like people to like us, and not be angry with us, if we choose this as a goal, we are bound to be disappointed. We try to make parents and other people happy, but the truth is that many situations require you to enforce regulations, or offer opinions with which the other person may disagree. Sometimes people are going to be unhappy about what you have to say.

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2. Anger is a feeling that belongs to the other person. It is hard to affect directly. Hostile, abusive behavior is another story. We want to focus our defusing efforts on reducing the amount of hostile verbal and non-verbal behavior. That is a realistic goal.
3. In a later chapter, we will flesh out the notion that abusive behavior is about control. The hostile or abusive person is trying to manipulate and control you and your decision making. We want to make sure we don't allow this, and later we will discuss how to "counter control".
4. We need to provide some leeway for people to express their anger, provided the expressions are not demeaning, insulting or manipulative. If we react to every four letter word, twitch, or raised voice, we will go nuts, and we won't be very good at defusing the abusive situations.

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Chapter 3 — Why Do We Have So Much Verbal Abuse From Adults And How Can We Use What We Know To Defuse Uncivil Behavior?

Why So Much Verbal Abuse From Adults?

Teachers often express the view that parents, at least when angry or upset, act a lot like their younger students and behave in ways that appear childish, immature, and just about as self-centered as young children who aren't getting their ways.

We live in a rather uncivil society, but that's not an explanation for why adults behave like unhappy children, or strike out at others. When you think of it, it's pretty remarkable that adults act in destructive uncooperative ways, when clearly it can't possibly be in their best interests. Being unpleasant, having an adult tantrum and being insulting does not often increase the chances the adult "child" will get what he or she wants. Yet, there it is.

In fact there are some sound explanations why verbal abuse is so prevalent. They have to do with the biological realities of being human. We aren't so much interested in the theoretical "why's" but in using our understanding of the origins of unpleasant behavior to defuse these situations.

In this chapter we'll look at how verbal abuse is quite "normal", not acceptable, or excusable, but part of the human condition. We'll use that understanding to generate some strategies and tactics to shorten the abuse episodes, and decrease the intensity of those episodes.

Where Does Hostile/Abusive Behavior Come From?

At The Beginning: Pat, The Newborn Infant

Consider Pat, the newborn infant. Pat depends on care-takers for his or her survival and will remain so for many years. Pat's job, if you'd like to think in those terms, is to influence the environment so that adults provide what s/he needs for both emotional and physical survival, and well-being.

But consider the following:

- Pat cannot talk, and has limited ways to communicate with those he or she depends upon.
- Pat has some innate behaviors that have evolved over time to allow infants to influence the environment. These behaviors are primitive, but effective. For example, Pat has, in his/her repertoire, crying, and some other signals that s/he needs

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- something.
- Pat also has some simple ways of communicating being OK (smiling, happy gurgling).

Pat is also almost completely **self-centered**, which makes sense since the prime directive is to survive, and obtain what is needed to do that.

Parents, on the other hand, have a complementary biological imperative, which involves responding to Pat's behavior. Research has shown that parents are particularly sensitive and emotionally responsive to an infant's crying and other indications of distress.

If you look at this cycle carefully, you find a perfect example of what psychologists call the effects of reinforcement, or how "rewards affect behavior". Pat behaves a certain way when uncomfortable, and in fact those behaviors, crying, flailing about, and other basic physical behaviors are angry behaviors. When Pat's parents respond to the behaviors, Pat is rewarded, and the behavior reinforced.

Pat learns that crying, moving and kicking, and turning red in the face are dandy ways of controlling the environment. What we have is a set of innate reactions, PLUS the effects of reinforcement. Pat learns, on a basic level, that angry behavior works.

Then Pat Learns To Talk

For several years, Pat improves at controlling and influencing his or her surroundings. Infants learn to make specific sounds that their parents can understand, this being a more advanced way of communicating, but again, in a pretty self-centered and survival oriented way.

Also, Pat learns throwing a toy at the wall is almost guaranteed to garner attention, albeit unpleasant attention. Pat learns that grabbing a playmate's toy can work really well, at least sometimes. Pat also learns how to sulk and pout. All before Pat speaks his or her first word.

Fortunately for everyone, Pat develops, the young brain matures, and Pat learns to talk, a much more efficient and effective way to influence caregivers.

Not surprisingly, Pat learns to use language in not altogether constructive and agreeable ways. Pat learns to say NO, how to ask for things in various tones of voice (begging, whining, angry). Pat learns that certain words create a big commotion (swear words), and discovers that s/he can influence people by using them. Pat also learns the basics of verbal influence or manipulation. Sure, the techniques don't always work well, but sometimes they succeed. And, of course, they generate attention, which operates to reward some of that behavior.

You probably know all this, and have observed the process in action more times than you'd care to. Learning how to control the environment through angry, self-centered behavior is learned very early. As Pat gets older, he or she gets better at it.

By the time Pat reaches adulthood s/he is an expert in it, knowing how to get attention, and make people mad, how to make other people feel guilty, and how to influence the behavior of others. The use of those techniques doesn't even require a conscious attempt to achieve these goals. They are, to some degree, automatic.

And In Adulthood...

Now, obviously, the fact that Pat learns these behaviors doesn't mean s/he spends all his/her waking moments being abusive or trying to control others. Pat is taught, and learns that many of the infantile behaviors and verbal outbursts aren't acceptable, or profitable. The **socialization process** moderates inappropriate social verbal behavior. So, we'd hope that inappropriate, ineffective verbal behavior, or for that matter any aggressive behavior would eventually disappear from the adult's repertoire.

Since most people learn that abusive, nasty behavior is not acceptable, how is it that we still see so much of it? We see it from rich and poor, lawyers and plumbers, inner city and suburban residents. Where does it come from?

Well, the first explanation is that some people don't learn that learned abusive behavior is inappropriate. Adults can develop ways to rationalize their aggressive behavior. But what about the others, people who do know that abusive behavior is not acceptable? A lot of "regular" people, perhaps most people, on occasion, use nasty or manipulative techniques.

A little more knowledge about human behavior can help us understand why adults use hostile behavior just like children do. Learning is a funny thing. Behavior isn't determined by what is learned, but also by **how well it is learned**. That's why curriculums provide so much opportunity to practice, because, in a sense, practice does make perfect. The more a behavior is used, and practiced, the more likely it will become a habit, and occur in the future. Some behaviors and skills can become so well learned that they require no conscious attention. For example, tying one's shoes, or handwriting, or driving a car all involve skills that are so **overlearned** that we can do them almost automatically.

Overlearned behaviors are things people do that are so well practiced, and used so often over time that they are 1) unlikely to be forgotten, and 2) require very little conscious thought and attention.

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Now to the core issue: **When people are upset, they revert back to earlier, more primitive, overlearned behavior.**

The more primitive angry/hostile behaviors that worked so well early in life re-emerge in the normally rational, calm adult. All of us, you included, operate this way. The more emotion that's evoked in a situation, the more likely you will use those overlearned behaviors, and these are the earliest learned, and the most self-centered ways of interacting.

The more emotion that is attached, the more our THINKING shuts down. That's another factor. Emotion trumps good judgment, to the extent that even the best educated and normally "calm and civil" have their thought processes and judgment impaired. Again, people go back to the "oldest" more primitive behaviors, particularly when emotions kick in.

That's what happens in many unconstructive interactions you might have with parents. They get emotionally triggered, revert to earlier overlearned, manipulative and controlling behaviors.

The specific patterns of control and manipulation an angry parent uses depends on his or her individual life experiences, but what's interesting is that there are only a limited number of ways to be aggressive and unpleasant. You've probably seen every possible way a parent or community member can be aggressive.

Keep in mind, though that most hostile people, are not plotting and scheming to get to you, or manipulate you... it doesn't work like that. Very few individuals plot out their strategies in a conscious manner. In a sense, most people are just acting human when they become abusive. They are doing what they are able to do. They don't know how to do things otherwise, **given their internal emotional states**, and as you'll see in a moment, there's a "feel" to manipulation that seems to suggest angry people are behaving without conscious thought or attention.

None of this excuses abusive behavior. The point here is that those people are reacting to their internal states and the situation, not to you personally. We will come back to this point when we talk about how to maintain control over YOUR emotional reactions when under attack — self control.

The Idea Of Automatic Scripts

You've probably noticed that angry people are hard to interrupt. It's difficult get them to stop talking AT you, and start listening and talk **with you**. Even getting an emotional person to answer basic questions so you can understand and help is a huge challenge. If you try to interrupt by talking over the person he or she often starts the "rant" anew.

It's almost like emotionally upset people have scripts, or little tape loops, that run off from their data banks. That IS close to

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what happens.

First, emotionally upset people, those caught in the “fight, flight or freeze” cycle, are LESS able to use their cognitive (thinking skills). Thinking provides the brakes for destructive behavior, and it gets suppressed in upset people.

Second, as we said earlier, overlearned behaviors “run off”, often without conscious attention. Consider this. Signing your name is an overlearned behavior. You don’t have to pay attention to sign a document. It’s an “automatic” behavior. I use an exercise in my seminars to help people “feel” automatic responses so they can better understand them when they come from angry parents or community members.

I ask participants to write out their regular signatures. Then, I ask them to write out their regular signatures, but this time leaving out every second letter.

Usually what happens is some participants laugh out loud. Out of a group of twenty, a few simply can’t complete the task and give up. Others think they’ve done it, but when they check, they notice they made errors.

I explain that the automatic behavior (the full signature) is like the angry parental behavior, in that it doesn’t require thought. The antidote is to do things that cause the other person to think. That disrupts the automatic behavior, the scripts.

Overlearned (automatic) behavior is hard to begin “in the middle”. It’s very hard to sign your name if you are asked to start on the third letter. That’s because the different letters in a signature are “all of a piece”. The individual letters actually get lost, and the signature is just “one” thing.

This gives us some clues about what will work with angry people.

- Interrupting (talking over) causes the person to restart the script, and that’s one reason why angry people tend to repeat themselves.
- If we can get them to think, and disrupt their overlearned and automatic abuse patterns, we can get “an in”. That “break” allows us to reassert some control of the interaction, so we can use other defusing techniques.

Many of the techniques in this book are based on these two ideas.

The Purpose of Hostile/Abusive Behavior

Now that we have explained where and when hostile behavior is learned, we can see clearly that its major purpose is to **control, or manipulate the environment**. Since we are talking about

hostile parents/members of the public, we can say that the purpose is to control you, to influence your reactions in the almost naive hope that you will do whatever it is that the person wants. It doesn't make a lot of sense, but the tactics, being learned in childhood, really don't HAVE to make sense.

Understanding this helps us discover some critical principles to guide us. Let's look at a key one — that you need to avoid being controlled. That means you must avoid responding to nasty attacks in ways that the attacker wants.

If you refuse to be controlled, and you refuse to react the way your attacker wishes, then you will start to short-circuit the overlearned and automatic attack behaviors coming at you.

Summary Of Key Points So Far

1. Angry and aggressive behavior is part of the human condition, and, for our purposes, is about controlling and influencing the environment to have one's needs met.
2. Angry and aggressive behavior is both instinctive and learned, so by the time a person becomes an adult, he has overlearned these behaviors.
3. Despite socialization, the ability to use aggressive behaviors doesn't "go away". Adults overlay more civilized ways of interacting, but the techniques used and learned by infants and children are never forgotten.
4. When under stress, or when upset, adults tend to use the most overlearned ways of interacting, and those are the ones learned early on — in other words the aggressive or manipulative methods.
5. Angry and emotional people tend to run on automatic pilot, as if they are using some "internal script". We need to disrupt those scripts by pushing people to "think".

The Rules of The Abuse Game

All human interactions, both constructive and destructive are governed by rules, whether they are social and culturally derived, or linguistic rules we don't even think about. To use a metaphor think of a game — let's say chess. It has various rules about what pieces can do what. It's those rules that make it a game of chess rather than a game of checkers.

Rules spell out what is "expected" in the interaction. When both parties abide by the rules, the game continues. If, however, one person violates the rules (or expectations), the game cannot continue. Picture a chess match where one player moves his pieces according to the rules of checkers. The game can't continue.

Abusive conversations also have rules, and as you will see they are remarkably simple. Just as in chess, you can step out of the

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rules, move outside of the expectations that apply to the abuse game and make it very hard for the abusive person to continue.

There are only TWO rules in the abuse game that you need to know. Before we discuss them let's look at the concept of "bait".

The Bait Concept

Earlier, we said that the major purpose or goal of the attacker is to control the interaction, and influence your reactions. The attacker wants to take and hold the initiative, forcing you to react and respond to him, rather than the other way around. So long as the attacker can hold this control, it is likely that the destructive interaction will continue. This isn't good. You can't help the person, or even identify what the person's issue might be, since he isn't responding to questions.

The primary control technique the attacker uses is BAIT. Bait consists of behaviors (verbal and non verbal) designed to get you to react, usually in an emotional manner. If you respond to the bait, you hand over control of the conversation to the attacker, which is exactly what he/she wants. The bait is used to upset you enough so that you will be off balance, as a result of your own emotions.

Take a look at the following brief dialogue.

Parent: *What the hell is wrong with you? Every time I come here, you hassle me and give me the run around. If you knew what you were doing, this wouldn't happen. And, this is the last time you are going to do this to me.*

Staff: *How dare you talk to me like that. I do my best to help and you don't even see that we're short staffed*

Parent: *I can talk to you any way I want. I pay your salary! You work for me!*

Look carefully at the parent's statements. Everything is bait. The comments are blaming, demeaning and threatening. Nothing in the parent's remarks is useful in solving whatever the parent's problem might be.

Now, look at what the staffer says. He responds with an aggressive remark (*How dare you talk to me like that*) followed by a defensive remark (*I do my best...*). He takes the bait, and ends up controlled by the attacker.

The parent follows up with more bait. Worse, now the conversation goes far afield. Whatever the original problem, it is now lost. If this conversation continues it's going to get more destructive, and abusive, with both parties playing the destructive conversational "game".

As a result of taking the bait here's what happens:

- The parent knows he has found some chinks in the staffer's armor and that he can maintain conversational control using this kind of baiting.
- The parent knows that he can upset the employee. That tends to "reward" the speaker, who then keeps the pressure on, or ups the ante by becoming even more unpleasant.

The destructive conversation goes on and on, taking much more time because the staffer takes the bait, and without a possibility of positive resolution.

Now, let's take a look at a slightly different scenario.

Parent: *What the hell is wrong with you. Every time I come here, you hassle me and give me the run around. If you knew what you were doing, this wouldn't happen. And, this is the last time you are going to do this to me.*

Staff: *Mr. Smith, you sound really upset about this. I bet you're really concerned about this situation with your son.*

Parent: *Damn right I'm upset. What are you going to do about this?*

Staff: *I need some information from you so I can help. Can I ask you a few questions to try and sort this out?*

Parent: *Well, I guess so but don't jerk me around.*

Staff: *I promise you I won't. Now...*

Note the difference. The employee refuses the bait dangled by the parent, and works to reassert control over the interaction. He does this by acknowledging the person's anger, but NOT exploring any of the bait remarks. There's a shift in the parent's behavior. He stops talking AT the staff member, and starts to talk WITH the employee. In effect, the employee responded in a way that **caused the other person to respond**, and that's the essence of establishing control over an interaction. As a result, this second conversation is likely to be shorter, and productive.

The key point is that the attacker expects you to take the bait — it's in the rules of the hostile game. The psychological rule the attacker uses goes like this:

If I use bait, the other person will react to it in ways that will allow me to maintain control

So, **break this rule of the abuse game**. Why should you play the game defined by the attacker, when it's a destructive game for both of you? Set up a new game, with a different set of rules. The first step is to not play by the attacker's rules, on the attacker's turf.

Don't get hooked on the bait. Recognize it for what it is, an at-

tempt by the other person to control and irritate you. Later on we will talk about specific responses you can make that take you out of the hostile game, but for now remember that bait hides a nasty barbed hook. Stay away from it.

More Rules For Confrontational Conversations

Here are the two conversational rules of the abuse game that we mentioned earlier.

When you are attacked, you are expected to respond, in one of two ways. These are gut reactions, your own automatic responses to attack, so when you react with your own “scripts” and without thought, he gains control.

Rule 1: When attacked you will respond defensively.

This rule specifies that when attacked you will attempt to defend yourself. A defense consists of denying the charge leveled at you or the school. Common defensive responses include:

- *I only work here*
- *I try the best I can*
- *We are short staffed*
- *I am treating you fairly*
- *I know what I'm doing*
- *We don't lose files*

Or, more specific defensive responses:

- *I have been teaching over twenty years, and indeed, I know exactly what I'm doing. (in response to someone attacking a teacher's competence).*
- *I'm not picking on your son here (in response to an accusation of unfair disciplinary treatment).*
- *I have you know I have a Ph.D in education, and I do, indeed, now what I'm doing*
- *Have you any idea how many teaching awards I've received?*

Defensive statements almost always have the word "I" or WE as the subject.

Rule 2: When attacked you will counter attack.

This rule specifies that when attacked, you will counter attack, making remarks or comments about the attacker. Common counter attacking remarks:

- *You have no right to talk to me like that.*
- *You don't know what you are talking about.*
- *Get out*
- *It's too bad your parents didn't teach you manners.*
- *When did you become an expert in teaching reading?*

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Counter attacking remarks almost always contain the word "YOU" in them, although sometimes the YOU is implied (e.g. Get out).

Remember, these define what the attacker EXPECTS from you, according to the game the attacker is playing. If you play this game, and do what's expected — defend or counter-attack, you lose. Ironically, so does the parent. Sadly the child being discussed might end up as the ultimate casualty.

Defending and counter-attacking are your natural gut responses, and they don't work. They make things worse.

To summarize this section:

1. Stay away from responding to bait. That attacker wants you to take the bait, and dangle on the hook hidden inside.
2. Avoid responding with defensive statements, no matter how tempting it is to defend yourself. If you use a defensive statement, you are playing the attacker's game by the attacker's rules.
3. Avoid counter attacking for the same reasons stated above.

Remember that when you do what the attacker expects, the attacker will continue to attack without skipping a beat. The key, as you will see later, is to respond to attacks in UNEXPECTED ways, to force the attacker to think.

What Upset People Need And Want

When dealing with an angry parent or member of the public, you may have asked yourself "What does this person want from me?", or even perhaps asked the other person this question.

There's a common misconception that an upset person wants ONLY that his or her "presenting issue", be "fixed". That's not accurate, and it's a good thing it isn't. Many times educators will face demands on issues over which they have no control.

Clearly, you can't give everyone what they want. If it was only about the "presenting issue", you'd have no way of calming down an angry parent.

Fortunately, people have psychological wants and needs separate from their "issue". By understanding and capitalizing on them, you can calm down upset people even in situations where you are unable to comply with their demands. In fact, these psychological needs are often as powerful in determining how conversations go as giving people what they want. You must address them to work with upset people.

Oddly enough, I've come across hundreds of case studies where an upset person gets what he or she asks for, but still remains upset, and abusive, because the process of getting what he or

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she wants made it impossible for the person to have his other needs met — those psychological needs.

Let's look at these needs and how we can capitalize on them.

They Want Help

Angry, emotional or hostile people want you to be helpful, even if you can't solve the entire problem. If they see you as making a genuine effort on their behalf, they are much less likely to be hostile towards you personally.

Have you ever gone into a department store to make a purchase? You walked in and had difficulty finding the item you wanted. After searching throughout the store, you finally found a staff person. When you asked the employee where you might find the widgets, you got a response like this:

"Don't know. That's not my department. "

Infuriating isn't it? Why do you get angry in this situation? If you are like most people, what really sent you through the roof was the lack of helpfulness shown by the staff member. If the employee had said:

Golly, I don't know, but if you wait a moment I can find out".

...your reaction would have been quite different. You'd probably have appreciated the effort, been a little annoyed with the initial frustration at not finding the "widget section", but you wouldn't have berated the helpful employee, or complained to the store manager.

It's no different with parents. Be helpful. Make the effort. Don't pass the buck. Take time to explain. By doing those simple things, you avoid sending the fatal message: **"You aren't important enough to me to make an effort"**. Remember too that anything that signals to a parent that he or she isn't important to YOU, will escalate the aggression.

They Want Choices

A parent, or for that matter, any upset person, wants to feel she has choices and alternatives. **She does not want to feel helpless, or trapped, or at the mercy of the "system"**. The analogy I like is that of a cornered animal. If its only way of escaping is through you, you can be pretty sure that it is going to attack you. The same is true of parents. Make them feel they have no options, or that they are trapped, and they will tend to strike out at you, even if they are the authors of their own misfortune.

Remember that individuals dealing with any large system, let's say a school system or government system, feel they have their backs to the wall. Their angry behavior has its roots in fear — fear they are helpless and lack options and choices in the face of an "impersonal bureaucracy".

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If you can reduce the sense of helplessness, and lessen the fear and frustrations people feel when dealing with bureaucracies, you will be less likely to be attacked personally. You will also portray yourself as a human being who is trying to help, and less like a cog in the “machine” that is taking away parental options.

Lest you think you can’t offer choices and options, because the “issue” doesn’t allow them, think again. You can ALWAYS offer choices, and they don’t have to be directly related to the parent’s issue.

Let's look at a simple example.

You answer the phone and the caller asks to speak to Jessica Jones. Ms. Jones is out of the office at the moment. You say:

I'm sorry, but Ms. Jones is away from her desk at the moment. I will take a message and she will call you back.

That's not a bad response, but there are not choices or options offered. Now look at another possibility.

I'm sorry but Ms. Jones is away tom her desk Would you like her to call you back at a particular time, or would you prefer to call again after 3:00, when she will be available?

Much better. The difference is subtle. The first response offers no options, but the second allows the caller some choices, or even to suggest some other workable possibility. The second example is much less likely to “set off” the caller.

There are **always choices** to offer. You may not be able to offer choices directly related to the person’s issue or concerns, but that’s OK. We know that people respond positively to being offered choices, even if they are small, or not directly related. Having choices reduces the sense of helplessness and fear. Even simple things like saying “*Would you like coffee or tea?*” or “*Would you prefer to meet just with me about this, or, if you like, I can arrange a meeting with you and I, and the school counselor?*”

Offering choices sets a tone of cooperation, and helps the person feel less trapped, more confident about your willingness to consider their issue, and make it less likely you will get targeted as a result of the feelings of frustration and helplessness.

They Want Acknowledgment

People have a powerful need to be understood. When angry, they want to know that you “get” their specific situation, plus their emotional state. The simple act of acknowledging that a person is upset will help calm him down, provided the acknowledgment is phrased and “toned” correctly.

The most common error teachers and administrators make when dealing with an angry parent is to ignore the feelings being

expressed, and shift immediately into problem solving mode. It's natural to do this out of a strong desire to help with the issue. Unfortunately, people perceive this approach as uncaring, unfeeling, and unhelpful, thus intensifying their anger. The "attack" escalates because the "attacker" isn't getting the acknowledgement and understanding she needs to "let go".

It is critically important that you acknowledge the emotions being expressed. Later, when we talk about specific techniques and phrases, we will explain how to use empathy and active listening as ways of acknowledging the person's feelings, and PROVING you "get" both the problem and the emotions the parent is struggling with.

They Want Reassurance

It may strike you as odd that an angry person might want reassurance. The last thing angry people express is a feeling of vulnerability, or fear, particularly when they go over the line from angry behavior to abusive behavior.

But fear is frequently linked to anger. The physiological responses are sometimes indistinguishable to the parent. For example, fear of being embarrassed can easily turn into aggression.

Keep in mind that the angry person in front of you is probably also experiencing fear. Addressing that fear by offering reassurances will help. Reassure them that you will listen. Reassure them that you will help. Or just a general reassurance, such as *"I'll do my best to make this turn out OK"*, can work. Besides, the last thing a verbally abusive person expects from you is reassurance. It surprises him, and they don't quite know how to continue the attack.

Section Summary

To summarize, angry people want you to fix their problem, but often this just isn't possible. Luckily, they also want:

- helpfulness and effort on your part
- to feel they have choices
- acknowledgment of their situation and their feelings
- reassurance

By recognizing these "wants", and providing for them, you will significantly impact the intensity and duration of hostile behavior directed at you.

How Angry Situations Escalate

Hostile interactions don't usually explode onto the scene full blown. Escalation refers to an increase in both emotions and hostile behavior during the conversation. Each person "triggers"

the other. This happens all the time whenever people have an emotional investment in a discussion, so you are probably familiar with how arguments, let's say with a spouse, can quickly escalate, and develop lives of their own.

Your spouse is a bit annoyed about your being late for dinner, and makes some off hand comment. In turn, you feel "annoyed at his or her annoyance" so you offer some snippy reply, which adds gasoline to the fire. The disagreement takes on a life of its own, ending up about...well, almost nothing and everything. That's the escalation cycle in action.

Spouses and family members often trigger each other's emotions because they know each other so well.

It's not much different in a parent-teacher conversation, as illustrated in the diagram on the next page. The conversation begins. Perhaps the parent enters into the conversation expecting the worst, and "loaded for bear", and uses a tone, or words that trigger the teacher. In turn the teacher responds defensively, or aggressively, in effect, having had his buttons pushed, which increases the aggression of the parent, and round and round we go.

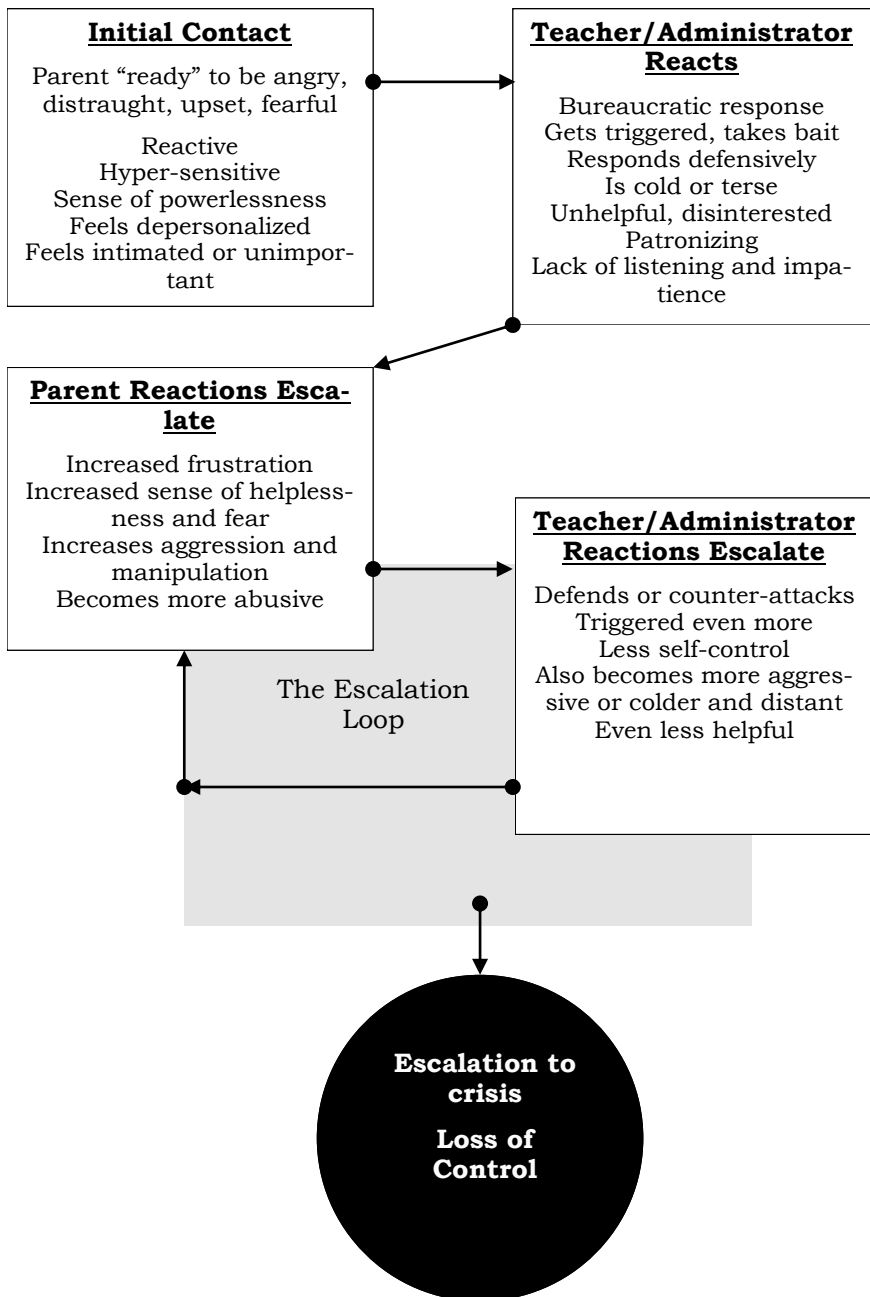
If the cycle is not interrupted, the situation goes, out of control, even to the point where violence is more likely to occur. The escalation cycle grows as a result of BOTH parties. YOU can choose to get triggered and escalate, or step out of the cycle. You can refuse to play the "escalation" game.

It is a lot easier to prevent hostile behavior than to deal with it once it has emerged, full blown. Momentum builds in arguments so step out of the game early, before the cycle gets that life of its own.

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The Escalation/Crisis Cycle

It Takes Two To Do The Conflict Tango



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Chapter 4 — Overview of The Defusing Process

Introduction

Now we're ready to start applying our understanding of difficult parent behavior and transition to what we can DO in those situations.

Before we do that, I'd like to share something important about the model we use, and that you are about to learn. Our focus is not on angry difficult people, per se, but on learning to respond effectively to their specific behaviors. So although we talk about difficult hostile people, always keep in mind that most people aren't difficult and hostile all the time, but occasionally behave as if they are.

Focusing on behavior, and learning to respond with more constructive behavior has a major advantage to trying to "figure out" what makes a particular parent tick, or why he are acting badly. You don't have to "psych-out" a parent, and you don't even have to know WHY a parent is acting aggressively, because the skills and techniques are tied to their observable behavior.

That's what makes them so powerful, and easy to learn. We don't need to talk about emotional intelligence, or trust your intuition about what's going on in the person's head. All you need to do is recognize that you are under some form of verbal attack, and respond (again with your behavior, what you say and do), to turn the conversation around.

Let's do a little review of the key points in the last chapter.

Review

1. At times parents and members of the public are going to be angry, and you need to recognize that they have a right to be upset or angry.
2. People do NOT have the right to be abusive or manipulative.
3. You need to focus your attention on techniques to reduce the amount of hostile behavior aimed at you. If these techniques cause the other person to feel less angry, that's great, but that isn't something you can control.
4. Hostile and abusive behavior is intended to control and manipulate you.
5. Hostile and abusive behavior is learned at a very young age, and everyone knows how to do it.
6. Hostile people will dangle bait in front of you. The first step in avoiding escalation is to not take the bait.
7. The rules of the hostile "game" say that when attacked, you

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are EXPECTED to respond defensively (usually using “we” or “I”), or by counter attacking (using “you”). When you do so you play the game according to the attacker's rules, and you will lose.

8. While angry people want their problems solved, they will also respond positively if you:
 - appear helpful
 - offer choices
 - acknowledge their feelings
 - reassure
9. Hostile situations can escalate very quickly. One key to defusing is to control the interaction from square one, and avoid doing things that will cause the escalation cycle to continue.

The CARP System: A Master Strategy

The CARP system is a way to remind yourself about the four major parts of the defusing process. It is what we call an umbrella strategy.

The CARP process is shown below. You will notice that each letter of "CARP" stands for a different part of the process. The four parts are:

Control

Acknowledge

Refocus

Problem solve

Let's go through these one by one.

Control

When you communicate with an irate person, they will "take the floor", refuse to listen to you and refuse to answer your questions. Often, she will take a verbally attacking position, pepper you with questions or insults, and not let you get a word in edgewise. Some characterize the behavior of the irate person as "ranting".

In addition to the verbal behavior of the irate person, he may use non-verbal behavior to intimidate, anger, or otherwise make you feel uncomfortable. He might move into your space, stare, and glare, and attempt to use height to gain an advantage. As we have said before, the other person attempts to control the interaction, by causing you to become defensive, angry or off balance.

Your first goal, then, is to **gain control over the interaction**. You need to get the person to stop talking, and start to listen, and respond to what you say. If he doesn't stop the "rant", there is little chance of a positive outcome. You may also need to control the interaction non verbally, so that the person stops using non verbal intimidation tactics to put you off balance.

As you will see when we talk about specific ways of controlling the interaction, we want to be as subtle as possible in reasserting control. Telling a someone to "get out of my face" doesn't work.

The key in reasserting control is to behave in ways that send the subtle sub message **"Your techniques are not going to work on me"**. That means making sure you don't reward the person for their inappropriate remarks and behavior.

Here's an example — a real life one that took place in a government office, and told to me by a seminar participant. It's so extreme that it illustrates how important getting control of the conversation is.

Picture a government office. The branch deals directly with the public via a storefront. It looks much like a bank, where people line up and are served at a wicket/window.

Mr. Jones walks in, and after waiting in line, arrives at the window. He asks for what he wants and the employee, Fred, informs him that he must fill in a series of forms, and provide some documents (i.e. birth certificate, etc). Mr. Jones starts getting angrier and angrier, and says:

"Why the hell didn't anyone tell me about this before. You want me to spend the next hour filling out your damned forms, and on top of that I need a birth certificate ... why the heck can't I just use my driver's license. You guys are so stupid and inefficient .. I am sick of having my tax money support your inefficiency. "

Fred, replies

"Sir, I know it's frustrating, but we can't process your application without the forms being filled out and the birth certificate. Why don't you just fill out the forms?"

This doesn't help at all, and Mr. Jones continues on.

*"Because I have better things to do with my time, it's too bad you don't. You know what you can do with your F*****forms? You can take them and shove 'em where the sun don't shine ". [Actually he used more graphic language].*

Fred replies:

"Mr. Jones, I would love to oblige you on that, but unfortunately, I have five file folders, six other forms and a large filing cabinet up there, and quite honestly, I don't think that there is room for much

more ".

Mr. Jones stops talking for a moment. When he realizes what the employee has said, his jaw drops. Then after a second or two, he starts laughing. Fred joins in.

Mr. Jones says:

"Look, I'm sorry. I'm having a bad day, and I don't mean to take it out on you. Do I really have to do all this?"

Fred replies:

"I know you are frustrated, but yes, we need the forms done. Can I make a suggestion as to how you might do this as quickly as possible, so you don't spend anymore time than necessary?"

Mr. Jones replies:

"Yeah, OK"

Quick Analysis

Notice what happened here. Fred, using humor, stunned Mr. Jones into giving up the floor. Mr. Jones gave up conversational control, probably because he was so surprised and stunned, and didn't know what to say. In the terms of our previous chapter, the employee disrupted Mr. Jones' semi-automatic script or tape.

Fred does some good things in the example, and he does some not so good things, so let's be clear that I don't recommend using this type of humor the way Fred did. In fact, I asked Fred if he used this technique often, and he said he didn't and wouldn't recommend it, and it just "came to him".

Later in the book, we'll talk about this being a "high risk, high gain" tactic, but for now, the important thing to note is that Fred gained control of the interaction so that he could move on to a more productive discussion.

Acknowledge

The A in CARP stands for acknowledge. Remember, it is important that the angry person see that you understand his/her emotional state, and the situation. So, when we talk about acknowledging, we are talking about two major techniques, empathy and active listening.

A person's anger will diminish if the person feels you understand them. Again, we will talk about ways that work and ways that don't when in Chapter 9.

Refocus

The R in CARP refers to refocus. Anger makes it difficult to work with the angry person. The control and acknowledge components work to reduce anger, at least enough to have a construc-

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tive conversation, and they work by BRIEFLY discussing the anger the parent is experiencing. You don't, however, want to get "stuck" in talking about how angry the person is, because focusing on it too long will interfere with addressing his or her issue. Refocusing involves making the transition from dealing with emotions to dealing with the actual problem. Later on you'll see examples of how simple and easy it is to refocus, provided you time things well.

Note the sequence. We do not attempt to deal with the problem until we have dealt with the feelings first. This is VERY important.

Problem Solve

Before you move to problem solving, you need the parent to be more cooperative, responsive and less emotional. As we pointed out earlier, emotion degrades thinking, so there's no point doing problem solving with a furious person. Not only does it not work, but believe it or not, if you move too quickly to problem solving, the parent can become even angrier. Refocusing provides the transition to "getting down to business"

Problem solving involves actions like getting and giving information, suggesting possibilities and options, offering choices as available, agreeing on a course of action, and following through.

Important Points

The sequence of the CARP system is important. While you may try to gain control and acknowledge almost at the same time, what is really important is that you don't jump to problem solving too early. How do you know if it is too early?

When you find yourself explaining the same thing over and over, or the person is just not listening and continues to interrupt, the person isn't ready to deal with the problem. If this occurs, go back to the acknowledgment component.

Remember that ALL four components are necessary to effective defusing. Acknowledging feelings is not enough. You need to be useful or at least appear useful in solving the problem. Problem solving on it's own doesn't work with angry people, because they just aren't ready to be logical problem solvers. Control is necessary because without it — without the person responding to you, all you get is being "talked at".

Principles of Defusing

At this point we are going to look at twelve principles to guide your defusing efforts. In the next chapter we will move to much more specific actions and phrases you can use.

Principle 1: Deal With The Feelings First

A fundamental principle of defusing is that you must deal with

the anger and frustration first, since an angry person tends to think unclearly, and less rationally. Empathy statements and questions are effective ways to acknowledge the person's feelings. This is embodied in our CARP model where it's absolutely necessary to use control and acknowledgement techniques BEFORE problem solving.

Principle 2: Avoid Coming Across As Bureaucratic Or Condescending

People who work in large organizations that are primarily rule and policy based tend to forget that bureaucratically based explanations come across as impersonal, and often arbitrary. This is particularly relevant to teachers, and people who work in other tax payer funded enterprises. If you aren't careful it's very easy to explain to parents the reasons for decisions and actions in ways that sound unfeeling and uncaring, and overly formal and officious.

We know that the more a person sees you as a gear in the bureaucratic machinery, the more he/she treat you like an object. This means more abuse. However, if you come across as a real human being, with a name, and feelings, the hostile individual is less likely to aim anger and hostile behavior at you. It makes you less of a target.

Something else that's worthy of note. Although parents may direct to you their frustrations about the educational, their anger is primarily about the system they are interacting with. You are just a handy target since you are accessible. If you portray yourself as a representative of "that system" you will act as a magnet for their frustrations, even if you "don't make the rules", which is often the case.

When dealing with parents or members of the public, avoid coming across as bureaucratic. It's better to express a bit of personality, smile, and use the person's name, and your name if possible. Avoid bureaucratic language, or specialized educational jargon. For example, rather than reading from a school or board policy, explain it in common language, while making the original text available. Stay away from harsh language that can be interpreted as inflexible (see section on cooperative language). Stay away from the expression "It's against policy". That one's a conflict fire-starter, if for no other reason than it highlights how helpless the parent is in the face of the bureaucracy.

Here's an example:

"You know, your child isn't the only one in the school". If we made an exception for you, then we would have to make an exception for everyone "

That may well be true. But it's a bureaucratic explanation that infuriates people. If you need to explain a policy, here's a better

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way::

"Let me explain how we usually do things and why. We ask that you..."

In other words, talk like a live human being, not a bureaucrat. You can say whatever you need to say in a helpful, cooperative and human way. You don't need to be the bureaucrat.

Condescension: A Common Parental Complaint

One of the more common complaints (rightly or wrongly) parents have about interacting with school personnel is that they feel they are treated as ignorant, unimportant, and they report feeling “talked down to”. One reason this happens is that teachers work with students who know much less than they do, and get accustomed to “teaching” those who know much less. It’s easy to forget that parents, while not experts in educational methods and issues, still know a good deal that can be valuable to teachers. It’s also easy to forget to “shift gears” from the words and tone one uses with one’s students, to words and tone that are more suitable when dealing with adults, and parents, or relative equals. Keep in mind that parents are your partners in education, and not your students, and that they can bring important insights to the table.

When parents feel “talked down to” they react emotionally and strike out. Feeling that you aren’t giving their views the credibility they deserve, their anger escalates as they feel depersonalized and unimportant in your eyes. The result, as is the case with coming across as bureaucratic, is an escalation of aggressive or resistant behavior.

While you may be used to having a degree of authority with your students, you don’t have that with the parents. Parents may not recognize your knowledge, skills, and abilities. Often they don’t. However, you can’t get “respect”, by talking down, or portraying yourself as an expert who knows everything important about the education of the child.

We’ll talk a bit more about this when we discuss the importance of listening, but for now, be alert to the very common errors — the tone and words you use, that might accidentally portray yourself as “better than”, or more competent than the parents you deal with.

You could very well be “better than” when it comes to expertise, but you’re going to need to prove it in ways that show you also value the parent’s inputs.

Principle 3: Each Situation Is Different

When you apply the techniques in this book, keep in mind that each situation, and each person is different. One person may respond very well to a gentle approach. Another person may re-

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spond to a firm tone, while someone else may require you to be almost aggressive. You must use your judgment and experience, since you are the one interacting with the person. There's no magic solution that fits every situation.

Observe the person carefully, watch to see if anything in particular is working to build bridges with that specific parent. If you try several empathy responses, a technique we'll talk about later) and the person gets more hostile, either you are mis-phrasing your responses (tone, words), or, empathy just isn't going to work with that person. You decide. Try out techniques, and look for their effect. If something works, keep doing it and if it doesn't, try something different.

Principle 4: Strive To Control The Interaction

Your two major tasks when dealing with a hostile person are to acknowledge their feelings and attempt to get them to start responding to you. Often, you will be doing both at the same time. Remember that if you can't get control, you can't accomplish anything.

Principle 5: Begin Defusing Early

In an earlier section we discussed the escalation cycle, and how angry interactions tend to escalate with time, unless one person gets off the merry go round. The more the situation escalates, the more time, energy and upset it creates. You need to defuse early. In fact, you can pre-empt angry attacks by taking control of the interaction immediately (be the first person to speak), and empathize, even before the angry person has had a chance to launch the first salvo. One thing that will help you defuse early is to look for non verbal indications that the parent is upset, as she approaches. If she looks tense, glanced at her watch, scowls, etc., then you should be sure to defuse immediately.

Principle 6: Be Assertive, Not Aggressive Or Passive

You are probably familiar with the term assertiveness. It means that you act in a confident way, and that you talk calmly but firmly if necessary, while establishing that you, too have rights and an expectation of civil treatment. It also means that your physical posture must be confident rather than too passive or aggressive.

If you have taken assertiveness training, you will doubtless be familiar with assertive language such as:

"When you yell at me, I feel upset. I would like you to stop yelling, or I am going to end our conversation. "

Or

"When you get too close to me, I feel trapped I would like you to step back, or I am going to ask you to leave."

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We **DO NOT** suggest you use this type of language with angry parents. It is fine with people with whom you have relationships, but remember that the angry parent, essentially a stranger, **isn't particularly interested in your feelings**. If they were concerned about you, they wouldn't be aggressive in the first place. They are concerned about their own feelings, and want to hear you recognize them rather than vice versa.

For the most part, you should leave out references to your own emotions. We will look more carefully at this when we talk about assertive limit setting.

Now, let's look at aggressiveness and passivity. Most of us know how to be aggressive. The aggressive person uses very harsh language, a tone of voice that sounds angry, and projects a physically confrontational stance. Note that we include any expressions of frustration in this category of behavior, such as sighing, rolling the eyes, etc. That's aggressive too.

The problem with aggressive behavior is that it invites confrontation and argument. If you want to spend half an hour arguing over some off topic point, or if you want to put yourself at risk physically, then be aggressive. If, however, you want to deal with the other person professionally and quickly, and increase your own safety, then be firm, assertive and calm.

At the other end of the spectrum is passivity. Passive people tend not to stand up for themselves, use a tone of voice that is whiny or weak sounding, and tend to use a body language that looks powerless. Some people believe that the more passive you are the less likely people will be nasty to you. Unfortunately, passivity entices a bully to redouble his or her efforts at intimidation. S/He will sense your discomfort, and continue to attack if you portray yourself as a door mat.

Again, assertiveness is the key. Firm but cooperative language and tone is the best choice and avoids creating confrontations.

Principle 7: If You Lose Control of Yourself, You Lose, Period

Perhaps the very worst thing you can do with a hostile person is to lose control over your own emotions, or, more specifically your behavior. When you allow yourself to get angry and respond aggressively, you are going to have an argument or a physical confrontation. If you get angry and make a snarky remark, or use hostile body language, you will simply provoke the person to continue.

What we stress here is that while you are allowed to be angry or upset with a parent or member of the public, it is not usually in your own interest to "take it out" on that person. It isn't so much an issue of what's right or what's wrong ... it's a very practical issue. Allow yourself to get your buttons pushed, and you are

letting yourself in for a string of hassles that you don't need. Another point to remember — because of your position you have less leeway to express your anger with a parent, and not suffer negative consequences. Parents, however can express their anger in a nasty manner without having to deal with those same consequences.

Normally, when we talk about self control, we talk about anger, but there is another issue. Hostile people don't just do things that contribute to your anger. They also do intimidating things. Self control also involves learning how to control your behavior when someone is trying to intimidate you.

It is absolutely essential that you pay attention to controlling your own reactions. You may not be able to completely control your own anger, but at least you can make sure that you don't communicate your anger or sense of intimidation in ways that will make the situation worse.

Maintaining self-control isn't easy, but you can learn to get better at it because it's a skill. In Chapter 5, we'll help you out with HOW to work on this.

Principle 8: What You Focus On, You Get More Of

This is one of favorite life principles, not to mention its importance in conversation. **When you focus your attention on something, you get more of it.** When people focus on doing work rather than results, they get more work. When people think about food all the time, they tend to eat a lot.

With respect to hostile situations, this principle has a specific application. When a hostile person brings up red herrings that have little to do with the reason you are dealing with them, you have one of two choices. The first is to sidestep the red herring and NOT focus on it. The second is to "dignify" the red herring by talking about it. If you focus on the red herring, you will encourage the person to talk more about it. When you do NOT focus on it, you are less likely to encourage the person to continue on that theme. This ties in to the idea of "bait" mentioned earlier. If you focus on and talk about the "bait", which is often irrelevant to the welfare of the child, you are much more likely to end up in a conversation about that "bait". You cede control, and you go merrily down the wrong garden path.

There's also a tie in with the CARP model, specifically to the Refocus component. If you recall, refocusing involves moving the parent away from their emotional focus and to a more logical attempt at problem solving. The reasoning: when you focus on the emotions, you will get more of them, and spend longer talking about them.

But we have previously stated that it is important to acknowledge the angry and frustrated feelings of a parent. Is this not

focusing on something that we don't want more of? Yes, and no. The purpose of acknowledging is to show that you are being attentive and understanding, without going into depth about all the details of the person's feelings or story. That is why the CARP model specifies that after acknowledging, you REFOCUS back to the problem. So you acknowledge and move on. Acknowledge and move on.

Principle 9: Don't Supply Ammunition

Lord knows, a hostile person can dredge up enough ammunition without your help. You can be sure that if you sigh, roll your eyes, show frustration, mutter, or do similar things, you make it easier for the verbal abuser. Your words and actions can also be used against you if the person chooses to lodge a complaint with someone else in the organization. For example, when you noisily slam down the phone on an obnoxious caller, you encourage the person to complain to someone, and claim that you slammed down the phone, or were rude. Then you have to explain or justify your actions. If you are a teacher, do you really want to spend time explaining to the principal what has happened? You don't need the hassle.

Things that you say can also be used as ammunition against you and your organization. Be aware that some hostile people will try to get you to agree to something, so they can use that agreement as a weapon when talking to another staff member. Kind of like a child playing off one parent against another.

For example, a person complains to you that Jim, a colleague of yours, gave him the wrong information. Without looking into it you reply "Obviously Jim was mistaken". The person you are talking to may very well go back to Jim and quote you or say something like "*Even [your name] thinks you're wrong, your very own staff*".

See the problem? The person above has succeeded in pitting one employee versus another. It's a form of manipulation, so avoid being sucked in by commenting on others in your school.

Principle 10: Don't Ask Questions You Don't Want To Hear Answers To

Questions are an important tool in defusing toolbox, but you can ask questions that will take the conversation in the wrong direction, or when they really do not want to deal with the answers. The best way to illustrate this is with an example I often use in my seminars.

Parent: *It's because I'm green [ethnic background] isn't it. You just don't like green people and that's why you failed my son!*

Principal: *Why do you think I don't like green people?*

Parent: *Isn't it obvious? You failed my son! I see you giving these*

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non green people what they want. And I'm the only green person here ... so I'd have to be an idiot not to notice your racist attitudes... [and on and on].

The Principal wanted to show that she was concerned about the parent's remarks, and that she took them seriously.

Unfortunately, look what happened. The parent made an accusation of bias, which we will presume was untrue. The Principal, by asking the question, opened the door for more discussion which clearly was not in anyone's best interests. Remember "what you focus on, you get more of"? The educator focused on the accusation of racism, and got more of it by using ineffective questions.

In some situations, it may be appropriate to ask what the Principal asked. It depends on the situation. You need to judge whether there is anything to be gained by asking such a question. If you NEED to ask it, then do so, but be aware that it encourages the client to continue on the topic, rather than focusing on the problem the parent is having in the first place.

If you aren't prepared to discuss the answer to a question you ask, then perhaps you'd be better off not asking the question in the first place.

Principle 11: Avoid Inadvertent Errors

I know that you don't intentionally say things to people to make them angrier or more hostile. Unless you are having a bad day! When conversations escalate, it's often because the employee does not realize that he or she is saying something that comes across as unhelpful. An example:

Someone calls asking for Marlene. Marlene is out, so you inform the caller he can leave a message.. The caller complains about being given the run around and how long everything is taking. You say: "*Perhaps there's something I can do for you. If you wait a moment, I'll check the file.*" Then you put them on hold. It takes you several minutes to find the file. When you get back to the phone, the caller explodes about the wait.

What a surprise! Your intent was to be helpful, but the caller TOLD you she was angry about the time everything takes. Is it any surprise that she got angrier, having to wait SOME MORE? Not really. You inadvertently made things worse by trying to be helpful in the wrong way.

If you want to get really good at defusing, you need to view your own behavior AS IT APPEARS to the other person. What you think will be helpful, from your perspective, may be seen as negative by the person you are speaking to. Think like the other person. Put yourself in his position. That can help.

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Principle 12: Avoid High Risk, High Gain Behavior

High risk, high gain behavior is behavior that, when it works, is very effective in defusing. When it doesn't work it escalates the conflict to an extreme degree. For example, using a commanding voice to order someone to be quiet can work. That bluntness may cause the other person to realize he's being inappropriate. On the other hand, being told to be quiet can be perceived as being told to shut up. "Fightin' words", so to speak.

Another example is humor. Humor can be a great technique to defuse a situation, when it works. If you can say something that gets the other person to smile or laugh, you will probably defuse the situation. However if you try humor and the other person doesn't think it's funny, he will think you just aren't taking him seriously. Then he will be really mad. High risk, high gain.

Chapter Summary

Now that we've established these basic and essential principles, we're ready to translate them into actual defusing behaviors you can use. Our next task to look at skills and tactics you can use to maintain self-control, since, as we said in Principle 7, if you lose control, it's a lose-lose situation.

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Chapter 5 — The Art And Science of Self Control

Introduction

One of the most difficult parts of the defusing hostility process is maintaining control over oneself. After all, hostile people often say things that are personally demeaning or insulting. Their tone of voice might offend you. If you allow yourself to get angry, and convey that anger to the other person, the situation is more likely to get worse rather than better.

The common, and worthless advice often dispensed about staying on top of your emotions is that you shouldn't "take things personally". That's complete nonsense. Verbal attacks ARE personal, even if they occur more out of frustration with the situation, than from frustration with you personally. When you are insulted, your competency challenged, or worse, accused of not caring about the welfare of a child, it hurts. And it creates anger, because you DO care. It's unfair. Unfair accusations evoke anger in most of us.

In this chapter we'll take about a number of tactics you can use to stay in control of your emotions, and more practically, how to stay in control of your own behavior when you are "under fire". Before we do that, let's talk a little about what we now know about emotions, and how our cognitions (our thinking), and our emotional responses are intimately linked.

Science, Emotions and Thought

Over the last decade or so, science has made great strides in understanding the links between what we think, and how we respond emotionally. We now know that our emotions are not uncontrollable. We know that emotional responses do not happen quite so automatically in response to external events as it might seem.

We also know that despite what many people think about how the brain works — that there's an emotional part, and a "thinking or rational part", that's inaccurate. Emotions are not JUST controlled by a specific part of the brain, operating on its own. Thoughts and perceptions of situations combine with the more emotional functions of the brain to affect our responses. Let's look at an example.

Let's say you like to hike in the woods. Recently you've read that there is a marauding bear in the neighborhood and all hikers have been cautioned to be careful. Since you love your walks, you decide you are going to continue, and figure you'll just be extra vigilant. Off you go. As you saunter through the woods, you hear a rustling sound, as if something large and clumsy is in the neighborhood. Uh Oh. Suddenly, your heart rate goes up.

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You feel various sensations in your gut, as the “fight of flight” instinct sets off. Your body, seemingly on its own, prepares to run like heck, or to fight (It doesn’t know that fighting a bear isn’t a very good idea).

Now, it feels like the emotional responses, and the action (running away) are automatic. But they aren’t. They are based on your PERCEPTION of the situation, and your perception involves thinking.

What if the rustling wasn’t a bear after all? Maybe a squirrel heavily laden down with nuts for the Winter? You still had the fight or flight response, and you still ran away, but there was no objective threat. If you hadn’t heard the warning about a bear in the area, would you have responded the same way to the rustling sound? Probably not.

Would someone else walking through the woods have responded the same way you did? Maybe. Maybe not. It would all depend on how the person interpreted the sounds, and whether the sound signaled a threat or not to that person.

The point here is that while it appears we respond emotionally in automatic ways — it feels like we do, our interpretation, our THINKING about the situation has a big effect on our emotional responses. This explains why people differ in their reactions to things. Why, for example, does one teacher not react to an insult in the same way you might? Why does a particular tone of voice coming from a parent cause a different reaction than that same tone used by your principal or from your own child? It’s all in the way we interpret situations. That involves thinking.

This is an entirely good news situation. If our emotional responses are automatic, then there would be little hope of changing them. If indeed, our emotions are housed in the reptile brain, as some people claim, how could we possibly bring them under control? Reptiles aren’t noted for self-control.

From this understanding has emerged a number of techniques used in Psychology to help people gain control, not only over their immediate emotional responses, but also over moods. Techniques have emerged, contained under the umbrella of “Cognitive Behavioral Therapy” that use the links between thought and emotion to bring emotional responses under better control and to help people with depression, generalized anxiety, phobias and other psychological challenges. No techniques in this area are perfect, but the success rates have been better than for most other approaches.

The core technique involves looking at **self-talk**, which actually means “the things we say to ourselves”. Our self-talk either helps us cope with, and let go of situations that have triggered negative emotions, or keeps us immersed in re-experiencing the negative emotions over and over.

Imagine you have a very unpleasant parent-teacher conference where the parent accuses you of not caring about her son. That makes you mad. If you say to yourself "*Oh my goodness, that's unfair, and cruel, and I'm so angry now...*" chances are your anger will get stronger. In effect your self-talk fuels your upset. On the other hand if you say to yourself "*This parent is clearly frightened and is crying out for help with her son*", are your emotions going to be tweaked in the same way? No, they aren't.

Not only does your self-talk affect your reactions DURING an unpleasant encounter, but it affects your stress levels after, as you revisit it in your head. Focusing on how unfair things are will make it difficult for you to let go of the insults, while focusing on the welfare of the parent or child will make it much easier to "move on". The difference is a result of YOU choosing to view things differently, and using different self-talk.

The upshot here is that you can LEARN to be cooler under fire. And the key is your self-talk. The techniques in this section will help you do it.

The payoffs for improving your self-control are huge. When you respond in kind to anger, you will create more anger on both sides, and end up with a longer, more destructive conversation. Even worse, the less self control exerted, the more likely the conflict will escalate into a dangerous crisis situation.

How Do We Lose Self Control?

Every one of us has experienced getting angry, and behaving in angry or hostile ways, so we all have some sense as to how it happens. Still, it's useful to review the pattern.

When we lose a bit of our self control, we are usually responding to specific things that the other person is saying or doing. We call these things "**triggers**", though you may be more familiar with the phrase "getting your buttons pushed".

When you get triggered, you tend to react quickly and with little thought, what we call a knee jerk reaction.

That is why the loss of control is so dangerous. Remember in Chapter 3, we mentioned that angry behavior is learned very young. When people are under stress, they tend to go back to the more childlike responses that were overlearned? These immediate, almost automatic responses are almost always the incorrect ones. Your immediate gut reaction gets you into trouble.

By acting quickly, you enter into the escalation cycle. Both people get angrier, the interaction moves faster and faster, and becomes more intense. As the pace quickens and intensifies, neither party listens.

Tactic 1: Identifying Your Triggers

Each of us has a set of triggers. You know, those things that just drive us nuts. The interesting thing about your triggers is they are likely to be different from mine, or from your colleagues. Not only that but your triggers differ depending who you are interacting with. For example, something your spouse does at home may not bother you if a parent does it, or vice versa.

One way to improve your self control is to identify the triggering behaviors that get to you. You will find that the simple act of identifying your personal triggers will help you be less affected by them.

To stimulate your thinking about what “bugs you” below is a list of common triggers. As you go through them you will find your own triggers bubble up in your mind. You might want to write down your “hot buttons”.

Examples Of Common Triggers Or Hot Buttons:

Tone of Voice

- whining
- yelling
- patronizing
- sarcastic

Content of Comments

- sexist remarks about you
- racist remarks about you
- suggestions you are:
 - incompetent
 - lazy
 - stupid
 - uncaring
- suggestions teachers or your colleagues are incompetent, lazy, uncaring,
- accusations that you are racist or biased
- accusations suggesting you don't like the other person
- guilt or blaming attack (*It's your fault if...*)
- threats (*I'll get you fired, or, I have friends*)

Specific Words

- Certain swear words associated with above attacks

Actions (Or What Is Called “Display Behavior)

- pounding on desk or counter

- waving arms around
- pointing
- waving finger in face
- putting hand on arm
- ripping up paper
- throwing things
- slamming doors

We suggest you take five or ten minutes to list your own hot buttons now.

Tactic 2: Slow Down Your Responses

Earlier we mentioned that when you get triggered you tend to respond quickly and without thinking, and that these initial responses are usually ineffective ones. You can learn and practice delaying your response so that the gut response that comes out so quickly doesn't occur.

You CAN learn how to do this, but it does require some attention and effort. After a while you can get into the habit of not responding immediately.

When you are dealing with a hostile person, consciously slow your responses down. Remember Grandma's Rule? When you are angry, **count to ten** before you say anything? Well, you can't count to ten, since that creates an unnatural gap in the conversation, but you can count to two or three before responding. By doing so, you break the trigger/automatic response cycle.

The goal is simple. Give yourself time to think your way out of your initial gut feeling response. **Your thought processes are slower than your emotional ones**, so you need to allow time before responding.

Another way of controlling your own response is to take a reasonably deep breath before responding. Make sure that when you release the deep breath, that it doesn't come at as a big sigh, as this is annoying to some people. This may sound ridiculously basic. In a sense it is, but a deep breath has benefits other than just slowing down your reactions. When you feel you are under attack, your muscles tense, and you have a tendency to either stop breathing, or take shallower, faster breaths. Both those behaviors increase your emotionality, so by taking a slow deep breath, you reduce over-reactions.

Count to two or three, and/or take at least one deep breath before responding. Do this consciously at first, and you will find that each time, it becomes easier and more automatic. If you work at it, eventually, it will become a new habit, replacing the automatic, ineffective response to the triggering behavior of the other person.

When you take the breath, focus your attention on it. This is called **“taking a mindful breath”**. Focus on the feeling of the air moving in and out of your nostrils, or your belly rising and falling. This has the effect of moving your attention away from the hurt feelings you may feel, and to something concrete. It can take as little as one or two seconds to do this and it helps.

Tactic 3: Take A Time Out

When you feel yourself getting upset, or you hear yourself starting to use an impatient tone of voice, arrange for a very brief time out. In many situations, you can take a moment to look for a file, check a regulation, get the person a cup of coffee, go back to your car for something, etc. You don't need to tell the parent why you are taking the break. Just offer some reason, even if it's as simple as: *“You know, Mr. Smith, just wondering if you'd like a cup of coffee, because I could sure use one. Can I get you one?”*

The time out needn't be long at all. In fact, keep it short, since a long wait can be inflammatory. Even 30 seconds away from the parent will be long enough to allow you to take a deep breath or two, and collect yourself. Even a short break can give you the time to remind yourself to stay cool and calm. During the break, use positive self-talk (see below), so you can return in a constructive state of mind.

Self Talk Strategies

We've mentioned that in hostile situations, what you say to yourself (self talk) has a large effect on how you feel and what you do. You can make choices regarding your own self talk. For example, when someone is treating you poorly, you can think things that will make it more difficult to maintain self control. Here's some examples of self talk likely to **increase your anger**:

- I should punch this guy out
- He has some nerve saying...
- Oh, just F*** Off
- Why don't you just go away, a* *hole
- Why does this person hate me?
- What did I do to deserve this?
- Oh my God ... what do I do
- I don't have to put up with this
- What a terrible parent

On the other hand, you can use self talk to help you maintain self control. Positive self talk keeps things in perspective. For example, you can remind yourself that the person is angry at the situation, not at you, or you can remind yourself that the person has a right to be angry. Below are some examples of self talk that are MORE likely to help you maintain self control.

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- This person really needs some help
- They aren't really angry at me personally
- I can handle this
- Boy, do they have it rough
- They must look funny naked
- This is really about the child, not about either of us

The examples in both “good” and “bad” self-talk provide a good starting point to identify you’re the self-talk you want to change, and how to change it. Since each of us is different, you may find that some of the self talk in the first list actually HELPS you maintain control. Or you may find things in the second list that won’t work for you. Find the self talk statements that work for you, and avoid self talk that doesn’t work for you. In the next few sections we are going to look at examples of self talk that my seminar participants have suggested work well for them.

Tactic 4: I’m Better Than That

Some people have suggested that they can keep control by reminding themselves that they are “better” than the attacking person, and that they aren’t going to stoop to their level. I have found this particular approach very effective for me. It seems to work well if you are the competitive sort.

Self talk statements such as *“I’m not rolling in the mud with you”*, or *“I won’t stoop to that level”* can work very well.

Tactic 5: I’m Not Getting Suckered

If you recall, we stated that most of what hostile people say is bait. You can remind yourself of this by saying to yourself *“I’m not getting suckered in by your bait”*, or something similar.

Tactic 6: I Won’t Pay The Price

Realize that if you respond angrily or lose self control, you pay the price. If you swear or yell, for example, the other person can file a complaint, and the investigations and internal hassles constitute the price. It’s a price you can refuse to pay. It is unfair that a parent can be rude to you with relative impunity, but if you return the favor, it’s you that suffers, but that’s just the way it is. So refuse to pay the price.

The “price” goes beyond that. If you get triggered, and say things you will regret, it’s you that has to face the self-criticism and sense that you didn’t handle the situation well. You may continue to think about the situation for days, feeling embarrassed that you acted badly.

Remind yourself, with your self-talk, that you absolutely REFUSE to pay the price for getting triggered, and responding in kind.

Tactic 7: Stay Focused On The Child/Student's Welfare

Most teachers are very dedicated to and concerned about the welfare of the children in their charge. That's a double edged sword because when you care so much about something so important, it's easier to get frustrated or triggered when faced with situations where the parent doesn't seem as concerned as you are.

The other edge to the sword is that caring about the student's welfare means you have something about which you care that transcends your needs, or the parent's uncooperative or demanding behavior. Use self-talk to remind yourself about what the conversation is about — the student, and his or her future. This grounds you and will help keep things in perspective.

Tactic 8: Put On Their Shoes

One thing you will find is that when you focus on understanding, and why the other person is upset, you will be less likely to take the attacks personally.

Use self talk that helps you **understand rather than judge** their behavior. Rather than saying to yourself, "*What an idiot*", try something like "*He must be very frightened to act this way*", or, "*He must be feeling really desperate*". This reminds you that the person is responding more to the situation than you personally.

Another related technique is to ask yourself some questions, such as: *I wonder why this person is so angry?*, or *I wonder what kind of experience this person has had that would cause him to say that?* Another might be: *I remember when I felt the same way when it came to my son.*

Section Summary

Use the tactics and examples we've talked about to design your own self talk to help you maintain control. As with learning to slow your responses down, you will need to work at using new self talk so that you can develop new positive habits to replace the negative ones you might have (and we all have negative self talk habits).

Getting Prepared

You are much more likely to be triggered if you do not expect attacking behavior from a parent or member of the public. The most difficult situations happen when the attack comes out of the blue...when you don't expect it. The unexpected insult or attack tends to provoke that old automatic tendency to respond in kind.

That's why it's important that you observe and prepare for hostile interactions before they start. Your goal is to see these situa-

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tions coming as early as possible.

Tactic 9: Observing

A good part of the time, an observant person can tell that an approaching person is already agitated or angry, even before anything has been said. Body language is a good indicator, and as the conversation starts, tone of voice and words will tell you that this person may be difficult to work with.

Whenever possible observe the other person, as he approaches or as you approach him. Look for signals that the individual is uncomfortable or upset. Some things to look for:

- clenched fists
- fidgetiness when waiting
- glancing at watch
- muscle tension in face
- darting gaze

When the other person says his/her first words, pay special attention to the tone. These first words are very valuable in determining the emotional state of the person.

One thing to remember. Since each person is different in terms of how they look and talk when they are uncomfortable, be aware that the non verbal behavior you observe may mean nothing at all. Some people are always fidgety, or always look tense, even when they are not. You just want to be prepared in a positive way, and to anticipate POSSIBLE problems.

Tactic 10: Mental Preparation

Observing is useless unless you use that information to prepare yourself for potential difficulties. That's where additional self talk comes in. When you observe someone you think may turn hostile, try some of the following self talk phrases:

- I can handle this.
- I need to make a special effort to defuse .
- I will remain calm and cool.
- I'm going to focus on the welfare of the child, even if I'm insulted, because it's not about me.

Also remind yourself of any techniques that you may want to use.

- Avoid any negative self talk that will make you less able to deal with the person effectively. Examples of negative self talk are:
- Oh no.
- I hope he/she goes somewhere else.
- Is it coffee break time?

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- There goes the morning.
- Why do I get all the losers?

When you see an upset person approaching, or notice indicators that the person is angry, remind yourself that you must start defusing immediately. In the next chapter, we will discuss some tactics for starting off interactions effectively. If you observe, prepare positively, and use these initial techniques you will increase your success rate.

General Stress Management Issues

A number of people have asked me if I have any suggestions regarding carry-over effects. In other words, if you deal with one hostile person, how do you avoid letting it affect how you deal with the next person, who may be perfectly pleasant.

Another question people ask is how they can deal with hostile people without experiencing a lot of stress and burn out.

This last question is an important one because dealing with upset people all the time is tiring. The answers can be found in the area of stress management. While we can't go into much detail here, we can make the following observations.

Our feelings of stress are related to lifestyle. If we **eat well, sleep, exercise, and take care of ourselves, we are less likely to feel stressed, or to burn out.** That means that lifestyle IS important. There are a number of good books on the subject that can help you with stress management, and also seminars available on the subject. You may want to investigate these resources.

Not only will stress management techniques help you over the long haul, but it will help you cope with difficult situations in real time. When you are tired, ill fed, or if you feel put upon or use negative self-talk patterns, you WILL be easier to trigger.

The first question about carry over is no less important. We don't want to take out our frustration on the next person we encounter. Let's look at a few tactics that people use.

Tactic 11: Humor

Humor allows us to put things in perspective. As someone once said, "If I didn't laugh, I'd cry". Here are some ways that people use humor to reduce their stress, and get ready for the next interaction.

- on the phone (out of sight of clients)
 - making faces to co worker as client rants on
- making hand gestures or other motions
- in person or related to phone (after client has gone)
- making humorous comments about client to co-worker

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If you are an experienced teacher, and have spent time in the teacher's lounge, you probably know dozens of other ways teachers cope with difficult situations. It's really common, as is also the case with social workers, and others in high stress jobs that involve difficult interactions.

Just know when to put a brake on it and use your head. Don't say do anything that you wouldn't want published in your local newspaper, because these days, privacy doesn't mean what it used to mean.

Tactic 12: Venting/Not Venting

Dealing with hostile people is frustrating. For many people, this frustration builds and builds, like a pressure cooker, until something "pops". People tell me that it is important not to let the pressure build, but to "vent" it out, by talking to co-workers, or other sympathetic people.

You are probably familiar with the term "venting", and already use it. But venting doesn't work for everyone.

Some people learn to let go of their frustration by talking it out. They let the steam out, and then things are OK, and can move on to the next situation. For them, venting works.

For others, focusing on their frustration doesn't reduce it, but intensifies the frustration. By paying more attention to it, they make the frustration and stress bigger.

You need to figure out which type of person you are. If you find that you vent, only to return to the situation later, you may benefit by not venting. In other words, if you vent, then leave the issue, then vent a few hours later, then return to the issue and so on, it's not working for you. Even if it feels like it's working, observe your own behavior. If you keep coming back to it, it's ineffective for you.

If venting doesn't work for you, you can try a distraction technique. If focusing on the problem person makes you angrier and angrier you need to do things that will get your mind off the situation or person. If you are at home after a bad day, rather than sitting around thinking about it, or talking on and on about it, do something different. Watch a movie, play a computer game, exercise, or do things that allow you to stop thinking about the unpleasant event.

For some people not venting is better. For some distracting and moving on works well.

Tactic 13: Letting Go Of The Revenge Fantasy

Before we leave the topic of self-control, let's talk about one of the most common responses to being insulted, or feeling like you've been treated unfairly. Most people, when treated badly, or

triggered, have a fantasy about “getting even” or fantasize about the unpleasant person receiving a “comeuppance”. It’s a pretty natural response. Here are some symptoms of the “revenge fantasy”:

- During the interaction, trying to find just the right phrase, counter-insult, or magical thing to say that will stop the offending person, and put him in his place.
- After the interaction, thinking about what one “should have said”, usually to get even, or to get retribution.
- Fantasizing about bad things happening to the offending person.

The problem here is that these thoughts are, in fact fantasies. There is rarely the opportunity to “win” so decisively that the other person is “put in his place”. In the unlikely event that you find the “ultimate put-down”, you’ll often find the other person will simply redouble his efforts to cause YOUR downfall (e.g. going to the media, complaining to the school board).

What’s even worse about entertaining this fantasy, particularly after the interaction, is that as you focus on “getting even”, you waste energy and actually re-experience the conversation that caused you upset. In effect, you are “victimized” first by the other person, and then you re-victimize YOURSELF by going over it and over it as you struggle and hope to get even. That’s a huge stressor.

Once again, this is a self-talk issue, and something you can learn to avoid. First, pay attention to these kinds of thoughts. They will come up, and your first step is to realize you are ramping up your emotions about something that is **now past**. Second, use your positive self-thoughts to move on. Remind yourself internally that you are entertaining fantasies that are probably not realistic.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter we have talked about tactics for self control and a bit about stress management. Remember that you need to find out what works for YOU. I have provided some suggestions, many passed on to me by people like you — teachers, administrators, and other staff. Use them to come up with solutions that fit your style and personality.

Chapter 6 — Starting Off Successfully

Introduction

- In previous chapters we made the following points:
- It is much easier to defuse hostility before the person gets up a good head of steam. You save more time, and get less aggravated.
- If you come across as a real human being, rather than a piece of the bureaucratic machinery, you are less likely to receive hostility.
- It is important to observe and prepare so that you are ready to deal with a potentially angry and hostile client.
- It is important to prevent the hostile person from taking control of the conversation.

In this chapter we are going to talk about some approaches you can use to begin interactions with parents and other members of the public, and decrease the likelihood of escalation.

Greeting Effectively

Whether you deal with parents/members of the public in person or on the phone, the way you begin a conversation will affect how the other person treats you. You know what they say — first impressions are hard to change. If the other person believes you are cold, distant, bored, uninterested, uncaring or unhelpful, the level of anger will escalate almost immediately. People develop these perceptions very quickly.

You want to project a positive image, as the individual approaches you, and in the first few sentences. Just as important as projecting a positive, helpful image is taking control of the conversation as soon as possible. Finally, you want the other person to know that you recognize them as an individual, and not just another parent.

You can do this by using appropriate greetings when a person approaches you, when you initiate a conversation, or when you answer the phone. The techniques may seem simple to you, and kind of “obvious”, but it’s very easy to forget these basics, particularly if you are stressed, busy or preoccupied.

An effective greeting includes:

Appropriate Non Verbal Behavior

- eye contact
- posture that indicates interest
- smiling when it fits the context

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Appropriate Tone Of Voice

- friendly
- Calm

Appropriate Content (What You Say)

- offer to help
- Acknowledgment
- effective timing

Tactic 14: Eye Contact—A Powerful Tool

When you deal with someone (almost anyone), it is important to look at the person when you greet them. A common error made by busy people is that they don't look at the person as they approach. Have you ever started off a conversation by forgetting to make eye contact and instead, looking at a file, or paperwork in front of you? Most people have. You don't do this intentionally to snub someone. It's just that you are thinking about something else. Regardless of why you might not make eye contact, it still gives the impression that you don't consider the other person important enough to warrant your full attention.

Eye contact should not involve staring. Holding eye contact too long, and without any eye movement can be interpreted as aggressive behavior.

Tactic 15: Manage Your Posture And Facial Expressions

Your non verbal language conveys whether you are interested in the other person or not. If you look bored, the other person will perceive you as too distant. When greeting someone consider leaning forward slightly. This is a standard posture of interest, whether you are standing or sitting.

Keep a eye on how your fatigue levels can affect your physical presence. As you get tired, it becomes more difficult to maintain a posture of attention, and to smile, or more to the point, feel like smiling. Remember that the parent doesn't know WHY you might look bored, or uninterested, and can't distinguish between body language that is a result of being worn out, and body language that is a result of not caring.

Most people realize that a smile is an effective technique in a greeting. For the most part it is. One thing I say to people is that no smile is better than a phony smile. If you are having a miserable day, and feel crabby, if you TRY to smile, the other person will perceive that it isn't "real". While a smile is great, there are some situations where you are better off not forcing it.

Finally, smiling must be appropriate. If your job is to inform people of tragedies affecting their families, a big smile is clearly inappropriate. If the conversation is going to be about a very seri-

ous situation, let's say where one student assaulted another, smiling isn't a good fit.

Tactic 16: Monitor Your Tone of Voice

Tone of voice may very well be the most important part in beginning ANY interaction but it's also something people don't pay attention to. Sound interested, even if you are harried or very busy. Remember that if you sound upset, the person will assume you are upset at them, even though this may not be the case.

It isn't necessary to sound like Mr. Rogers, though. Your tone of voice can be professional, and show interest without sounding overly cheery. In fact, if you work in an organization that always gives bad news, an overly cheery greeting may, in fact, be offensive. One more thing to remember. Those that spend a lot of time with young children tend to use a tone of voice so "full of cheer" that it is perceived by adults as patronizing or condescending. Try to keep your "classroom" tone, and your adult tone separate.

Tactic 17: Manage The Content—What You Say

An effective greeting makes clear that you are there to help. It also contain something like " Good morning " or "Hello ". Keep this part of your greeting short and to the point IF THE CLIENT IS APPROACHING YOU. In other words, don't begin a conversation by talking about all kinds of extraneous topics. After all, when a person comes to you, they are usually coming because they need more than social chit chat.

If you are the one approaching a parent to initiate a conversation, particularly one that could be volatile, you may choose to spend more time on creating rapport and talk about a few extraneous topics, just to get the conversation going. This becomes more important if you are on the other person's turf, for example, if you are visiting a parent's home.

Tactic 18: Acknowledge Early

The second exception to the " *Good morning, what can I do for you today* " short greeting occurs when you notice the person is already upset or angry. We've already touched on observing (Tactic 9) and how you can be more aware of signals — fidgetiness, looking at watch, scowling, etc. When you see these emotional signals, you need to expand your greeting and acknowledge that person's state or situation.

For example, George works in a principal's office. A parent comes in for her appointment with the principal, but the principal is running late. When the parent came into the office, even before anything was said, George noticed her looking at her watch, and looking impatient. George handled the situation like

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this.

Just as the parent approaches George's desk, he says:

George: *Good morning, I bet you're in a hurry today. What can I do for you?*

Parent: *Damn right I'm in a hurry. I have a 10 o'clock appointment with Mr. Jones.*

George: *He's just talking to another parent right now, but I can let him know you are here and in a bit of a rush.*

Parent: *Thank you.*

Did you notice how George greets and acknowledges that the person is in a hurry (underlined portion)? George avoids any lengthy discussion of how long things are taking. This is a good example of applying the CARP model we talked about earlier, and how an acknowledgement of feelings and situation (the A in the model) is followed by REFOCUS, or transitioning to problem-solving (in this case that the parent is in a hurry).

Tactic 19: Effective Timing For Conversational Control

Timing is critical in the greeting. You want to be the first one to speak. Including a question encourages the other person to respond to you from square one. This is a control tactic. By speaking first, and not giving the person an opportunity to seize control from the beginning, you reduce abusive behavior.

So, don't hesitate. If you work in situations where people approach you, you can begin your greeting even before the person stops moving towards you. You want to speak first.

Tactic 20: Generating Rapport

When a client approaches you, your greeting should be short and to the point, but sometimes, it is better to spend a bit of time in conversation before getting down to business. This is part of generating rapport.

This means that you spend a minute or two asking questions or talking on subjects other than the reason you are having the conversation. The purpose is to establish a form of relationship with the individual, or to recognize that a relationship already exists.

There are two situations where this is particularly appropriate. One is when you have initiated the conversation with the person. The second is when you have worked with the person before. Let's look at two examples:

Colleen works as a school principal. She contacts Mr. Jasper to arrange a meeting to discuss his son's disruptive classroom behavior. In talking to Mr. Jasper on the phone, Colleen feels that Mr. Jasper is unhappy with the prospect of the upcoming con-

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versation. When he comes to the school, she begins the conversation:

Colleen: *Good morning Mr. Jasper. I know it's always hard to get away from work for these kinds of things... I'll try not to keep you too long. By the way, I noticed your daughter, Angie is doing really well in [whatever]. You must be really proud.*

Jasper: *We sure are.*

Colleen: *That's great! I wanted to talk to you about your son, John. A small problem has come up, and I think you and I can work together to solve it. Let me explain what is happening.*

Jasper: *OK, where would you like to start?*

In the example, note that Colleen immediately acknowledges that Jasper's time is important. She also takes a personal interest in Mr. Jasper's family and successes by asking about his daughter. That shows she's made the effort to remember important things about the family.

She uses an implied question (You must be very proud) to bring Jasper into the conversation in a positive way. And, finally, because she suspects Jasper is dreading the meeting, she is careful not to increase his fear levels by making the behavioral problem seem earth shattering. Later, if she needs to emphasize the importance of the problem, she can do so.

In the next example, the teacher (Janet) and parent had talked previously about some problems related to Ms. Wilson's daughter's tendency to avoid doing her homework. They are having a one to one parent teacher meeting. The teacher also knows that Ms. Wilson tends to fly off the handle and becomes defensive. Janet handles the greeting like this:

Janet: *Good morning, Ms. Wilson. I hope you got your problem from last month sorted out ... how did that work out?*

Ms. Wilson: *Well, things are a bit better, but not great.*

Janet: *Well, let's talk about the homework issue, and then we can talk about what's happened since our last meeting. How's that sound?*

In this example, Janet refers to the last time she met with the parent, showing she considers the person important enough to remember. Notice, also that Janet asks a question (How's that sound?) which gives the appearance of choice, something we talked about in our chapter on psychological needs.

She treats the parent as an equal. It helps create rapport so that Mr. Wilson is less likely to be hostile.

Tactic 21: Using Names

People like to hear their own names. Likewise, they like to know

your name. The use of names helps both parties see each other as real people, and as unique individuals. Yes, it's a simple thing, but something that's easy to forget to do if you are feeling stressed or distracted.

Just a few notes on using names.

- With people you haven't met before use the more formal Mr./Mrs./Miss/Ms. form. This is more respectful. If you don't know which one to use, ask. For example, "*Do you prefer Mrs. or Ms.*"
- If you have worked with a person previously, and want to set a less formal tone to the conversation, first names are useful. Not everyone appreciates the informality. Older people tend to prefer the more formal use of last names, since they see that as more respectful.
- If you don't know if it's OK to use first names, ask. Try: "*Do you prefer I call you Mr. Smith, or is John OK?*" or "*If you like you can call be Bob, how would you like to be addressed?*"
- When giving out your name, consider security issues. Some organizations don't like staff to give out their last names. Exercise good judgment here, and consider asking others in your school what's best.

Since a good amount of your discussions with parents will involve discussing their children, get into the habit of referring to each child by name. Terms such as "your child" tend to suggest that the child in question is "just another child".

Chapter Conclusion

We have discussed tactics for beginning potentially hostile interactions in an effective way.

You want to convey helpfulness, concern and a desire to work WITH the parent. Starting off successfully also involves recognizing the other person as a unique individual. Keep in mind that the greeting stage isn't just about being "nice". It's the start of the process of taking control the conversation by being proactive.

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Chapter 7 — The Art of Cooperative Language— The Power Of Language

Introduction

Have you noticed that some words and phrases sound confrontational and challenging, while others sound more cooperative and calming? You may not have thought about it before, but you probably automatically use different kinds of language in different situations. For example, if you are talking to a senior official with a great deal of power, you probably use more cooperative language. When dealing with students, you use different words and tone, and if you are embroiled in an argument at home, or perhaps a political discussion, you use more confrontational and challenging language.

In this chapter we are going to talk about these two types of language, and the importance of using cooperative and calming language when dealing with hostile or volatile people. Understanding cooperative and confrontational language types will help you PREVENT conflict and help you keep conversations with parents on track. In addition, we will talk about a few other language related techniques that can be used with upset people.

Type 1 & Type 2 Language—Confrontation Versus Cooperation

The words you use determine whether a person sees you as arrogant, disbelieving, mistrustful, challenging, and uncaring, or cooperative, willing to listen and discuss, and to be flexible.

People react to what they see and hear and form positive or negative opinions about you, regardless of your intentions, or “what is in your heart” When you choose the wrong words and phrases — “fightin words”, you are far more likely to create conflict and destructive conversations that doesn’t have to happen.

If you SOUND confrontational even unintentionally, you create conflict, even if you don’t mean to. By understanding the differences between confrontational language, and cooperative language, you can make small changes in what you say to drastically reduce unnecessary conflict and negative emotions that get in the way of working with parents for the sake of the students.

In the first chapter parents reported the perception that conversations with school personnel are one sided, and that some teachers come across as arrogant, and patronizing. One reason this perception exists is that many people have not had positive experiences in school, either as adults or a children. The other reason is that teachers use the wrong kinds of language — language which is sounds patronizing or “superior”.

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Type 1 Language — Confrontational Language

Type 1 language has the following characteristics and sends the following messages:

- you are absolutely certain you are right
- you are unwilling to consider the other person's position
- challenges the other person to back up what they say
- has a harsh, confrontational tone
- the other person has no choices available to them
- tends to blame the other person
- doesn't leave other person a face saving out
- other person is expected to follow commands

How does Type I language affect the other person's behavior? When you use Type I language you encourage the other person to “fight back” and to also use Type 1, confrontational language. Confrontational language breeds confrontational language in return as parents resist your message because of HOW it is stated. As a result conversations escalate as each of you increases the force and energy used in the conversation.

Type 2 Language — Cooperative Language

Type 2 language is the exact opposite. While confrontational language sets the stage for resistance and argument, cooperative language involves creating a climate of “working together” so the other person feels “you are on the same side”. Cooperative language has the following characteristics:

- you are willing to consider other person's position
- you recognize you COULD be wrong
- invites person to discuss rather than challenges
- has a milder, cooperative tone
- leaves room for choice
- tends to blame nobody
- helps other person save face
- relatively free of " You must" or even "You should"

How does Type 2 language affect the other person? The person realizes that you are not the stereotypical bureaucrat or "teacher standing on a pedestal", who never admits to being wrong, and is uninterested and uncaring. The parent also realizes you are trying to work WITH him or her, that you are on the same side, and that you want to help deal with the problem, or make the best of a difficult challenging situation. Contrast this with Type 1 perceptions, where the parent believes you are trying to impose (read force) your expert opinion on him or her.

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Looking At Some Examples

The best way to get a feel for the two kinds of language is to look at examples of each. Consider the following sentences used by a teacher in a discussion with a parent:

That's impossible. (1) We always send out this information to all parents. (2) Did you throw it out? (3)

Is this Type 1 (confrontational) or Type 2 cooperative? Look at each sentence.

Sentence (1) implies that whatever the parent said previously is not worth considering. It could be perceived as an accusation that the parent is lying. It implies the other person **MUST** be wrong. There's no invitation to enter into a discussion, and it almost always guarantees an argument. All in one two word sentence!

Sentence (2) uses the words always, and all, common words in Type 1 confrontational language. The use of "always" and "all" suggests "we" never make mistakes, and that if things have gone awry, it is most certainly the parent's fault.

Sentence (3) is the most blatantly problematic part of the response. It uses a question in a way that implies the person is stupid or careless. Once again, there's a blaming slant here, and, to top it all off, a lack of focus on solving the issue.

It doesn't matter if the teacher **INTENDED** to send all these negative messages because it's about perceptions. The words used would certainly be interpreted by the parent as insulting, and an invitation to argue, regardless of the teacher's conscious intent. That's why it's confrontational.

By making some small changes in the words and phrases, we can easily communicate to the parent in a cooperative way.

It's odd you didn't receive the information. (1) We usually send out this information to parents. (2) Perhaps it's just gotten lost somewhere, but maybe we should make sure this doesn't happen again... (3)

Look at what we changed. In sentence (1), the speaker expresses surprise at the situation, in a way that doesn't suggest the parent is lying, or to blame. This is sensible since the issue shouldn't be who is right or wrong... that's not what the conversation is about, anyway.

Sentence (2) is only slightly altered, with the word usually substituted for always, and the word, all is removed. "Always" is absolute, while "usually" uses a gentler tone. Finally, sentence (3) begins with the word "perhaps", another less absolute word, and suggests the possibility the material has gotten lost, without pointing the finger at the parent. It also provides a "face saving out", in case the parent did actually throw out the papers and is

embarrassed.

Let's look at a second example:

Sir, there is no point arguing with me. (1) You have to speak with the trustees since THEY decided on this curriculum. (2)

Type 1 or Type 2? In sentence (1) the speaker uses the wording, "There is no point", which is an absolute statement. In sentence (2), the speaker uses the words "You have to" which implies no choice, and sounds like a command rather than a helpful suggestion.

This is a Type 1 response. While it isn't rude or nasty, neither is it cooperative sounding.

Ok, let's fix it as follows:

Sir, I don't think I can help you with this. (1) If you want to pursue it, the best thing is to contact the school board trustees. (2) Would you like the room number (or telephone number)? (3)

Are you seeing how easy it is to change a confrontational communication into a cooperative one? The improved response expresses the same content but is more helpful / cooperative.

Sentence (1) suggests the teacher doesn't think he can help. Notice, he didn't say "I *can't* help you", or "I *won't* help you", which are absolute statements. The improved phrasing sounds way more flexible and helpful.

In sentence (2) the speaker starts off with the word "if", suggesting that the listener has a choice. No longer does it sound like the teacher is ordering around the parent. In sentence (3), rather than giving the information to the parent directly, the teacher shows respect by asking if he would like the information, again providing choice while appearing helpful.

Hopefully the examples help you understand the difference between the two kinds of language. Table 7.1 (next page) provides more examples of phrases that are perceived as confrontational, and improved wording associated with cooperative language. Look at them carefully because you'll see how easy it is to make those small modifications to the words you use and completely change the tone and direction of conversations.

Tactic 22: Appropriate Use of Type 1 & Type 2 Language

It may have occurred to you that there are situations where Type 1 language is APPROPRIATE and even desirable. While we recommend that you use Type 2 cooperative language your "default", there are occasions where the stronger and more challenging Type 1 language is appropriate. For example, the more

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Table 7.1: Examples of Confrontational Language And Making Your Message More Cooperative

Type 1 (Confrontational)	Type 2 (Cooperative)
I can't	I don't think I can
We never	We don't usually
We (I) always...	We (I) try to... We (I) usually
You must have...(lost it, forgot)	It's possible I/we...
You must...	The best thing to do is... Have you thought about... You could try... If you like, you can...
That's impossible	That hardly ever happens here I'd think it's unlikely that, but it's possible
You can't	I don't think that's going to help you but it's up to you
You were...(followed by an accusation)	Were you aware that you were...
Don't...	It might be better if you (state positive option)
You're wrong	Is it possible that...?
You should have...	If you...then you will...

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confrontational Type 1 language is useful when the situation being discussed is so important that you need to send a message that **"This is very serious"**. For example, if you are talking to a parent about his child bringing a weapon to school, and you say, *"Well, it seems to me that bringing a weapon to school might be a bad idea."*, does this convey the proper sense of urgency about the issue? No, it doesn't. It understates the seriousness of the problem. It's better to say: *"We have zero tolerance for any weapons on school grounds, so we have serious consequences that we apply."* Once you have established the seriousness of the situation, there is no need to continue to use confrontational language, unless you want an argument.

The key is being able to assess the situation, and the other person, to determine if you should switch to Type 1 language. **The general rule is to stick with Type 2, until it is clear that stronger statements are needed.** Then switch to Type 1 only long enough to gain control of the interaction, then move back to Type 2. Again, you know your clients best, so you need to use your own judgment.

A similar situation occurs when there is an imminent and serious situation involving the safety of the child, or other students. There is a place for using commands, even with adults, when safety is at stake, or in similar emergencies. When you need immediate compliance for safety reason, it's more appropriate to be direct, and commanding, even if it can come across as "bossy", or as reducing the parent's choices.

Tactic 23: Use of We

You want to give the impression that you are working **WITH** the other person, not **against** her. You will find that replacing the words you or I with **WE** can help convey the idea that you and the parent are on the same side. It suggests cooperation.

Be careful not to overuse "we" in a conversation. Pick your spots so the use of "we" makes sense. For example, it is nonsensical to say to someone *"Well, Sir, we need to sign our children's report cards and send them back."* This sounds patronizing. This is something one might say to a child, but not to an adult. What we **CAN** say is: *"There seems to be a problem with getting these report cards signed. Perhaps we can work together to figure out how to get this done. Matt, do you think?"*

Other reasonable examples include:

- *I guess we'd better take a look at that.*
- *Let's see what we can do about that.*

Tone & Word Stress

Establishing a cooperative climate involves more than the words you use. It also involves using the appropriate tone of voice for

the situation. For example, you can say "*Have a nice day.*" in a way that tells the other person to get stuffed, or in a way that indicates that you mean what you say. It depends on the WAY you say it, and the context.

Obviously you can't "hear" tone and word stress on the written page but we can give you some suggestions about monitoring your tone of voice and matching it to the situation.

Tactic 24: Using Appropriate Tone & Word Stress

First, some information. Cooperative tones of voice have one characteristic in common. When you speak in a calm cooperative way, you stress only one or two words in a sentence. When we talk about stress, we are referring to verbal emphasis on words. On the other hand, if you speak in an angry, frustrated or confrontational way, you will stress more words in each sentence.

To help you "hear" the difference let's look at a simple sentence.

I'm not going to help you unless you lower your voice.

Let's add the word stresses (in bold, capitalized type) that will make this a confrontationally toned comment.

Say this to yourself, as if you were angry. Which words are you emphasizing or stressing?

If you are like many other people, this is how you would say it:

*I'm **NOT** going to **HELP** you unless **YOU** lower **YOUR VOICE**.*

You may have emphasized different words, but the point is that you will have at least four heavily stressed words.

Now, let's look at the same sentence, but said in a cooperative tone. Imagine that you are calm, not feeling any anger what so ever. Now, say this sentence to yourself, once again:

I'm not going to help you unless you lower your voice.

Did you emphasize fewer words. Probably. This is one way you could have emphasized the words:

*I'm not going to **HELP YOU** unless you lower your voice.*

Can you hear the difference?

You can become more aware of the tone you use by practicing listening to yourself speak.

Hot Phrases & Words

Tone and word stress can cause an innocuous phrase to come across as confrontational, as we've just seen. Tone can drown out even the best word choices. However, the opposite can occur. There are some words and phrases that have such emotional meaning for people that no matter how nice your tone of

voice may be, the end result will be insulting and consequently escalating. We use the terms hot phrases, and hot words, to refer to language which should be avoided.

My favorite examples of hot phrases/words are:

- I don't care....
- Whatever
- So what?

There is no way that you can use these and sound cooperative and helpful. It just can't be done. If you have ever had someone say "Whatever", to you, you know how aggravating the phrase is.

It's the same with "I don't care.". Because these three little words have such emotional connotations, the listener stops listening to the context, and only hears the "I don't care." part. For example, you say:

I don't care if you DID send in your application. I want to help you fill out this new one so you can enroll your child in school.

What does the other person hear?

"I don't care" blah blah blah wallawalla bing bang."

And they don't like it. It won't register that you might be trying to help them. Such is the case with hot phrases. They blot out context, and helpfulness.

Tactic 25: Avoid Hot Words & Phrases

Avoid hot phrases and words. In Table 7.2 (next page), we have provided a list of hot phrases and words that remove from your vocabulary. There are always other ways to say similar things that will not evoke negative emotional responses. The table includes suggestions about alternate wordings to remove these emotional reactions from the conversational equation.

Tactic 26: Avoid Repeating Hot Words & Phrases

Hostile people use a lot of hot words and phrases in their verbal attacks. They may call you stupid, incompetent, an idiot, or accuse you of being racist, or corrupt, or lazy or ... well you get the idea.

In the CARP model we suggest that you acknowledge the person's upset and situation. What you DON'T want to do is repeat the hot words aimed at you. For example:

Parent: *You wouldn't treat me this way if I wasn't "green", you just don't like green people.*

Teacher: *Your race doesn't affect how I treat you. We deal with lots of green people here.*

The teacher makes several mistakes here, not the least is re-

Table 7.2: Examples of Hot Phrases/Words And How To Re-phrase

Hot Phrases/Words	Suggestions On Better Phrasing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any reference to specific ethnic backgrounds or race, color, etc. e.g.. Black, Chinese, Ukrainian Other words related to unequal treatment, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> racist discrimination bias bigoted race 	<p>You can refer to a person's heritage, culture and race with the word "background", which has far less emotional baggage, and is much less likely to spark hostility. You still need to be careful to avoid any sense that you might be stereotyping someone, and/or not treating them as a unique individual.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Words or phrases that suggest disinterest. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whatever I don't care I don't give a damn That has nothing to do with... I'm not interested in... I don't want to hear about your... 	<p>The hot phrases to the left are most often used in response to something a person says that seems off topic or irrelevant to you. Even if something seems irrelevant, take care not to dismiss the person.</p> <p>Try: <i>"It's not clear to me how that ties in with our conversation. Could you help me out?"</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phrases that blame or imply blame, or suggest ignorance, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you paid attention, you would ... Why don't you listen. You don't know anything about ... Obviously, you haven't... 	<p>Blame is about focusing on the PAST. Suggesting someone lacks knowledge or experience just fuels the fire. These hot phrases usually occur when you try to win an argument rather than solve a problem. Focus on the future, and forget about "showing up" the other person. It doesn't work.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Absolute words, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Always Never Every thing Every time 	<p>Absolutes convey a sense you believe you are infallible, and that causes people to want to take you down a notch. Replace absolutes with qualifiers — usually, often, are good options as are sometimes, more often than not.</p>

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Table 7.2 (continued): Examples of Hot Phrases/Words And How To Rephrase

Hot Phrases/Words	Suggestions On Better Phrasing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phrases that express an opinion about the other person <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I don't like you You are rude You have no right to... 	<p>Opinions aren't facts, and these phrases are not relevant to a specific issue, so why are they there? If you must express an opinion, express it as a perception of a specific parental behavior, and try to put it in a positive future oriented way.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phrases that suggest helplessness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There's nothing I can do There's nothing you can do 	<p>Offer options and choices, even if they are imperfect. When possible share the load and offer something YOU will do, in addition to things the other person can do.</p> <p><i>I can't change that but you might want to contact....</i></p> <p><i>I can't change that but I can put you in contact with, who might be able to...</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phrases that have a threatening undertone, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you don't be quiet I will throw you out. You aren't going to get much help if you insult me. 	<p>There's a difference between pointing out a consequence versus threatening. A consequence is something that is a natural outcome, and is stated in a calm way and with neutral words, while a threat sounds very personal. Here are some rephrase examples:</p> <p><i>If you don't stop yelling, I'll have to end the conversation.</i></p> <p><i>I'd like to help you but I can't do that if you continue to make personal comments..</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phrases that dare or challenge: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Go ahead, try to get me fired. Prove to me that you mailed the payment You can do whatever you like, but... My supervisor is going to say the same thing. 	<p>Direct challenges push people to respond aggressively. Adults don't "dare" each other to do destructive things to "up the ante". Put aside any desire to "win" the conversation, no matter how upset you are, and put aside your desire to exact revenge because you have been triggered.</p>

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sponding to this attack with a defensive statement. Apart from that, the employee repeats the word "race" which is a hot word, and repeats the word "green". Most words connected with ethnic background are hot, so this is a mistake, and likely to cause the conflict to escalate.

So, you ask: How do I respond to this type of thing? There are always non hot words that mean about the same thing. These you can use. So the teacher could have said:

*Your **BACKGROUND** doesn't affect how I treat you. We deal with people from **EVERY WALK OF LIFE HERE**.*

In this example, the employee removes the hot words. It still isn't a great response because it dignifies the attack, and focuses attention on it, but it is a good example of how you can replace hot words with non hot phrases.

We will come back to this in the next chapter when we discuss verbal self-defense techniques.

Tactic 27: Using Questions Instead Of Statements

The final cooperative language approach involves replacing harsher sounding statements with questions. If you have ever been stopped for speeding by a police officer, like as not, one of the first things the officer did was to ask you a question or two. A common one is "Do you now how fast you were going?" or a variation, *Are you aware of how fast you were going?*

Why do they do this? There are three reasons. Questions are less likely to provoke a person if they are phrased in this manner. Second, asking a question or two at the beginning allows the officer to assess your state ... do you sound stable, upset, or intoxicated?

The third reason has to do with control. By asking you the question, the officer asserts control of the interaction, and encourages you to respond to him/her.

You can use questions in this manner, too. Be aware, though, that a barrage of questions can be interpreted by a parent as constituting an interrogation, and she can react as if you've attacked her. Also there's a special type of question you need to use with caution. WHY questions are frequently perceived as asking for justification, and to most people, challenging.

Examples Of Effective Use Of Question

Asking questions helps you to control the interaction, shows you are interested in the person, and may help you gather information that will help you with the substance of the person's problem. Questions can be used to replace some statements, so that what you have to say is perceived as more cooperative.

It is important to use a very calm, quiet voice when questioning,

so the questioning doesn't sound like an inquisition.

Some examples:

Rather than *"It's not our policy to handle appeals. Go to the school board."*

Try *"Did you know that you can speak to our school board?"*

Rather than: *"We require you to conform to our regulations. "*

Try *"Were you aware that we have some regulations that need to be addressed? "*

Take a look at the last example. It allows a face saving out to the parent, in case he is not aware of the particular regulation. We know that allowing people an out to save face will prevent long arguments fueled by embarrassment.

Chapter Summary

It may seem like the tactics in this section are insignificant, but if you think about the conflicts you've been involved in, you'll likely realize that a good percentage of them are a result of people using language in ways that unintentionally demean or "put down" other people. By making these small and manageable changes in the words and phrases you use, you can actually PREVENT conflicts from starting at all, or, pave the way for much easier resolutions.

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Chapter 8 — Verbal Self Defense Techniques — Control

Introduction

Verbal self defense techniques refer to statements or questions you can use to interrupt a hostile person's verbal attacks. They are based on some of the same self defense principles you find in the martial arts, and take into account the nature of angry interactions.

Our primary goal in using self defense techniques is to regain control of the interaction. A hostile, emotional person tends to hold the floor by not responding to normal questions and continuing to talk and interrupt. We want to stop the person in their tracks, so that they begin to respond to our questions, and use the rest of the CARP model.

Before we go on to talk about the specific tactics, let's review a few principles from past chapters, and explain a few new ones.

Review

1. The hostility attack game is learned very young. Verbal attackers have developed attack scripts that require little thought to execute.
2. The hostility attack game has "rules". The attacker expects you to respond to attacks in the following ways:
Defend (I, We statements)
Counter attack (You) statements
3. The attacker wants you to respond to bait, allowing him or her to control your behavior.
4. The best way to stop an attack and re-assert control is to avoid playing the game according to the attacker's rules.

We need to avoid defensive statements and counter attacking, since these tactics are part of the game that the attacker knows well. When we defend or counter attack, the attacker need not stop to think, since he/she has automatic scripts that can be used to continue the attack.

Self Defense Principles From The Martial Arts

Martial arts, and physical self defense have become more well known over the last decade. Verbal self-defense techniques and principles are similar to those in physical self-defense, most notably the principles of Judo, Aikido, and Ju-Jitsu, but NOT similar to karate and the "striking" disciplines.

The first principle is surprise. When you do what is expected, the opponent is prepared and can act almost without thinking. Whether it be physical self-defense or verbal self defense, you

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want to do things that are surprising or unexpected, so that the attacker must pause and think. If you can freeze the opponent in thought or confusion, you create an opening to use other techniques. This applies to both physical attacks and verbal attacks.

The second principle relates to how you handle the momentum of the attacker. When a physical attacker throws a punch, the person develops forward momentum. His whole body is moving forward.

In martial arts like Judo and Ju-Jitsu, you use the attacker's momentum or force to your advantage. Rather than taking the force of a blow or resisting it, strength against strength, you use the momentum to slip the blow, moving the attacker into a position where you can control him and force the attacker off balance. Karate and the "striking disciplines" are different because they involve the use of your strength against the opponent, rather than focusing on using the opponent's momentum.

The same principle applies to verbal self defense. You don't absorb the force of the verbal attack (e.g. by arguing, defending). You don't fight force against force.

Of all the techniques in this book, the ones that follow are the most interesting, and also the least known. They leverage how language works, combined with our two principles above to allow you to take control of the conversation. Without these techniques, if you go "head to head", it's very hard to get a person to stop yelling, or monopolizing the conversation, and if you can't create your conversational openings, the argument or rant goes on and on, and increases in intensity.

Since verbal-self defense techniques are the least known, you may find some of them "odd", or initially uncomfortable to use. You may even say to yourself "That wouldn't work with me", or "I'd never use that.". That's fine. You don't need to use all the available defusing techniques to be successful. You do need to be comfortable with whatever you use, so if you don't want to use any one specific technique, there's no harm in not using it, but try to keep an open mind. They do work. And, yes, it can feel strange to use them. While you may think a particular tactic wouldn't work on you, that's often because it's just unfamiliar, and nobody has ever tried it with you.

Tactic 28: Use Surprise

At this point in your reading, it shouldn't surprise you that being surprising and doing the unexpected is a worthwhile tactic, since we've already talked about stepping out of the abuse game and NOT behaving according to the rules of that game. Interestingly enough, there's actually a biological explanation operating here that makes this tactic even more powerful.

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We're wired up to respond to and pay attention to the unusual, novel, and surprising. We are also wired to ignore that which happens often. A loud bang that repeats periodically eventually gets gated out. We get used to it. However if the bang becomes much louder, or changes, our attention moves to this "new event" without effort or even consciousness on our part.

It is very hard for someone to "resist" paying attention to something unusual, whether it's a sound, a change in the visual field, or unusual, surprising responses in a conversation.

If you want to grab attention, and therefore stop the verbal attacker long enough to use other techniques, use unexpected, surprising and novel statements and questions. Change things — your tone, gaze, move from questions to statements. CHANGE drives attention.

When you do this, it causes the attacker to stop and think. Usually that means she stops talking or ranting long enough for you to gain control.

If you want to use the element of surprise to gain control of an interaction, it's important that the other person does not see your action as demeaning, or indicative of a lack of interest or concern. Remember our earlier example where humor was used? In that example the customer suggested the employee could *"Take his forms and stick them where the sun don't shine."* The employee responded with *"I would love to oblige you on that, but unfortunately, I have five file folders, six other forms and a large filing cabinet up there, and quite honestly, I don't think that there is room for much more."*

The customer was surprised, paused, and then began laughing. As a result the employee was able to re-gain control, and went on to use acknowledgment, refocusing and problem solving techniques. In this real life example, the humor/surprise tactic worked effectively. However, if the conversation could have easily escalated if it hadn't been said in an appropriate tone of voice.

Not all unexpected responses are high risk, high gain. Most of the surprise tactics (self-defense techniques) carry no risk at all. The next set of tactics describe responses that are surprising, novel and unusual, and do not carry the same risks associated with humor.

Tactic 29: The WHEN Question

Let's say a person is very upset and says something like:

"You don't give care about my son. You are over-paid for such an easy job, and you have some nerve telling me I can't [whatever the person wants to do]."

First, notice that everything here is bait. It's all accusation and insult. If you respond directly to the content of the attack, you

end up controlled by the other person, and play the game by his rules. Your initial response will probably be to disagree, to argue about how much you care, or point out that you aren't over paid. Get into an argument by defending against these unfair accusations and you lose.

Yet, you can't ignore the attacks. If you say nothing, or try to change the subject, you aren't addressing the underlying psychological needs we talked about in Chapter 3. The parent doesn't feel heard, and so is likely to continue the onslaught.

Here's an option that shows you are listening, and is unusual enough that it can derail the parent's "rant". You can respond indirectly, so the person knows you have heard what he said, while sending the message that you aren't going to play this particular attack game.

In this case you can use the WHEN Question. It goes like this:

"When did you start thinking that I wasn't concerned about your son?"

The attacking person doesn't expect this, so you confuse the attacker by not playing by the abuse rules. If the attacking person responds to your question, you have now gained control of the interaction, since the person is now reacting to you rather than vice versa.

The general form of the WHEN questions is:

When did you start feeling (or thinking) that [rephrase a part of what the person said so that it is non inflammatory].

Here's a brief dialogue that illustrates how this works.

(1) Parent: *"You don't give care about my son. You are over-paid for such an easy job, and you have some nerve telling me I can't have him do less homework."*

(2) Teacher: *"Mr. Smith, when did you start thinking that I'm not concerned about your son's workload."*

(3) Parent: (pauses before responding to think) *"Well, as soon as you called me to talk about him not completing his homework assignments."*

(4) Teacher: *"That's not a good situation. Let's see what we can do. Can I ask you a few questions to get to the bottom of your concern about his workload?"*

(5) Parent: *"Well, OK."*

The teacher chooses to respond by not taking the bait, and not going head to head with the parent, but still wants to show she's listening and concerned, while, at the same time, getting the parent to start responding to her. She wants to derail the automatic script the parent is using by creating a situation where

Mr. Smith has to THINK.

In (3) you see that Mr. Smith, the parent and faced with an unexpected question, pauses to think, and then answers with a specific time (when the teacher called). And then he stops talking.

This points out something about the WHEN question that makes it different from any other questions one can ask. It is a close ended question, meaning it asks for a specific response — a time. This is different from the WHY question which is open ended, and just encourages the person to continue ranting. That's one reason it works so well.

In (4) the teacher uses the opening created by the parent ceasing his tirade, to use other tactics. We haven't yet talked specifically about how to acknowledge a parent's concerns, but the teacher uses acknowledgement, followed by a REFOCUS. This steers the conversation away from the insults and emotions, and back to the issue at hand — the homework. The parent consents to having the teacher "ask a few questions", something the teacher offered so the parent doesn't feel helpless in the conversation.

One other thing that's important about this, and the other tactics in this chapter. They work in conjunction with other tactics. No single tactic is effective at defusing difficult situations. You have to combine them together, and that's when the techniques become very powerful.

To use this technique effectively, or any technique that involves rephrasing of the client's remark, make sure that you rephrase in a non inflammatory way. In other words, use Type 2 (cooperative) language and avoid repeating any hot words or phrases the client uses. The following, while a WHEN question wouldn't work:

"When did you start thinking that I don't give a damn about your son, that I'm over-paid, and have a lot of nerve?"

First, it sounds silly, in part because it's a parroting of what was said, but more to the point it focuses the person's attention on the very things you don't want to deal with. Take out all hot words and phrases when you rephrase and don't repeat verbatim.

Before we move on to the next self defense tactic, here's one more tip. For this tactic and the next one, you can't change the wording very much and expect it to work. For example, you can't replace the word when, with why. Saying "*Why do you think I'm not concerned about your son*", causes a very different reaction because it's an open ended invitation to receive more insults. For this reason, don't change the wording of the when question.

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Tactic 30: Going To Neutral Mode

Neutral mode is another means of responding in a way that shows you are listening, but doesn't involve taking the bait. It is also unexpected by the attacker so it tends to disrupt the attack chain.

Using the previous example:

You can respond as follows:

"That's interesting. Some people do think that teachers have easy jobs."

Then you stop. Period. Dead stop.

Again, this response pushes the other person to THINK, and disrupts the automatic script because it is:

- unexpected
- neutral — neither a defense (I or We statement) or counter attack (You statement)
- shows you aren't taking the bait

Because it is unexpected and confusing, it is likely to force the attacking person to stop and think.

The general form for Neutral Mode is:

That's interesting (or some other neutral statement). Some people do think [feel] that [rephrase the attack in a bland neutral way].

Here's an example of how it works:

- (1) Parent:** *"I'm sick and tired of damned teachers telling me what I can and can't do in raising my son. What an over-paid, lazy bunch, the lot of you. And, worse, you keep treating me like a child."*
- (2) Teacher:** *"You know, some people do feel that teachers can get a bit pushy".* Then the teacher STOPS, resisting the temptation to continue by defending teachers.
- (3) Parent:** *"Well, I'm one of those people, and I'm sick of it."*
- (4) Teacher:** *"I'm going to try my best to work WITH you on this, so maybe we can work out a solution that we're both happy with. I really want to get to understand your concern, so can I ask you a few questions?"*
- (5) Parent:** *"Well, OK."*

The pattern is very similar to the one in our WHEN question example. The teacher doesn't take the bait, and the neutral mode response (2) is unexpected and ambiguous enough that the parent has to THINK. The parent responds in (3), **then stops**, providing an opportunity for the teacher to REFOCUS back to work-

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ing out a constructive solution.

There's one more characteristic of Neutral mode that's both unique, and powerful. In our example (2) the teacher doesn't express an opinion, which is why the technique is called "neutral mode". However, it sounds like the teacher is agreeing, or at least open to considering the accusation. Neutral mode is also way of engineering agreement, another self-defense technique we'll talk about shortly.

Tactic 31: The Topic Grab

Like the "when question", and "neutral mode", the TOPIC GRAB is used to get someone to stop long enough in their tirade to pay attention to what you have to say. It is designed to exert some control over the interaction. Based on the self defense principle that suggests you use the momentum of the attacker for your own benefit, the TOPIC GRAB is unexpected and surprising to the hostile person.

The topic grab involves taking something that the individual has said during their tirade, and commenting on it or asking a question about it. What makes this different from asking a question about the issue at hand is that you choose a topic not directly related to the complaint. By "grabbing" something the parent says in passing, you show interest while providing an unexpected response that, again, causes the parent to THINK.

The more the client is interested in the topic, the more likely it is that he/she will hesitate or stop the tirade. **The topic grab is a technique to temporarily distract the client, and return the conversation to a more calm condition.**

The best way to illustrate the technique is to give an example:

Parent: *"What the hell do you expect me to do now. You're failing my kid for no reason ... no, because you are a lousy teacher. If my kid's not learning, it's your fault! Look, I got better things to do than have these stupid conversations .. I got other kids to worry about. I CARE about my kids .. it's too bad you don't!"*
"(and on and on)."

Teacher: [Very calmly and in a tone that shows interest] *"It must be frustrating, Mr. Smith. How many kids do you have?"*

Parent: [stops and stutters a bit] *"Well, two more. Why do you ask?"* [note that the parent has relinquished control by responding to the teacher].

Teacher: *"Well, I have two kids, and it sure is tough sometimes, isn't it? I know how difficult it is to worry about them. Let me explain what you can do, so at least you will know your options and how we can help your son."*

Parent: *"Well, this stinks it just isn't fair."*

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Teacher: *“Some people think it IS unfair .. let me explain what you can do next, OK?”*

Pretty simple, yes? A couple of tips. If you ask a question about something the parent mentions, pick a question that is neither too easy to answer, or too hard. If the question is too difficult, the parent will probably not answer, and resume the rant. If it's too easy, the person won't have to think.

In our example, the teacher asks *“How many kids do you have?”*. He could have asked *“How old are your children?”* but that's a harder question, particularly if the parent has seven children. Ages change often. Number of children doesn't often change.

One other thing to keep in mind. You want to ask a question that is not overly invasive. If the question seems too personal, or an invasion of privacy the parent may respond with *“It's none of your business”*. If that happens, it's easy to fix. Simply AGREE, apologize and refocus back to the issue. For example:

Parent: *“It's not any of your damned business how old my other kids are.”*

Teacher: *“You're right, and I apologize. Let's get back to how we can help your son succeed.”*

Notice the use of *“You're right.”* That's an additional verbal self-defense technique that is very powerful. We'll talk about that shortly.

Tactic 32: The Broken (Stuck) Record Technique

If a person is talking angrily and not paying attention to what you are trying to say, it is a waste of time to get into complex explanations. One tactic people find useful is called the Broken (or Stuck) Record technique. This involves repeating one or two short sentences until the angry person starts to hear and respond to you.

What you choose to repeat is important. Choose language that shows that you are willing to help, and that you are concerned, rather than formal, bureaucratic language. For example:

Parent: [talks on and on]

Teacher: *“Mr. Smith, it is frustrating Let me explain what you can do next.”*

Parent: [Keeps talking abusively]

Teacher: *“I know you are frustrated. let me explain what you can do.”*

Parent: [Keeps talking abusively]

Teacher: *“It's frustrating. Can I explain what you might do next?”*

Parent: *“Damn right it's frustrating.”*

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Teacher: *"It is. What you might want to do next is...."*

In this example, the teacher chooses to "broken record" an empathetic acknowledgement coupled with an offer to explain what the parent can do. Both messages are positive, blame free, and constructive. At first, the parent doesn't pay much attention, so the teacher repeats the messages with slightly altered words and tone. Finally, the teacher breaks through, and the parent relinquishes control of the conversation.

It's important that you VARY the message, at least a little. If you parrot the exact same words in the exact same tone, you draw attention to the use of the tactic and the parent will call you on it, making the situation worse. Verbal self-defense techniques work best when the other person's attention is NOT drawn to the use of the tactic.

Tactic 33: Telephone Silence

The self defense techniques presented so far can be used in person or on the phone. Let's look at a tactic that is designed specifically for conversations on the phone and encourages the caller to stop talking and respond to you.

Like any kind of conversation, conversations over the telephone have rules. One of those rules is that when one person is talking, the other person sends signals to the "talker" that she is listening, and still there. This is necessary because the parties can't see each other. The only way to know there is a person on the other end is if the other person makes some sort of noise, usually "yes", "uh huh ", "I understand", etc.

Consistent with our self defense principles, you do not want to follow this rule. The best way to get a person to stop talking on the phone is to say nothing at all. If you can avoid breathing into the phone, or exclude any noise getting through from your end, that's even better. Eventually, the person on the other end will stop, and say something like *"Hello, hello, are you there?"* and pause for a moment. This gives you the opportunity to say something at the invitation of the caller.

Let's look at an example. A parent is talking to a school employee.

Parent: *Why are you people so inefficient? I have called six times today, and each time I get told the same thing ... what's wrong with you ... if you worked for a real company, you'd have gone broke years ago, and I am sick and tired...*

[Note that the caller appears to have no intention of stopping and allowing the staff member to help].

Staff: [Actually says nothing, making sure not to use words like "yes", or "uh huh".]

Parent: *Hello, hello, are you still there?*

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Staff: *Yes, and I know you are just frustrated I WILL help you if you give me your name.* [employee uses a louder than normal voice, but still sounds firm and calm].

Parent: *It's Mr. Jones.*

Staff: *Thank you. Now, if I understand what you are saying, you are upset because you haven't received an explanation about [whatever], right? Can I ask you a few questions to get to the bottom of this?*

Parent: *Yeah, OK.*

Let's analyze this interaction. The parent is complaining and ranting. If the staff member tries to interrupt, the caller is probably going to continue, and talk over the staffer. The employee just keeps quiet. Eventually, the caller asks if the staff member is still there, providing an opportunity for the employee to reassert control.

The staff member uses the opening to ACKNOWLEDGE the person's feelings and situation. He uses an empathy response, and emphasizes help will be forthcoming.

Once the caller responds by giving his name, the employee has re-established control and enters the next components of the CARP system.

The staff member uses a LISTENING response, and then uses a question to replace a statement, REFOCUSING the person on the reason he called.

The caller again responds, and for all intents and purposes, the attack has been stopped. If we followed the rest of the conversation, we would then see that the staff member refocus and move to the problem solving stage.

Tactic 34: Allow Venting

A variation of Telephone Silence works both in person and on the phone. Similar to the above tactic, it involves silence. Remember that most angry and hostile people want to feel that you are listening to them. If you constantly interrupt, the message you send is that you aren't listening, even if you are. This results in the person increasing the intensity of the attack.

We know that sometimes, a person needs to let off a little steam, before they can "get down to business". Rather than going head to head, it makes sense to allow her some time to vent her frustration, and tire herself out. As she starts to wind down, use acknowledgment techniques to prove that you are paying attention, then refocus and problem solve as the person begins to calm down.

In effect, remain silent, until the person either slows down the venting, OR, explicitly asks you to re-enter the conversation.

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Tactic 35: You're Right

This next self defense technique is exceedingly powerful. When a hostile person is being nasty to you, he expects you to fight back, to defend or counter attack. The last thing he expects is for you to agree with something he has said. If you can find something to agree with, the attacker will be caught off guard. Creating a sense of agreement makes it appear that you are on the same side.

However, when you choose something with which to agree, be sure that you aren't giving ammunition. And, be clear about what you are agreeing to. Look at the example below.

Parent: *"Why is it so difficult to get in touch with you. You must be dodging my calls ... I've left at least a dozen messages ... and you haven't responded to one. I have rights you know."*

Teacher: [using loud, strong tone] *"You're right! It IS difficult to get in touch with me. I know it's gotta be frustrating. I can help you right now, though!"*

Parent: [sarcastically] *"Yeah, sure, right."*

Teacher: *"OK, if you would like to tell me why you called, we can get right to it. What do you think?"*

Parent: *"Alright."*

If we analyze this we see that the teacher confuses the parent into silence by agreeing that it IS difficult to get in touch, but isn't encouraging the person to continue talking about that topic. Note the wording. The employee isn't agreeing that it is TOO difficult, since this supplies additional ammunition, but echoes the opinion expressed. It sounds like the teacher is agreeing, although the truth is the teacher hasn't agreed to anything.

Saying "You're right" brought control back to the teacher, who seizes the opportunity by acknowledging the frustration, and offering help in the form of a question.

The parent isn't calmed down, but has started to scale down the attack. Then the teacher asks a helpful question, and makes a suggestion. For all intents and purposes, this situation has been defused!

Tactic 36: Engineering Agreement

Engineering agreement is an off-shoot, or extension of the "You're Right" technique. It's drawn from a commonly used method for creating rapport in hostage situations, and by crisis negotiators. The idea is simple, though the execution is a bit more advanced. If you can't find something in the person's words to agree with, you need to create a situation that will create the opportunity for agreement. Any agreement on any topic

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is better than no agreement.

Here's an example:

Parent: *"This is the third time I've been asked to come to this damned school to handle something you teachers should be handling. If Pat is misbehaving in your classroom, it's not my problem. When are you going to start doing your job?"*

Teacher: *"So, you're concerned that we are placing a heavy load on you. Is that right?"*

Parent: *"Yes, it's not my job to police your classrooms."*

Teacher: *"You're absolutely right. What happens in the classroom is our responsibility, but we both care about Pat and her success, so it makes sense for us to work together on this. Don't you think?"*

Parent: *"Well, I suppose."*

There is nothing in the parent's first verbal barrage with which the teacher can agree. It's bait. The teacher uses a listening technique (acknowledgement), followed by the question *"Is that right?"* That works because the parent finally offers up something the teacher CAN agree with, that it's not the parent's job to police the classroom. The teacher then uses the "You're right technique", and the conversation can "turn" from one where the parent complains, and refuses to take responsibility to a constructive when where they can work together.

Remember that any agreement on any topic can help to develop some rapport, and to stop the momentum of the verbal attacker.

Tactic 37: The Reassurance Tactic

In an earlier chapter, we mentioned that one contributor to angry and hostile behavior is fear. The Reassurance Tactic is designed to address this, while at the same time, capitalizing on the element of surprise. One of the nice things about the reassurance tactic is that it is empathetic in nature, and does not require us to know exactly what the other person is afraid of. And, it's calming.

The tactic is very simple to use. If you are dealing with a person who is distressed and difficult, and you want to stop the flow of unwanted talk or abuse, respond to the person with a simple, short sentence such as:

- I think we can do something about this.
- I've had some pretty good results helping people in situations just like yours.
- It will be OK, we'll figure something out.

Remember that you shouldn't expect the other person to respond to reassurance with politeness, though it can happen. The

purpose of these remarks is to show you are concerned, and allay some of the fear. And, above all, to get the other person starting to respond to you. Even if the person argues, you have started the process of controlling the interaction, simply because the person is responding to something you said, rather than vice versa. This is a good technique to combine with the “broken record” tactic. You can offer up reassuring statements until the person starts responding to you.

Tactic 38: Is There Anything ... Tactic

The final tactic we are going to present to you is, again, one that surprises, and encourages the person to respond to you. It is a tactic that is best used after you have tried other techniques, and can also be used as a prologue to ending a conversation that is going nowhere.

This tactic was suggested by George Thompson, a police officer who realized that if he didn’t find verbal ways to deal with people, he was likely to end up dead in the line of duty. It’s explained in his book, *Verbal Judo*.

Imagine that you are interacting with someone who is uncivil and argumentative. She seems unwilling to discuss things calmly, and you realize that unless that person switches modes, nothing will be accomplished. Let’s also assume that the individual is yelling and not listening. Here’s a phrase to try:

“Mr. Jones, is there anything that I could say or do that would encourage you to work with me, and lower your voice?”

If the individual answers no, then it’s time to set some assertively stated limits, or move to end a conversation that is going nowhere. If the individual responds in a positive way, you now may have a bit more to work with, and at least you have gotten the person to respond to you in some way. It’s a last resort before you take stronger steps with someone who is insulting and aggressive.

Tactic 39: Reframing To Common Goals

In any situation where two people disagree and the conversation takes a turn for the worse, a shift of focus occurs in terms how they see each other, and their goals. In a conversation that escalates into hostility, what happens is that each “side” believes the other’s goal is unfair, or otherwise inappropriate. Worse, the perception is that there are two mutually exclusive goals, and that erodes trust.

Once these beliefs or perceptions are in place, it’s almost impossible to find some way out of the argument, because trust is gone, and the two parties are, indeed, on different sides.

You’d think that this is a situation where the whole conversation is a lost cause, but thankfully that’s not the case. The key is to

alter the way the parent perceives the school board, and the issue, by focusing on COMMON goals, rather than the points of disagreement.

Once you establish that you share common goals despite the points of disagreement,, you create a foundation for resolution, and a way for the person to lower the emotional intensity involved in the situation.

That brings us to the idea of reframing, and refocusing. Reframing refers to a process where you encourage the other person to see the situation differently and in a more positive light. This process isn't about conning someone, or manipulating someone to accept a lie. It's also not about trying to put a positive spin on the situation. It is about acknowledging there are other ways to look at things, and to acknowledging the truth — that there is common ground. There almost always is at some level.

How do you do it?

The easiest way to grasp this is to look at an example of how it works. Here's a dialogue that illustrates how it's done.

Let's consider the case where a parent is angry because the school bus pickup point has been changed so that her daughter has to walk an extra block. The parent wants the stop moved back in front of her house. The school board administrator wants, and in fact, needs the stop to remain in the new location, because it's more efficient and the budgets are tight.

Parent: *So, what idiot decided to move the bus stop. It's been in front of my house forever, and it worked just fine, and now my daughter, Julie has to get up earlier, AND I have to walk her to the stop, and wait with her. It worked find before. I pay a lot of taxes and you don't pay any attention to my kids.*

Administrator: *"It seems like the change HAS caused you some inconvenience. In fact, you touched on the reason why we had to make the change, and it has to do with keeping your taxes as low as possible."*

Parent: *"What the heck are you talking about?"*

Administrator: *"I think it's our mistake that nobody explained WHY we had to move the stop, so let me give it a try. It really has to do with making sure your school taxes don't go up this year and next."* [goes on to explain that the changes in the bus stops across the system were done to provide the lowest cost bus service possible, and that overall, the changes mean that school taxes could remain at the current level.]

Parent: *"Why don't you just cut some of the administrative staff. You guys seem to have a lot of people at the board doing absolutely nothing."*

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Administrator: *“That’s a good question. The school board trustees looked at all the options to keep your taxes as low as possible. They looked at all kinds of cuts, including reducing library hours, cutting staff that keep an eye on the kids during lunch and recess...all kinds of options. But here’s the problem. Any cuts to personnel would have resulted in compromising Julie’s safety and even the quality of her education. I suspect we both agree that Julie’s safety should be top priority as should Julie getting the best education she can, right?”*

Parent: *“Well, yeah. I guess, but nobody asked me how the bus stop change would affect me.”*

Administrator: *“I believe parents were invited to present their feelings to the school board, but perhaps you didn’t receive the notice. Since the board looks at the bus routes at least once a year, I have a suggestion for you, if you want your voice heard.”*

Parent: *“Ok, let’s hear it.”*

Quick Explanation

There’s a lot going on in this dialogue and the administrator uses a number of techniques tied together to defuse a difficult conversation. Let’s focus on the “reframing” part. The administrator wants to find the common ground, the common interests and concerns, and the parent actually gives the administrator an “in” to do this by bringing up the subject of taxes. The administrator knows that by appealing to the parent on that level, he can create a sense that they are both in this together, with the common interest of keeping taxes stable.

The administrator also knows there is common ground about pupil safety and quality of education, so he brings this up also.

While there is still a disagreement about the bus stop, the climate for the discussion changes, since now, there are those common areas of concern. They are on different sides of the bus stop issue, but on the same side with respect to some very important concerns.

Tactic 40: Walk With Me. Channeling Energy

Since you probably work everyday with children, you will have observed that sometimes, no matter what you say to get the kids to settle down, it’s like they are seething masses of energy that can’t be bottled up. Sometimes you have to go with THEIR flow, and let them run around, until they get tired. While it’s not quite the same thing with adults, it’s worth considering that you can go with that energy flow to tire out angry people.

It’s really simple. Physical movement is a good thing to encourage, even with adults, and particularly when they are upset, angry, frustrated, and are behaving uncivilly. First, it does help

burn some energy, but it can also distract the individual from focusing on his or her own feelings, and his or her aggression towards you. While walking isn't a difficult task, it does take some attention, and it brings other things to attend to as you walk.

This is one of the simplest tactics. If you can, rather than sitting down, consider asking the parent to "walk with you", and head towards the door. Just make sure that you can still carry on a conversation on "your walk", that the noise levels aren't so high they will become frustrating, and there is enough privacy to suit the conversation.

I know. You've probably seen this tactic on television shows — crime or law related shows tend to incorporate it. While it's not a primary defusing technique, to is still useful.

Chapter Conclusion

We have presented a number of self defense tactics that are designed to help you get control over the interaction. By using unexpected phrases and tactics, you can confuse the other person just long enough to begin using the other parts of the CARP model.

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Chapter 9 — Acknowledgment Tactics

Introduction

Up to this point we haven't explained the most important acknowledgment tactics we have — empathy statements and active listening, although we've alluded to them in the CARP model, and in previous chapters.. Both of these tactics are relatively easy to learn, although some people feel that the use of empathy makes them sound weak. This isn't true. Before we discuss this, and the details of using these tactics effectively, let's review relevant principles.

Review

1. Angry and hostile people want their problems solved. They also need to feel understood and heard, before they will begin to calm down.
2. Angry and hostile people are not ready to problem solve.
3. Acknowledging a person's emotional state and situation is a strategy that can be applied throughout the defusing hostility process, but **MUST** be done early in the interaction, and before problem solving occurs, since a furious person is not ready to problem solve.
4. While you want to acknowledge someone's feelings, you don't want to dwell on them for an inordinate amount of time. That's why you follow acknowledgment tactics with efforts to refocus the other person back to the original issue.
5. As with any defusing tactics, you want to be sure not to provide ammunition to the other person, something that's particularly important with these two tactics.

Tactic 41: Empathy Statements

Empathy statements **PROVE** to the person that you understand her emotional state, be it angry, frustrated, or frightened. Empathy statements are most effective when you demonstrate that you also understand **WHY** the individual is upset.

We need to be absolutely clear here that empathy statements do not involve AGREEING with the person, or condoning his or her abusive behavior. Empathy statements just convey that you are interested and concerned, and that you understand. **Nothing more, and nothing less.**

Before we look at examples of empathy statements, let's examine the question: Does the use of empathy statements make us sound weak? Some people, particularly men, believe that talking about feelings makes them sound less authoritative and less strong. My experience is that this isn't the case. Often, people

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who are uncomfortable with using empathy statements are uncomfortable because they aren't used to using them, or they do not often receive them.

Empathy statements allow the school staff member to relate to the other person in a non-bureaucratic way, and in a way that recognizes that the other person is a unique human being — a person with unique reactions.

Examples

Let's look at a few empathy phrases. In the next section we will provide you with some guidelines to use to ensure that your empathy statements are effective.

- *I realize you've been waiting a long time. It must be frustrating.*
- *It sounds like you're pretty annoyed.*
- *I guess you feel like you're getting the run around.*
- *It must be pretty difficult to make ends meet.*
- *It must seem like these things take forever.*
- *Of course, you are worried about your son.*

Notice how simple these statements are. Short, to the point, and uncluttered with other details. Also, note that there is nothing that shows that the empathy giver agrees with the other person, only that the staff member understands the situation.

Guidelines

1. Empathy statements are usually short and to the point.

They can be used on their own, or they may be coupled with re-focus statements, or other tactics. For example:

(1) Parent: *"I'm fed up with how long it takes for you to make a decision...It's been 3 months already ..."*

(2) Teacher: *"I realize it's been a long time. It must be frustrating."*

(3) Parent: *"Damn right it's frustrating."*

(4) Teacher: *"It must be. Let's see what we can do to speed things up. I need some additional information. Can I ask you a few questions?"*

At first (2), the teacher uses empathy statements and STOPS, allowing the parent to RESPOND. When the parent responds, the teacher agrees it must be frustrating (3).

When the other person is very angry, we suggest that you use empathy statements and stop. Allow the person to respond. If he/she appears to be too angry to carry on a rational conversation, then continue to use single empathy statements, using the BROKEN RECORD TECHNIQUE from the previous chapter.

When the other person is not too angry, empathy statements can be coupled with other approaches from the beginning. For example:

- (1) **Parent:** *"I'm fed up with how long it takes for you to make a decision ... It has been three months already ..."*
- (2) **Teacher:** *"I realize it's been a long time. It must be frustrating. Would you like me to explain why it's taking this long?"*

In this example, the teacher realizes the parent is angry, but not so angry as to be overcome by his emotions. She uses an empathy statement along with a question that shows a willingness to provide information. And, she offers a choice.

2. Empathy statements should not include the word BUT.

Remember what it was like to bring home your school report card? Often a parent would say something like: *"Gee, Mary you got an 'A' in Math, but that English mark has got to improve."* What did you remember, the compliment or the negative comment? The negative comment of course. It works the same for empathy. Don't say something like:

"I realize you've been waiting a long time, but all these people were here before you."

or

"I know this is upsetting but you have to follow the law."

When you have two things to say, one positive and one negative, don't use "but". Separate the ideas into different sentences. For example:

"I realize you've been waiting a long time." [pause] *"There are a number of other people who have been waiting, and it's frustrating for everyone. I apologize."* [Note the rephrasing of the last sentence. It is less blunt, but the other person will know what you are saying.]

3. Empathy statements must not restate or under-state the idiotically obvious. If someone is in your office, throwing things and yelling at the top of his lungs, it is probably not a good idea to say:

"It seems like you are just a touch annoyed."

Since the person's behavior clearly indicates the client is furious, not a touch annoyed, this statement is both inaccurate, and sounds patronizing. Better to simply say: *"I can see how upset you are right now."*

4. Empathy statements require the proper tone of voice. You can make an empathy statement sound sarcastic, aggressive, or patronizing by the tone of voice you use. The best tone for empathy statements is a calm, matter of fact tone, so that it is clear to the receiver that you have no hidden agenda, and that you are

making a simple statement of fact, rather than an accusation.

5. Using I in an empathy statement has some risk attached to it. Remember, you want to focus on the feelings of the other person, not yours. When you use “I” as a major part of your empathy statement, you run the risk of providing ammunition to the other person. For example:

Staff: *“I understand how frustrating this is for you.”*

Parent: *“How could you possibly understand. YOU don’t have to go through this ...”*

Rather than beginning your empathy statement with I, begin it with “It seems like...” Then you are less likely to receive the kind of response shown in the last example.

In the event that you are challenged, as is the case in this example, no problem. Go with it, and use the You’re Right technique from the last chapter. For example:

Staff: *“You’re right. I don’t know exactly how you are feeling right now, but I know you are asking for help and I’m going to do my best to provide it.”*

Notice, again how we’re starting to string together the tactics. In this response, the staffer uses an empathy response, then when challenged, uses the “You’re right technique” followed up by offering some reassurance. That’s where the real power of these tactics comes out — when you string them together.

6. Prove you understand by “naming that emotion”. Many people believe they use empathy statement when they say things like:

- *“I hear you.”*
- *“I see where you are coming from.”*
- *“Yes, it’s got to be difficult.”*

By our definition, these aren’t effective empathy responses. Why not? They prove nothing. Anyone can say these things even if they don’t pay attention to what the person is saying, and even if they have no understanding of the emotions in play.

You need to PROVE your understanding by being far more specific — naming the emotion. For example:

- *“I can hear how frightened and concerned you are in your voice.”*
- *“It seems like you are worried a lot about your child’s educational future.”*
- *“It seems that you are angry about the long delays here. It has been a while.”*

Tactic 41: Listening Responses

Listening responses show that you are making the effort to listen to what the other person has to say, and that you are committed to getting it right. If you want to have a positive affect on another person you need to PROVE that you are listening.

Listening responses are useful for another purpose. Angry people are sometimes difficult to understand because the angrier they are the less coherent their speech. Sometimes it's difficult to get the details clear, or to understand what the real problem might be. Listening responses help you clarify the situation, so you don't end up in an argument due to misunderstanding.

Listening responses are again relatively simple. They involve rephrasing what the other person has said, and bouncing it back.

For example:

Parent: *"Look, I completed this form before, and now you say I have to do it again! If you can't keep track of your paperwork, don't make me do your job...blah blah."*

Principal: *"Ok, let me make sure I understand. Are you saying that you already completed the form ? If so, maybe I should check the file one more time."*

The same principles that apply to empathy statements apply to listening responses, as do the principles of self defense. When you rephrase what the client has said, remove hot words, and harsh language.

Below are two examples of how you can start off your listening responses.

- *"So, if I understand you correctly, you're saying that ... Is that correct? "*
- *"I want to make sure I understand. Are you saying that ...?"*

Chapter Conclusion

Acknowledgment tactics are surprisingly powerful considering how easy they are to learn, and their simplicity. Of all the tactics in this book, the ones in this chapter are probably the most important.

With both empathy statements and listening responses, remember that it is necessary to prove to the other person that you are hearing and understanding. A cursory "Uh huh" or similar responses will not have a positive effect, while full fledged listening and empathy responses will.

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Chapter 10 — Countering Nonverbal Intimidation

Introduction

So far we have talked about the many ways that people use language to gain control of the interaction, and put you off balance. That's not the whole story. Not only do people learn how to use language in manipulative ways, but they also learn how to use non-verbal behavior to apply pressure, to make you nervous, and to convey negative messages to you.

No doubt you are familiar with these tactics. Think for a moment. Can you remember a situation where the other person used non-verbal communication tactics that made you feel uncomfortable?

In all likelihood, you are familiar with the following behaviors:

- invading your personal space
- staring you down (extended eye contact)
- using height to intimidate
- standing over you while you are sitting
- severe facial expressions
- pointing at you
- waving a finger in your face
- obscene gestures
- table pounding
- ripping up papers
- throwing things or knocking objects off table
- door slamming
- heavy sighs
- rolling eyes
- extreme fidgeting

It isn't pleasant to be on the receiving end of these tactics. Before we talk about ways you can counter act some of these behaviors, perhaps we should clarify a few points.

Taking Meaning From Non Verbal Behavior

When I deliver seminars, I usually ask about the kinds of non-verbal behavior participants have encountered. I generally get a list very similar to the one presented above. But, occasionally I get a few suggestions regarding more subtle behavior, such as crossed arms. We need to be careful when we interpret non verbal behavior. Is the person standing with arms crossed trying to intimidate you, or is he cold? Or perhaps he's short on his "hug quota" for the day? It's hard to tell, particular if you don't know him well.

These days you can walk into a book store, and find at least one

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book of the "how to read someone like a book" variety. You'll read that head scratching means one thing, and, or looking up and to the right means something else. Essentially these books and their "universal interpretations" of body language are using pseudo-science to make assertions that are simply wrong. You can't generalize across all people, and across cultures to make sense of body language. That makes these interpretations and prescriptions useless or worse.

The truth is that non verbal behavior can't be interpreted in such an exact way. Is the head scratcher suffering from fleas, or is he confused? It's all junk science, generating income for authors rather than offering accurate reflections of how body language works.

The list of aggressive non-verbal behavior provided in the previous section is pretty reliable. But for our purposes it doesn't matter. We focus on BEHAVIOR, not psychoanalysis, and not mind-reading. Since you are going to react to the behavior, rather than interpreting that behavior, it matters little if you misread the motivation of someone who might intrude on your physical space. You still need to stop that behavior, and that's what we'll focus on

In Case You Are Interested: Cultural Differences In Non-Verbals

The second point to be made is that different cultures have different non-verbal patterns. Some groups are far more expressive, using gestures and tone of voice in more dramatic ways. People differ in terms of the length of time eye contact can be maintained, depending on their background. And, people differ in terms of the personal space (distance between you and them), they find comfortable.

But here's the kicker. Within any cultural group, there are large differences among individuals. For example, there is a common stereotype that Native People (First Nations) prefer not to make eye contact for any period of time. However, if you spend time with people from this group, you will find that the variation between people is huge. Some don't like eye contact that is held for a long time, but some don't seem to give it a second thought.

You will find the same situation for other cultural groups. Perhaps the generalization applies to the person in front of you, but it is just as likely that it does not.

For this reason, we have to stress that you should make NO assumptions. That's also why you won't find explanations of how, say Chinese people differ in their non-verbals from Hispanics. Generalizations are as likely to be wrong as right, so let's stop the stereotyping.

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Each person, regardless of background, has his or her own style. You must treat each person as an individual, not as a Native person, or a Chinese person, or whatever. By observing individuals, you will learn about them, and the meaning of their behavior.

Countermeasure Strategies

We are going to focus on dealing with the three most common non verbal techniques that "attackers" use: prolonged eye contact (staring), invasion of your personal space, and use of height differences.

So, let's imagine a situation: you and another person are standing. He is angry and hostile, speaking in a loud voice, and moving closer to you. He's also staring and glaring at you as you talk. If he is taller than you, you will find that the closer he gets, the more you have to angle your head to look at him. The closer he gets, and the taller he is, the less likely you are going to feel comfortable and in control.

What do you do?

The most common, gut response is to step backwards. People tend to do this when they have been "triggered" by this kind of non-verbal behavior. They try to increase the distance between themselves and the other person by retreating a step or two.

Is this O.K.? Well, it's not dangerous, but think for a moment. If you move backwards what impression does it give the aggressor? Does it tell the person you are in control? Does it present a strong, firm, confident image? Is it likely to stop the person from entering your personal space?

The answer to all of these question is NO. When you move backwards, you present a weaker image to the person. Since you are reacting to THEIR inappropriate behavior, you continue to allow them to control you. And, most importantly, if someone is trying to dominate you by intruding on your personal space, that person will move closer once again, causing you to move backwards. It can be an awfully weird dance.

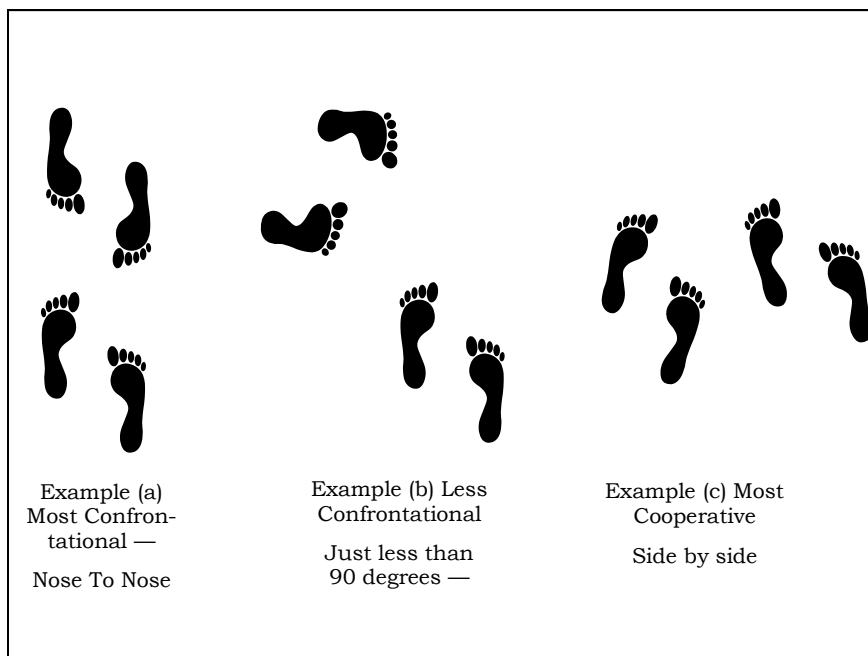
Not a great way to exert control. Maybe an understandable one if you feel at risk physically, but not a good way to exert control.

What else can you do? Well, you can hold your ground, or move forward, matching the person's intimidating tactics with those of your own. It's a stronger form of response.

There are real problems with this tactic. First, if you stand your ground, or move forward, you escalate the conflict. You create a situation where physical contact can occur, and in these situations any physical conflict can quickly escalate to violence. For most people, there is a psychological barrier to violence, but as soon as ANY physical contact occurs, whether it be inten-

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Figure 10.1 - Confrontational & Cooperative Stances



tional or accidental, that barrier disappears. So, if you move forward and bump the person, he may grab your arm, or shoulder. Then what? Whatever happens next is going to be destructive, and dangerous.

It is true that standing up to this bullying kind of behavior can cause the other person to back down. Just sometimes. It's a huge risk, a high risk, high gain maneuver. **Don't do it.** At least, if you back up, you are safer.

If you can't back up, and you can't move forward, or hold your ground without risking a physical confrontation, what does that leave? Well, you could ask the person to step back. While this isn't a terrible response, it violates our rule of "What you focus on you get more of". By drawing attention to the issue, you let the person know that she is succeeding in making you uncomfortable.

Here's the solution, the Stand Up Shuffle.

Tactic 43: The Stand Up Shuffle

The Stand Up Shuffle is based on something we know about non-verbal behavior. When two people are angry they will tend to stand face to face and nose to nose. The nose to nose position is the

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most confrontational position. There are two other positions that are perceived as less confrontational.

In the right angle position, each person is at right angles to the other, or “kitty-corner”. Take a look at Figure 10.1. The feet indicate the directions of the shoulders, and of course, the location of the feet. In example (a), the most confrontational position, the shoulders are parallel. In example (b), the shoulders are almost at right angles.

To reduce the sense of confrontation, and to feel more comfortable, you want to move from position (a), to position (b). You want to be at more of an angle to the intimidating person.

The third position (example c) is side by side. The side by side position is the most cooperative and is appropriate when two people are working cooperatively and when anger levels are lower.

So let's map this out. Imagine you are nose to nose. What you do is move your feet slightly (shuffle), so that your shoulders are no longer parallel with the other person's shoulders. While you do this, you can also break eye contact with the individual, which also reduces the confrontational feel. Finally the movement of your feet and shoulders actually increases the distance between you and the other person and that's a good safety precaution.

Now, you are slightly sideways to the person. Suppose the person wants to get in your face again. They have to follow you to get back into the confrontational position (a). Then, you simply respond by shifting back into your original position, so that you are again at an angle to the person. Most people will simply give up on this tactic if you do this properly. If you can imagine this in action, you will realize that it can look like a little dance.

But, who is leading the dance? You are. You are using very subtle non-verbal techniques to send the message that you will not be controlled. In our terms, we are removing the rewards for this kind of behavior. Attempts to manipulate or intimidate become, “Unfun”.

One caution. You cannot turn so far so that the other person sees any part of your back. Do not turn to more than a 90 degree angle. This implies that you are dismissing the other person, and is inflammatory.

Never, ever shuffle in a way that shows, and exposes your back to the other person. That can provoke physical contact, grabbing a shoulder, for example, that you do not want to happen.

Tactic 44: Distraction Tactic

Another technique that works well, particularly when combined with the Stand Up Shuffle is the distraction tactic. What we

want to do is to provide a reasonable excuse to break eye contact, without appearing to be submissive, while at the same time, directing the person's eyes to something else. That something else could be a piece of paper (map, form, report, etc), a computer screen, a piece of machinery, clipboard, or anything handy that may be relevant to the discussion. Let's see how it works.

A parent and teacher are discussing a child's report card. The parent has been told by his son that the marks are unfair. Unfortunately, this particular parent is one who has a physically intimidating style, and "gets in the face" of the teacher.

The teacher turns somewhat sideways (stand up shuffle) while at the same time, saying: "*Tom, let's take a look at a test or two.*", and holds out the clipboard that contains one of the child's tests. The teacher continues, (parent has broken eye contact to look at sheet) "*You notice, your son, John, did really well on [fill in]? Unfortunately, he didn't do as well on [fill in].*". Meanwhile the teacher points to the relevant part of the form. In fact, not only does the teacher point, but he keeps his eyes on the paper, and he taps on the spot on the paper where he wants to direct the parent's gaze and attention, so there's actually a tapping noise.

While the parent is looking at the paper, it's hard to use intimidation tactics. If he appears to calm down, the teacher can move to the side by side position, to further defuse the situation.

The distraction techniques also works with people who are seated. Get them to look at something else, and you will break the tension that exists.

While we've included this tactic in the physical intimidation section, it also disrupts verbally abusive behavior. Some of my seminar attendees have pointed out that directing a person's attention to a computer screen, or some other sort of file, and guiding the person's gaze to it is effective at stopping the flow of insults.

Let me give you another example. It's not a situation in an educational context but it is a true story, as related to me by one of my participants. It's also amusing.

An insurance adjustor works in insurance company's garage. She has just explained how much the insurance company is willing to pay for the damage to the customer's car, but the customer is irate and complaining. The customer is taller than the adjustor, and moves closer, using non verbal intimidation tactics. The customer is male, the adjuster is working in a field that has been dominated by males.

The adjustor takes control of the situation this way. She shuffles somewhat sideways, so she faces the vehicle. Extending her

hand to point to a lower portion of the car (around the wheel well), she says *"Take a look down there. Is there a dent there we might have missed?"* The customer naturally moves closer to the lower area of the car, and bends over to investigate, whereupon the adjustor moves slightly behind the customer. Because the customer is bending over, butt up in the air and head in the wheel well, he has lost his height advantage. At this point, the adjustor says: *"I could be wrong, Mr. Smith, but let's take one final look at the car, to make absolutely sure there is nothing we've missed."*

The adjustor took control of the interaction, and sent a subtle message that she is not going to be intimidated. All without calling attention to the situation. As she put it, *"When you have your head in a wheel well, and your butt in the air, it's really hard to be intimidating, no matter how big and tall, and...well, macho you are!"*

Tactic 45: Equalizing Height

For those of you who interact with clients while sitting, be aware of the importance of equalizing height. If you are seated, and the other person is standing over you, you won't be able to feel confident or sound in control. The clear solution here is to stand up, or encourage the other person to be seated.

When you stand up, make sure you do so calmly and slowly. We recommend that you turn yourself to approximately right angles to the person. Do not stand up and move into THEIR space.

As you stand, you may want to suggest that the person take a seat. If he chooses not to, then continue the conversation from the standing position. You can also use a distraction tactic as you stand.

If the person does sit down at any point in the conversation, then it is appropriate for you to sit also.

Chapter Conclusion

When you deal with non verbal hostility, you want to be as subtle as possible. That's why the tactics in this chapter are so useful. The other person will probably not even be aware of what you are doing to counter their aggression.

You CAN do something to counter the most common intimidation tactics, provided that you remain calm, and don't over react or react too quickly.

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Chapter 11 — Referral Techniques

Introduction

Referral techniques refer to tactics that involve another person or agency, separate from you and the parent. While some tactics clearly fall into one of the four CARP categories, referral techniques could be classified in any of the categories.

No doubt you are familiar with the term “passing the buck”, where someone tries to fob off someone on someone else, and you know that buck passing is frustrating and provokes anger in people. It’s infuriating.

While referral techniques DO involve passing someone on to a third party, there are some fundamental differences in HOW it’s done that turn it from an infuriating process to a constructive one, that is appreciated by parents and other community members. In this chapter you’ll learn how to pass someone to another person in the spirit of HELPING, not avoiding.

Referral techniques can be very effective. They are most appropriate when you realize that you will not be able to calm down or help the person. This situation can occur when:

- you and the other person just can't get along
- you lack the authority to make a decision on the issue
- the person is complaining about something that has been decided at a much higher level in your organization, for example at the school board level.
- you are getting triggered (losing self control)

In this chapter we will look at three referral tactics. The important thing to remember is that referral techniques must be used correctly. Poor referral methods are likely to make things worse.

Tactic 46: Referring to Supervisor/Principal

[A note on terminology. When we use the term supervisor, we are referring to the person you report to. The title of that person will obviously depend on your place in the school hierarchy. It could be a principal or vice principal, a superintendent, or even a school board trustee. In the interest of readability, we use the generic term "supervisor" to refer to such a person. It's not a great term, but quite honestly, I can't think of a better one (I hate the phrase "your superior".)]

You have probably come across the following situation:

You are dealing with an angry parent who just won't calm down. As the conversation goes on, the person becomes more abusive and irate. At some point in the conversation the parent demands to see your supervisor (principal, superintendent). You arrange

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this, and they meet. After about five minutes, the parent leaves. You observe that he appears to be much calmer, almost content.

You are curious as to what magic words the supervisor used to have such a profound effect on the parent, to turn the person from a lion to a pussycat. So you ask. Your supervisor says: *"Well, I pretty much said exactly what you said."*

And the truth is, that's likely what happened. You see, it's not just what is said, or how it's said, but also who says it that makes a difference.

We know that people tend to be more abusive and hostile to staff they perceive as having less status and power. We know the opposite is true — that upset people tend to treat people they think have status and power with more respect and politeness than people they think are at the "bottom" of the organization.

There is another principle that applies. People perceive the first person they talk to in an organization as having less power and status than the next person they talk to. In other words, if they first talk to a receptionist, and then to a teacher, they will see the teacher as "more important". Or, if they first talk to a teacher, they will perceive the principal as "more important" when they are referred to see that person.

This suggests that referring to a supervisor may be a way of capitalizing on this phenomenon. If an angry, abusive person will automatically treat a supervisor with more respect and be more reasonable, doesn't it make sense to offer this option to the individual? Yes. Experience tells us that a good deal of time can be saved by offering this option to the person early on in interactions that appear to be going nowhere.

There is another reason why "referring" is important. You may not have the authority to change a ruling, but your supervisor or manager may have that authority. In this situation, it makes sense, after trying to defuse the individual, to pass them on to the person who CAN help them. And, just the act of offering to refer gives the impression that you are making the effort to help. That in itself can help to calm down the individual.

But, remember one thing. The referral technique is far more powerful if YOU offer it, rather than waiting until the other person demands it. By offering it, you show you are taking the initiative to help, and you are taking control of the interaction. If you wait until the other individual demands it, you are creating the appearance that he/she is in control.

Doing It Right

Referring to a supervisor is a process that can be done well, or done poorly. Keep in mind that referring will be most successful when:

- it is offered by the staff member
- the offer includes choices for the parent
- the supervisor is able to take control of the situation immediately
- it appears to the parent that you and the supervisor have taken the time to discuss the situation with each other
- the supervisor appears informed about the situation

Let's look at the steps in the referral process:

1. Determine you aren't getting anywhere.
2. Ask/offer if parent would like to speak to supervisor.
3. Notify supervisor of situation (without presence of parent).
4. Explain to supervisor in private:
 - emotional state of person
 - facts of situation/problem
 - what person has said
 - what you have said
5. Supervisor emerges to introduce self to parent (or contacts in some other way).
6. Supervisor explains his/her understanding of situation to client.
7. Supervisor uses CARP techniques.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

Determine you aren't getting anywhere. If the other person is getting angrier and angrier, even though you have used other defusing techniques, it may be time to cut short your involvement, and refer. Or, if it is clear you don't have the authority to help, a referral is indicated.

Ask/offer if person would like to speak to supervisor. Here are some phrases you can use:

- *"Sir, I don't think I can help you, but my principal might be able to. Would you like to speak to her?"*
- *"Mrs. Jones, I'm not able to approve what you want, so to save time, how about if you talk to my supervisor?" Would you prefer to wait, or would you like me to ask her to call you?"*

Note that we are offering the person the choice, and we are careful not to over commit the supervisor. We wouldn't say something like *"My supervisor will give you what you want"*, because that may not be the case and builds false expectations.

After the parent has consented, explain you will return in a moment, and/or proceed to make whatever arrangements are nec-

essary.

Explain to supervisor. Approach the supervisor (see Tactic 47) and provide enough information about the situation so the supervisor does NOT have to start from square one, and ask the same questions you asked of the parent. It's getting on the same wavelength. For example:

"Got a problem. Mrs. Jones wants to [...] and I have told her that we can't legally do that. I have also said that [...] and she has been yelling and disrupting the office. Can you see her?"

Presumably the supervisor will consent.

Supervisor makes contact: When you and the supervisor return to the client, we want the supervisor to grab and maintain control of the situation from the beginning. For this reason, I recommend that the supervisor introduce him/herself, rather than you making the introductions. While it may be more "polite" for you to introduce the supervisor and then back off, it is more powerful if the supervisor can approach the parent, and before he/she has had an opportunity to restart their complaint, the third party says:

"Hello, Mrs. Jones. I'm Ingrid, principal of the school. I understand that you want to [...] I and that you are upset that it isn't possible. Is that correct?"

We hope the parent replies "yes". At that point the supervisor can invite the person into further discussion. For example:

"Ok, why don't we go into my office so we can discuss this and see what the situation is."

What we want to avoid at all costs is forcing the parent to explain his/her situation over again. First, it aggravates the person, but more importantly, it allows the supervisor or principal to take control.

So, it is NOT effective for the supervisor to say: *"What seems to be the problem, here?"* This will just restart the complaint. It is this single element that **distinguishes between "passing the buck" and making an effective referral.** Research tells us that one of the biggest complaints people have when dealing with bureaucracies is that a) they have to take to several people, and b) at each step, they have to re-explain the situation to the next person. It drives people nuts.

That's the basic tactic. But there is a bit more to this. Obviously, you and your supervisor need to be on the same wavelength for this to work. This is SO important that we have included a separate tactic to help you create a situation where the above technique will work.

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Tactic 47: Planning For Referral — Getting On The Same Wavelength

You and your supervisor need to be on the same wavelength about referrals. Your supervisor may not want to be involved in some situations, but may want to be involved in others. You and your supervisor need to agree on how these situations will be handled. For this reason, I recommend that you approach your supervisor to discuss some of the questions listed below. And, if you are a supervisor, I suggest you talk to your staff about these same questions. Supervisor and employee need to be clear about when and how referrals can be carried out.

- Under what conditions does the supervisor want to be involved?
- How often can you refer to the supervisor?
- What does the supervisor want to know about the parent beforehand?
- When will the supervisor be available for referrals?
- Does the supervisor have any preferences about the mechanics of the referral?

This information must be shared between supervisor and employee in advance. I recommend that the subject be revisited at least once a year.

Tactic 48: Referring To Co-Worker

Some staff members have told me their supervisors are unwilling to be involved with angry people. Occasionally, I hear this: *"Whenever there's a problem, it seems my supervisor [principal] has the amazing capacity to become invisible ... nobody can find him/her."* Well, it happens. We can grouse about it, or we can see what other possibilities are available.

Referring to a third party capitalizes on the same status and power dynamics as referring to the supervisor. Third party referrals can be used when a supervisor is unavailable, or as a step prior to referring to supervisor.

Specifically, you can refer a parent to a colleague at the same level in the organization as yourself. You do this in almost the exact same way you would refer to the supervisor, using the same steps. The one difference is in your phrasing. What you want to do is to phrase things in a way that enhances the status and ability of the "third party in". Look at the following example.

You are dealing with a hostile parent who is getting increasingly agitated. You recognize that you just aren't getting through but you think that your colleague, Mary Ann, may have better success, and that a fresh approach might work. You say:

"Sir, you know, I don't think I can help you with this, but

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Mary Anne Astin is really our resident expert on math teaching. She can provide a fresh perspective. Would you like to speak to Mary Ann?"

Take a look at what has been done. We present Mary Ann as more experienced — an expert. This builds up her status in the organization without lying or over committing Mary Ann.

You will find that in this situation, the parent may assume that Mary Ann is at a higher level in the organization. This is fine, since you haven't lied about her position, only called her an expert. And, if the person sees Mary Ann as having higher status in the organization, he/she is likely to treat her with more respect. This means less time wasted, and less argument.

Remember you and your colleagues must be on the same wavelength about doing this. So, make sure you apply Tactic 47 — planning beforehand, so each player knows what to do. And, follow the principles and process described in Tactic 46 — Referring to Supervisor.

Tactic 49: Directing Person's Anger

There are times when someone is angry at a situation not under your control, or even under the control of anyone in your immediate organization. Regulations, rules and policies are often developed by people "above your pay grade. This doesn't stop a hostile person from complaining to you about these laws, regulations and policies even though you have no authority to change them.

In these situations, it is **not** effective to say "*Sir, that's not my job to make those decision*", or "*Don't yell at me, it isn't my fault.*" Both are defensive and come across as bureaucratic and certainly unhelpful.

What you can do is direct the person's anger to a person or agency that has some responsibility for the policy/law/regulation. Take a look at this example:

Parent: "*Who the hell makes up these stupid policies? What a bunch of idiots... You guys don't have a clue about what it's like to run a business...and how difficult it is for me to find the time to come to this school so often.*"

Staffer: "*Sir, I know you disagree with the policy. If you want to have your say about this, the best thing to do is to contact [agency, person, policy]. They are involved in setting the policies. Would you like me to write down a name and phone number for you?"*

There are several things to notice in the example. First, the staff member is combining several techniques. First, she acknowledges the person's concern. Then she provides information, and makes a helpful suggestion in a non-defensive tone. Then she

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offers the parent a choice.

Several things to consider. First, most people will NOT take the time to follow up and follow through. That takes effort, and often by the time the person gets home, he or she has calmed down enough to say "*Nah, I won't bother*". Directing the person's anger weeds out people who are just complaining to get to you, or to manipulate you. Those that are truly serious about their concerns will follow up. Those who are not serious will give up.

Second, directing the person's anger may be annoying to the person who ends up having to listen to it. Some politicians and administrators feel that the less contact they have with problems the better, and may not appreciate your efforts. If you direct the person's anger to the wrong person, or to someone who is unwilling to deal with the person, you may create more problems. So be careful.

Again, being on the same wavelength is important. All employees in an organization (e.g. a school, board office) should know who they can refer angry parents to. Perhaps the elected school board trustees hate to hear complaints. Well, you need to know that. But maybe there's another high ranking official that is more receptive. Or, vice versa. These things need to be discussed internally so that you know what is OK and what is not OK.

When I talk about this technique in my seminars, someone usually asks whether this is "passing the buck". It's a really good question. If you are referring to someone else simply to get the complaining person "out of your hair", then I think it will seem like the proverbial buck passing. But if you are referring because the parent is simply not going to gain anything by talking to you, because you lack the authority to help, then I think it's a constructive action. The key here is to keep a helpful slant and tone, to offer to assist the person in contacting the relevant authority, and to not show frustration as you do so.

Chapter Conclusion

Referral techniques can be very powerful ways to defuse hostile people.

When you refer properly, you will appear helpful and concerned, particularly if you offer the option before the parent demands it. And, of course referrals capitalize on the status issue. We can use it rather than let it use us.

Finally, let's talk about one other point. It is often frustrating to have one's decision reversed by a supervisor or someone higher up. When you diligently apply appropriate policies and regulations, and an administrator, in effect, makes an exception or breaks that regulation, it can be upsetting. Keep in mind that the reversal usually has nothing to do with you personally. It doesn't mean you are incorrect, only that the person reversing

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your decision has a perspective that differs from yours.

It happens all the time. You probably aren't going to change it, and it goes with the job. If you get all bent out of shape about the reality of serving in a large, and sometimes political organization, you are only going to harm yourself.

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Chapter 12 — Time Out — Disengaging

Introduction

We have only one tactic to be discussed in this chapter. Many teachers are familiar with the concept of the time out. A time out is used when children are out of control, and exhibit inappropriate behavior. The technique can also be used with adults, with some minor modifications needed because while you have some authority in the classroom, you don't have that same authority and "power" with adults with whom you interact.

The idea behind the time out is not to punish the individual acting inappropriately, but to provide some time for reflection, so the person can regain self control. One of the themes of this book involves using tactics that provoke the upset parent to THINK, to allow time for the more logical and rational part of the brain to "kick in".

A second purpose of using a time out is to remove the child from his/her peers, who may be involved in keeping the inappropriate behavior going (audience effect). Finally, the time out, at least for children, is designed to teach them that there are consequences to their actions, and that they will be held responsible for their own behavior.

While time outs may be appropriate for children, their effectiveness is based on the ability of the person who IMPOSES it to enforce it. You are not in such a position with your adults, or at least it isn't so clear. You can't say to an adult: *"I'm going to put you in a room by yourself until you calm down. When you are ready to behave you may come out."* At least, you can't say that to an adult and expect any positive outcome. It's patronizing and offensive.

What you can do is use a process called disengaging. The idea behind disengaging is to allow the person some time to think about what he/she has been saying, and to provide an opportunity to save face.

Tactic 50: Disengaging

We know that a person acting in a hostile, abusive manner is unlikely to stop in the middle of his tirade and apologize. Even if he realizes he is acting unfairly, or is flat out wrong, it is difficult to stop in the middle of a rant to apologize. It is simply too embarrassing. There ARE people who won't back off from a verbal attack even if they realize they are wrong.

However, a person who realizes he is wrong may apologize if there is a "break in the action". For some reason, when there is a break, there is a psychological sense that the conversation is starting anew. And since it is starting anew, the other person is

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more likely to be able to back down or apologize without losing face.

What you can do is use a process called disengaging. The idea behind disengaging is to allow the person some time to think about what he/she has been saying, and an opportunity to save face. It differs from time-outs with children in terms of how you setup up a disengagement, and how you communicate it.

As with time outs for children, disengaging allows the individual some time for reflection. As we have mentioned before, angry people act quickly and without great thought. Force them to think, or provide an opportunity for them to think and they may conclude they are going about things the wrong way.

Disengaging, or taking a break in the conversation can be effective in getting control over the interaction, and allowing the other person to think and act differently.

One more reason you may want to disengage is to allow YOUR-SELF some time to reflect and get your own feelings under control. If you find that a person is "getting to you", it may be best to disengage for a moment, take a few deep breaths, remind yourself of the many defusing techniques available to you, and then return.

Disengaging means calling a temporary halt to the conversation. This doesn't mean walking away without a word, or walking away in a huff. It usually means that you present a plausible reason for removing yourself from the presence of the hostile individual. You take a brief break, and return again to take control of the interaction.

This is the major difference between disengaging with an adult, and using a time out with a child. With a child, your intent, besides stopping the problematic behavior, is to teach the child something. With adults, that is NOT the point. While it may seem to you that parents could use a good "learning experience", it's not your job to impose it on a parent. Remember that. So, while you communicate fully with a child and explain the reason for a time out, you don't do that with an adult or parent.

You want to create disengagement. You do NOT want to draw attention to your reasons for doing so — to allow some time for reflection.

Take a look at the following example:

Parent: *"Every time I come to talk to you about my children you criticize the way I bring them up. Who do you think you are? I just think you have it in for me, and I can't stand seeing you, you F***** A * * * * *"* [person continues despite efforts by school employee]

The staff member realizes that to continue at this time would be

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pointless. The parent is not ready for rational discussion.

Staff: *"You know, Mr Talbot, I know you dislike these discussions. I have something I want to show you, but it's in my office desk Can you hold on a moment while I get it?"*

[Staff member exits to retrieve an article that briefly discusses something tangentially related to the issue at hand (note the article is not MEANT to be used to win the argument). He returns, holding out the article to the parent].

Staff: *"Mr. Talbot. I thought you might be interested in this article because [insert explanation]. I am sure both of us want the best for your children, and we **can** work this out. What can I do to help us work together right now?!"*

Parent: *"Look, I'm sorry to yell at you ... but I just can't stand it when you sound patronizing."*

Teacher: *"Nobody likes that feeling. I'll try not to do that. You can help by pointing out to me if I say something that bothers you. How does that sound?"*

Parent: *"That sounds reasonable, I guess."*

Look at what's happened here. While the teacher would have been justified in ending this discussion, she chose to hang in there, knowing that she was going to have to talk to the parent throughout the rest of the year. Rather than trying to to through this whirlwind of a parent, she disengages, retrieves something to show the person, and returns. You will notice that she also acknowledges Mr. Talbot's concerns and if you are really sharp you'll see how she couples a number of other tactics into her responses — empathy, offering choices, using questions, distraction technique.

When she returns, she doesn't wait for the parent to speak, but immediately seizes the conversation. She returns with something to use to distract Mr. Talbot. In this situation, the short break in the conversation allows him to realize he is being unreasonable and his behavior unacceptable, even in his own eyes.. His tone changes from very aggressive to more of a pleading for understanding. At this point the teacher knows that the storm is over.

When you use this tactic, it doesn't really matter WHAT you bring back, although you don't want to make it too obvious what you are doing. Often, offering coffee or something similar is a good choice, but this works only if you have to go to another room to get it.

Plausible Reasons

There is almost always something you can find that will sound like a plausible reason for disengagement. You can:

- consult a colleague

- consult your supervisor
- check policy or laws
- check a file or computer screen
- offer to get a cup of coffee for the client

Make the reason sound like it might be of value to the parent. If, for example, you offer up a pretext, one that seems selfish or self-centered (e.g.) returning an important phone call) that has nothing to do with him, the person is going to think that he is much less important than this “other thing”, you are going to do.

Variations and Things You Should Know

Consider offering choices to the other person when you disengage. For example:

“Sir, I want to check the policy just to make sure I have it right. I’ll be just a minute. If you like you can wait here, or take a seat in my office, whatever would be more comfortable. Do you have a preference?”

As with all the tactics in this book, use your common sense. The disengagement period should be relatively short — say one or two minutes. Longer than that and the tactic will backfire.

If the parent is occupied doing something during the disengagement, the length of time can be extended somewhat. As you well know, waiting without having anything to do to fill the time tends to increase anger and frustration.

Once again, if the parent says she’s in a huge hurry, show you respect that. Offering a hurried parent a cup of coffee when she’s just told you she’s late for another appointment shows you are NOT listening, and not bothering to understand.

When possible arrange for the person to be alone during the disengagement, or at least in a situation where it will be difficult to talk to others. If he has other people to talk to during the “break”, he is less likely to reflect on their behavior. It also gives him a forum to vent to them which in turn is likely to crank up his own anger levels.

Concluding Points

When you disengage, it should be for a short time only. Use your best judgment, but a long disengagement is more likely to anger the other person.

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Chapter 13 — Problem Solving And Negotiations Tactics

Introduction

The final component of the CARP system is problem solving. While we can talk about the importance of control and acknowledgment, when all is said and done, the parent hopes and expects that you will do something to help them with the substance of the problem or issue.

But, often we can't do exactly what they want. Perhaps the person has expectations that are totally unrealistic and based on a limited understanding of the laws, regulations, curriculum, policy or learning or teaching theory. Or, just as often, the parent will have only a vague idea of what she wants you to do.

The problem-solving process shows the other person that you take his or her complaint seriously, and that you are making the effort to do SOMETHING, even if that something is not exactly what the person wants. The most important part, though, is that once you engage in a problem-solving process, you might very well discover solutions that WILL address the parent's concerns that were not evident at the start of the conversation. That's a WIN-WIN.

What Is Problem Solving?

Problem solving involves a dialogue between you and the other person with the following goals:

- to arrive at a decision regarding what YOU will do, taking into account the rules, regulations and constraints you work under AND the concerns of the client.
- to determine courses of action that the CLIENT can take to pursue his/her own needs and concerns, and taking into account the rules and regulations of the system.
- To uncover possible solutions that address the issue under discussion, even if they are not immediately obvious to either of you.

The first two goals take into account, the realities of the system, and the needs and concerns of the parent and the student. Both must be present to undertake problem solving that will calm down an angry individual.

Problem solving is a complex area, and we don't have space to go into it in great detail. However, we can provide an overview for you. If you need more information, we suggest that you look for books and other resources that are available on the subject. However, briefly here are the steps:

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- Define the person's concerns or problem
- State your own requirements and limitations (Share Information)
- Explore alternatives available
- Work to agreement on course of action
- Follow thru

Tactic 51: Define Person's Concerns & Problem

You can't help someone unless you know exactly what the problem is. Often the person expresses vague concerns or displays unfocused anger. Your first step is to strip away the surface concerns presented by the parent and determine his or her real problem. We call the initial problem issue a parent brings to the table, the PRESENTING PROBLEM. Very often that presenting problem is so vague that conversations go around in circles with no hope of resolution. That's because many people aren't that good at defining and communicating what is at the root of their unhappiness, so the presenting problem is often vague, and not always reflective of what's REALLY going on.

Let's take a concrete example. Let's say a parent contacts you regarding disciplinary action taken against his son, John. He feels that the school's action is overkill and calls you to complain.

Parent: *"Look, I don't even think he would skip class. He's such a good boy. You must just have it in for him."*

[Note: What is the parent's problem here? Actually, we aren't sure. Is it the disciplinary act? Too severe? Inconvenient for the parent? Or is it that the parent believes his son didn't commit the offense? We don't know yet, and unless we can define the problem more clearly, we won't know what to do for the parent, and he's just going to get angrier.]

Teacher: *"So, you're concerned that there was a mistake made?"*

Parent: *"Well, yeah, but what really gets me is that because of this I'm going to have to lose work time. I'm gonna have to lose a day's pay!"*

Teacher: *"It's understandable that you are concerned. We certainly don't want to penalize you. We just want John to know that there are consequences to missing school. I'll check to see if there might have been a mistake, but I think you and I can work this out."*

Parent: *"OK. That sounds fair, but I can't miss work."*

Now we've gotten to the core of the problem. We now know the parent is very concerned that the disciplinary action might cause him to lose work time and pay. The two parties can now re examine the school's action to see if there is something that

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will meet the needs of both parties.

Analysis:

This is an example of how to move past the presenting problem to uncover what's "really bugging the person". The teacher makes the effort to find out what the parent's underlying concern is, and then moves to the problem solving process.

Make special note of how the teacher works to define the problem — by asking questions, and using reflective listening responses to get the parent to explore the issue more deeply.

Keep in mind that this logical, analytic approach wouldn't work if the parent was absolutely furious. To problem solve, both parties must be calm enough to think clearly, to focus on the problem, and to listen. If the client is not yet to this point, then you have to use the Control, Acknowledgment and Refocus strategies FIRST. You can't problem solve until the person is acting reasonably.

Timing and emotional states are important for another reason. In any problem-solving situation the more emotional a person is, the more likely he is to enter into hyper focus, a mental state that tends to get people "stuck in the box". Hyper focus causes people to latch on to ONE part of a problem, and not the totality of the problem. In effect this shuts down creative solutions. If you and the other person are stuck in hyper focus mode, you won't be able to find good alternatives — perhaps creative alternatives that create a WIN-WIN outcome.

Tactic 52: Provide Information

Members of the public don't often understand the systems they with which they interact. This seems more prevalent in government and educational settings. Outsiders will often ask for things that either don't make any sense, or are simply impossible. In problem solving it is critical that you explain the reasoning behind the way things are done, AND your own limitations. Try not to assume parental knowledge about even basic stuff, because if that assumed knowledge is lacking, you can get lost in a conversation where you aren't on the same wavelength.

The person needs to know:

- what you can and can't do
- why you can't do what he or she is asking or demanding

An important part of the problem solving process is to put your cards on the table. Some phrases may be useful to help you provide information.

- *Sir, let me explain what I can and can't do for you.*
- *Were you aware that our job is to make sure everyone is pro-*

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tected?

- *Perhaps nobody has taken the time to explain the situation to you. Let me try.*

Remember that your purpose in providing information is NOT TO DEFEND YOURSELF. If the person feels you are doing so (often based on your tone of voice), you can end up fueling more anger.

Tactic 53: Offer Alternatives & Suggestions

The parent or member of the public WANTS you to be helpful, of course. One way to appear helpful is to take the time to make suggestions regarding what the person can do next — the CHOICES available. Remember that we mentioned earlier that clients often feel helpless when interacting with government or schools, and this sense of helplessness fuels their anger and hostile behavior. By offering suggestions and alternatives, we tell the other person he/she does have options. This shouldn't be new to you because we've talked about it before, but the alternatives and solutions you discuss with a parent can also stimulate fresh thoughts for both of you on how to solve the parent's problem.

Offering alternatives/suggestions can and usually should involve suggestions about what YOU can do, in addition to what the parent can do. Don't make it sound like the entire responsibility for solving a problem rests with the parent, even though it does.

Tactic 54: Follow Through

When you reach agreement on a course of action, make sure that you can follow thru. You MUST do what you offer to do, so this means that you don't make promises you can't keep. Keep in mind that promises involving other people are harder to keep than promises that only involve you. For example, in some situations you may not be able to promise that "*John will call you back in the next five minutes*", since John might not be available. What you can do is say:

"I'll talk to John, and either John or I will get back to you in five minutes."

If you make a promise you can't keep, you are responsible for contacting the parent to let her know. For example, if you go to speak to John, and discover he is not able to discuss the person's problem at that time, you STILL need to contact the parent within five minutes, since that's what you promised. So you would follow thru by saying:

"Mr. Jones, I couldn't talk to John about your problem, but didn't want you to think I had forgotten about you. Here's what I suggest." [offer alternative suggestion].

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If you break a promise, and don't get back to the parent, you can't complain further about how unpleasant the person was, since you broke your word. It makes no difference if you are a receptionist, or the chair of the school board.

Extra Problem-Solving And Negotiation Tactics

Before we end the chapter, let's talk about a few other tactics that you can use during problem solving and negotiating.

Tactic 55: Create Or Engineer Agreement And Establish Common Ground

Expert negotiators and mediators know that getting two people to agree on small issues will open the door to agreement on the real issues. They start by creating agreement on little things first. You can use this technique in your own work. If the client says something you CAN agree with, make it clear that you DO agree (recall the use of agreement as a self defense technique?).

Or, create agreement by asking questions that are almost guaranteed to get agreement. For example:

"I'm sure that you want to settle this as quickly as possible, right?"

How many people are going to disagree? Not many.

Or CREATE agreement as follows:

"I agree that the process seems to take a long time. I am sure you would agree that you want to solve this."

In the same vein, don't forget to establish, and make clear the areas where you and the parent share common ground — what you both value, where your concerns overlap. That mitigates the parent's sense that you are on opposite teams, and coming from completely different perspectives. This is particularly important because parents often assume that because you are part of a system, or bureaucracy, that you don't care, and just apply rules that benefit YOU, rather than the parent or his or her children.

Tactic 56: Give Away Something

Some folks come into discussions wanting to "win the battle". This happens more often when a person is upset, and actually forgets the actual issue in the quest to win. The smart staff member will look for things to give away, or give in on, to give the impression that the other person is gaining "something". The question to ask yourself is: "Is there something this person wants that I can provide?"

Basically, we're talking about compromise here. You may not be able to bend, or give way on a position, because you have to abide by the policies and procedures of your employer, but there

will almost always be smaller, tangential things to give away. The “value” of your compromise isn’t as important as the fact that you are willing to try to meet somewhere in the middle. It’s as if what you “give up” in a negotiations is more symbolic, with the actual value of what you give up is of secondary importance.

One caution to keep in mind. We don't want to reward bad behavior by giving in, so we need to use this tactic only when the person is behaving politely. For example, a person who is yelling while waiting in a line is actually rewarded if you serve him or her out of turn. We don't want to reward bad behavior, and we don't want other parents to start believing the “squeaky wheel gets the grease”.

Dynamics Specific To Educators

A common complaint tendered by parents is that teachers or educational personnel tend to lecture, criticize or otherwise imply that the parent is at fault for the problem. Or perhaps, worse is when parents walk away feeling they have been treated like know nothing idiots.

It's easy for educators to fall into the trap of contributing to these perceptions, even if they are well-intentioned. Why? How?

First, many people (parents) do not have completely positive experiences with teachers. They remember what it was like to be in school, often from the child's point of view, and base their current perceptions of teachers and principals on those long past times. They may still see the teacher as “on the other side”, and remember being lectured or scolded. These left-over perceptions don't just “go away” when a person leaves the school system and this can be a significant impediment to building a productive relationship between two adults. For some parents, there is a hyper sensitivity to any hint that the teacher is treating them as they were treated when they were children.

There's a flipside. Teachers aren't always able to switch gears from communicating with their students, to communicating with the students' parents. The communication skills and techniques that can be important strengths for a Grade 3 teacher can, in fact, get in the way of communicating with adults.

In my opinion there is some truth to the parental accusation of patronizing behavior — being talked down to. I don't think teachers do it intentionally..they just forget to shift gears.

It's important that you be aware of your own communication style, and that includes the words you use, and the tone, and how they MUST be different when teaching your students and interacting with their parents.

There's one more dynamic in play here. When I do seminars with non-teachers who work in customer service, I ask who they feel are the toughest customers to work with. You'd think it might be

the intoxicated customer, or the dishonest customer, but in fact, they consistently rank teachers, and lawyers at the top of the list. Both teachers and lawyers are used to having some degree of formalized power in the work they do. For teachers, it's a necessity to exercise what little power and influence they have to keep order in a classroom. The problem, though comes from a demeanor that carries over into discussions with parents.

Teacher DO have a tendency to present themselves as “the experts”, and uninterested in the opinions of those they see as having less expertise. Whether that's justified or not, it creates a barrier to problem-solving WITH parents.

Try to monitor how you communicate with parents, and evaluate whether you might be subject to the natural tendency to presume you are an “expert”, and they are not. Also, try to be aware of any tendency to speak to adults like to you speak to your students. It may be appropriate. It may not be. It all depends on the context, so your own self-awareness is key. The better you understand how you communicate, the better you will be at presenting the proper “way of communicating” that fits your audience.

This isn't an issue of whether teachers/administrators, or parents are to blame. It really doesn't matter. What is important is that you realize that building bridges between people means modifying one's communication behavior to fit the context.

Chapter Conclusion

In a way we haven't done justice to the problem solving process, which includes elements of negotiation and conflict management. However, we have provided you with some concrete tactics that you can use during this phase. The important thing to remember is that problem solving will be ineffective if the other person is too angry to listen and think properly. If you find that the problem solving process is not working, you can use acknowledgment tactics to calm the person down, before proceeding to the actual problem.

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Chapter 14 — Assertive Limit Setting

We try to use “gentle” and indirect techniques to defuse hostile parents, but sometimes we need to set and enforce limits on hostile behavior. While it would be great if our defusing techniques worked in every single situation, that’s not a realistic assumption. What do you do when, regardless of your brilliant gentle attempts to defuse, things get worse? Do you have to “just take it”? In this chapter we guide you through the process of setting and enforcing reasonable limits regarding aggressive and insulting parent behavior.

Introduction

So far, you’ve learned almost fifty tactics for dealing with and defusing hostile people. For the most part these tactics are “gentle”, subtle, and use the least possible “force”. That is in line with our principle that we only use stronger tactics after we have determined that our more subtle techniques have not worked.

There will be times when the gentler techniques don’t work. What do you do when you spend time trying to defuse someone who just won’t calm down, and won’t stop behaving badly? What do you do when a client is consistently over the line that separates angry behavior from totally unacceptable behavior?

That’s where assertive limit setting comes in. Setting limits is a stronger approach to dealing with hostile people and is based on the premise that YOU also have rights. While we recognize that a parent should have some leeway in expressing his anger, you also have the right to feel safe, and to end interactions when the other person’s behavior is grossly inappropriate.

How you do it is important. If you allow yourself to get triggered, and lose your temper, you are likely to respond in an angry way, which may make the situation worse. However, if you follow the strategy of assertive limit setting, you will be handling the situation in a strong, polite way that makes it clear that you will not accept the behaviors the hostile person is exhibiting.

Assertive Limit Setting

Assertive limit setting is appropriate in two situations. First, you can use limits to end a conversation when you have determined that further conversation is not going to accomplish anything. Generally, you decide to do so based on a) **the individual’s behavior** and b) **failure of gentler defusing techniques**. Second, you use limit setting to encourage the parent to modify her behavior, so you can work together to build some sort of positive resolution.

Each of us has limits in terms of what we are willing to accept from an angry individual. Limit setting is a way to communicate

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our limits to the client, in the hope that he/she will modify his/her behavior so it is more constructive for both participants. If he or she doesn't, it's time to end the interaction.

Definition and Format

Let's define an assertive limit setting statement. An assertive limit setting statement conveys to the individual that:

- certain behaviors are unacceptable
- you are making a request of the person to change those behaviors (usually implied)
- there are consequences if the individual does not alter his behavior
- the consequences are chosen by the individual by virtue of whether he continues to act inappropriately

Let's look at an example:

"Sir, if you continue to swear and yell (1), I will have to end our conversation (2). Would you prefer to continue or stop now?" (3)

The first sentence **(1)** indicates the specific behaviors that are problematic. The part labeled **(2)** indicates the consequence that will occur if the behavior does not change, while the portion labeled **(3)** is a question that indicates that the client has the option of choosing whether the conversation continues or not. You will notice that the request for behavior change is not made explicitly, but is implicit (understood without pointing it out).

Let's take each of the components in turn.

Tactic 57: Describe Unacceptable Behavior

If we want the person to change his behavior, we need to be specific as to the behaviors that are unacceptable, and/or the behavior we want the individual to use instead of the offending behavior (in this case, lowering his voice.)

This means that when we describe behavior we **MUST** be specific in our descriptions. Don't say:

"Sir, unless you calm down, I will have to end our conversation".

This isn't specific enough, and does not refer to specific behavior. If you say something that is a judgment or inference, rather than describing behavior, you are likely to get the following argumentative response:

"Calm down!? Calm down? You think I'm not calm?!" [and so on]

By not being specific you are **MORE** likely to provide ammunition to the hostile person, something you don't want to do. Besides, the problem isn't that the person isn't calm — the problem is that the person is swearing and yelling. Being calm is about the parent's internal state. Your concern is not the inter-

nal state, but the behavior. Even if the parent remains “uncalm”, if the swearing and yelling stops, that solves the immediate problem.

The most important part of setting limits is to describe specific behaviors rather than vague non-behaviors.

Tactic 58: Request Behavior Change

You want to convey to the person that you are requesting that he cease doing what he is doing, and do something else. There are two ways of doing this. One is to make an explicit request. For example:

“I would appreciate it if you would stop yelling.”

The second is to have the request implicit. That means that you don’t make a specific verbal request. Instead, you phrase things so that your meaning is clear. When you say:

“If you continue to swear and yell, I will have to end the conversation...”

the person knows you are making a request to stop swearing and yelling.

Which approach is better? In most cases, the second is a better approach. Why? Remember that in the section on verbal self-defense we mentioned that using “I” statements may create additional argument. An angry person, a relative stranger, is not particularly interested in “what you appreciate”. Focusing on what YOU want, and YOUR feelings about his behavior is likely to create even more anger and hostility. By making your request, and beginning with the word “I”, you create the impression that you are focusing on your own motives, and not trying to help the person. That’s creates a higher risk of backlash.

While we want the upset parent to know that we are asking for a change in behavior, it’s often better to use an indirect implicit approach.

Tactic 59: State Consequences

You need to make clear what will happen if he continues to behave inappropriately, or in a way that “crosses your line”. The best way to state this is in an IF — THEN format.

“If you continue to yell, I will end the conversation” or

“If you don’t stop pounding the table, I will ask you to leave.”

Now, there are a few things to keep in mind when stating consequences.

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Use Cooperative Language

Don't use language that is confrontational (Type I language). That means avoiding things like:

- I will throw you out.
- You will be arrested.

It means staying away from "hot words". It means using "we" instead of "I", when possible. It means applying the other characteristics of cooperative and confrontational language we talked about earlier.

Use Enforceable Consequences

Don't set limits or consequences that you are unable or unwilling to enforce. When you set limits and state consequences, you **MUST** be prepared to enforce them. If you do not, you lose credibility and control.

Tactic 60: Offer Choice

There is a difference between punishing someone, and applying consequences. The difference is that when you punish someone, you are relying on power based words. The "punisher" does something TO the person being punished. The use of consequences is different. The power appears more shared. That is, it's clear that the other person has a choice. If the behavior stops, things will continue. If the person chooses not to stop the offensive behavior, the person also chooses that consequence — ending the conversation.

The difference is important. If the parent feels that you are punishing her by using power, she will rebel/respond with increased force. Power and force create more power and force. If she realizes she has choices, and still has some control over the outcome, she is less likely to be more aggressive.

For this reason we want to be clear that we are offering a choice to the person. So we say:

"Would you like to continue or stop now?"

"It's up to you whether we continue."

"We can continue if you stop [behavior], or you can return some other time."

Notice how the statements above don't sound personal? Compare with *"If you continue I will throw you out?"* which sounds like a personal threat. That's why you try to make it clear that the person has a choice.

Tactic 61: Enforcing Limits

Obviously, there isn't much point in setting limits if you aren't

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going to enforce them. Again, the way you enforce the limits is very important. For example:

Employee: “*Sir, if you continue to swear, I am going to ask you to leave*”. [Limit Setting]

Parent ignores and continues.

Employee: “*Sir, I warned you. Now get out right now.*” [Limit enforcement]

Not so good! In this example, the limit enforcement statement has a threatening tone (*I warned you*) and contains a command/order, which sounds emotional, personal and punishing. (*Now get out right now*). The employee’s limit enforcement statement may cause the person to become even more aggressive.

We want to enforce our limits in a calm way, again using cooperative Type 2 language, rather than confrontational language.

Enforcing limits contains the following parts.

1. Reference to the limits stated previously.
2. A request to comply with the consequence.
3. An offer for further help.

For example:

“*Sir, I explained to you that I won’t continue this conversation if you continue to yell (1). I am ending this discussion now (2), but you are welcome to come back some other time.*” (3)

The first part **(1)** refers to the earlier limit. Don’t use the word warn, or anything similar that sounds threatening. “I warned you” it sounds like a threat—like a personal issue or attack.

The second sentence **(2)** involves stating that the consequence is being applied. It’s also an implicit gentle request for the parent to comply. The third component **(3)** is the offer of further help. Why do we do this?

We want to send the message that our concern is not with the person as a human being, but with that person’s behavior. We also want to convey that we **WILL** try to help, and we are not permanently cutting off the parent. By adding this statement, we show that we are not making this a personal issue and not forcing the person into a corner.

One more note about the third component. When you suggest that the person can come back at some other time, don’t say:

“*You are welcome to come back when you calm down.*”

While this may **seem** like a reasonable thing to say, it tends to

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come across as patronizing and is not much different than the following statements:

- “You are welcome to come back when you get a grip.”
- “You are welcome to come back when you smarten up.”
- “You are welcome to come back if you act responsibly.”

These are patronizing and offensive. Don’t do it.

Then What Happens?

Assume you have set some limits, and these limits are ignored. You then enforce those limits by requesting something, or stating that you are ending the conversation. One of two things is going to happen. The individual will comply (e.g. leave), or not comply. If the person responds positively (complies), you are pretty much done. But what if the person won’t leave?

This is the point where you must be very careful. Your reaction will depend on the situation. If the person is in your office, and you ask him to leave and are refused, avoid a “head-to-head” confrontation.

Provided the individual is not a physical threat, you can offer another choice. Look at the following example which takes place in the principal’s office.

Parent: “Sir, if you continue to yell, I am going to have to end this conversation. It’s up to you whether you want to continue.”

Parent continues to yell.

Principal: “I explained to you that I won’t continue if you yell. I’m going to end this conversation, but you are welcome to come back some other time.”

Parent: “So you want me to leave? I’m not going anywhere. Just try to make me go.”

Principal: “Sir, I’m not going to force you to leave. It’s really up to you what happens next. However, I’m stepping out. If you want to stay here for a little while to think, that’s fine. However, if you aren’t gone in twenty minutes, we will have to contact security (police) to escort you out of the office. It’s up to you.”

Now, notice what the Principal does:

- She reassures the client that there will be no physical confrontation initiated by the principal.
- She gives up something by saying the parent can stay for some reasonable period of time.
- She highlights the issue of choice.
- She then states another consequence (security).
- Throughout the whole set of statements, she uses cooperative language, and stresses choice.

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Now to continue, in ten or fifteen minutes the employee returns to the office door and says:

Principal: *“Mr. Jones, have you decided what you want to do next?”*

Parent: *“I wanna talk some more.”*

Principal: *“OK, are we agreed that the yelling will stop?”*

Parent: *“OK”*

Principal: *“OK, we can talk some more provided there is no yelling.”*

In this situation the parent realized that the principal was in control of the interaction and he chose to alter his behavior.

If the parent responds negatively, then the principal can call security, if that option is available. These days most schools and school divisions have strong policies and procedures to handle these kinds of situations, since school security is such a priority. Follow those policies, and remember that it's not your job to “make someone leave”.

Remember one thing. **It isn't your job to “throw someone out”.** It's dangerous, so don't get involved in it. If a person refuses to leave, then often it is best to exit the situation, inform your colleagues and boss, and just let the person cool off alone.

Chapter Conclusion

Setting and enforcing limits is an important part of the defusing hostility process. But you **MUST** be aware that limit setting and enforcement will work effectively when you do it correctly, and may blow up in your face if you sound punishing, and power oriented.

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Chapter 15 — For Principals, Administrators And Managers

Introduction

In the previous chapters, we outlined almost fifty tactics to defuse hostility, but we haven't specifically addressed the behavior and roles that principals, administrators, managers and supervisors play in the process. Just to clarify this chapter focuses on the special positions held by:

- Principals and Vice-Principals
- Superintendents
- Supervisors of support staff
- Department heads
- School Trustees

Since administrators deal directly with parents, taxpayers and community members, the tactics we've mentioned so far apply to them. However administrators also play other roles in the organization and have additional responsibilities. Specifically these additional responsibilities relate to the following:

1. Reinforcing the use of defusing strategies on the part of employees.
2. Ensuring the work environment is as safe as possible.
3. Communicating safety policy to staff.
4. Communicating / explaining other important policies to staff.
5. Reversing staff decisions.
6. Serving as "models" for how to handle conflict with parents and tax payers.

Let's take a look at some specific tactics.

Reinforcing Defusing Tactics

Administrators influence the degree to which staff use defusing strategies. Keep in mind that the manager/supervisor plays a leadership role in the organization. Staff take their cues regarding appropriate and inappropriate behavior from the people above them in the organization. Not only do administrators need to congratulate staff for effective defusing, but they need to set a tone as to how these emotional situations should be handled. Staff look to what "leaders" do, much more than at what "leaders" say, so how administrators deal with their staff will actually affect how those staffers behave with respect to parents and tax payers.

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Tactic 62: Model Appropriate Behavior

The best way to encourage staff to use professional and effective methods for dealing with hostile and emotional parents is to model the behavior you want them to use. If you treat staff and parents the way you want your staff to treat school stakeholders, staff will realize that this is the “standard” of behavior. If, however, you treat staff or parents in ways that increase hostility, staff will pick up on your behavior. And, it is your behavior that sets the standard, not just your words.

Tactic 63: Support Skill Building

Apart from modeling defusing tactics, administrators can also create a climate where skill building can occur. For example, managers can arrange for and encourage staff to attend professional development activities on defusing hostility, conflict resolution, negotiating or on any topic that builds their skills at interacting with parents. Administrators can also encourage staff to talk about difficult situations during staff meetings, so staff can learn from each other. The latter can be particularly useful, and is a practice adopted by some of my clients and it costs nothing.

At regularly scheduled staff meetings, set aside a short period of time (e.g. fifteen minutes) to discuss a hostile “case” that has occurred. One person presents the case to the rest of the group, and people can brain-storm around other strategies that can be used. Or, the case can be a “success story”, where a staff member shares what worked well.

Tactic 64: Debriefing With Staff

Managers/administrators can support staff learning by debriefing when hostile situations occur. For example, if a hostile parent is referred to the principal, rather than simply forgetting about the incident, the principal can sit down with the staff member to discuss how he/she handled it, and to provide information about how the principal handled it. This need not be a long process or a formal, unpleasant one. The best tone to take is one that stresses learning and prevention. Both principal and teacher can learn this way.

If you are going to debrief staff, it is important that it become an “organizational habit”, so staff don’t feel they are being singled out. To work towards creating a learning tone, be prepared with questions to ask the employee, such as:

- *How was the parent behaving?*
- *How did you react?*
- *What seemed effective/ineffective?*
- *What would you do differently?*
- *How do you feel now?*

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You can also describe the process you used with the parent. You can make a few suggestions for future situations, but make sure you are specific, and refer to the staffer's behavior, not him/her as a person. And only make one or two suggestions so the recipient doesn't feel overwhelmed.

Make sure that it is clear that you are working with the teacher/staffer to avoid future unpleasant situations, that you are playing a supportive coaching role, rather than a "judging" role.

Finally, the debriefing process is an opportunity for you to help relieve some of the stress the staff member may feel about the situation. For this reason, listen at least as much as you talk.

Tactic 65: Recognize Appropriate Behavior

Administrators don't always recognize when employees have defused hostile situations effectively. Staff need to know you value what they do, and to feel that you are aware of the difficulties they face. It is very important to recognize effective defusing behavior.

Recognition can be expressed in individual meetings with staff as appropriate, or in a group setting, where you can point out specific incidents that were handled well. For example:

"Before we end our meeting, I wanted to point out some really good work by Joanne. Last week, you may remember, a parent came in and was yelling and screaming about [whatever]. Joanne was able to calm the person down by keeping her cool and using some empathy statements. I know it is very difficult to deal with these situations, and I think we should congratulate Joanne for being able to defuse a really difficult and stressful situation."

Another way to recognize effective behavior "under fire" is to send a note to the individual, perhaps posting it where other staff can see it, and even including a copy in the personnel record of the staff member. Wording can be similar to the above.

It's so easy to forget the little heroic acts teachers and educational personnel execute on an almost daily basis. Administrators play a huge role in making staff feel they are appreciated, particularly when they effectively resolve tough situations with parents, stakeholders and community members.

Tactic 66: Effective Reversing of Employee Decisions

There are times when a principal or administrator will reverse a staff member's decision. Sometimes it will be because the teacher has made an error, but more often reversals are a result of a judgement call on the part of the principal.

Reversing a decision, when the reversal benefits the parent or

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student, can be an effective way to terminate a hostile situation. However, you need to know that reversals must be done effectively.

Be aware that reversing a decision may appear like you are rewarding undesirable behavior. We don't want to grease the squeaky wheel too often. When reversing a decision, it should be clear why you are doing so. Explain the reasons to the staff members involved. Don't "reverse and forget". COMMUNICATE!

It's frustrating to staff to have their decisions reversed. A common problem is that administrators don't take the time to explain why a decision has been reversed, so employees feel their competence is being questioned. Make it clear to the employee why you changed the decision.

Tactic 67: Communicating/Explaining Other Policies To Staff So They Can Explain To Parents

An important aspect of defusing hostility is the ability to explain WHY certain decisions have been made. We have discussed this in the chapter on problem-solving, but just to reiterate, angry members of the public need to know that your decisions are not made arbitrarily, and that rules and regulations serve some purpose. Staff defusing hostile people need to be able to explain to parents the reasons behind decisions, or to provide information.

In order for staff to be able to explain things to parents, they need to understand the reasoning behind policies and regulations. Sadly, not all employees know why things are done a particular way. It is important that the reasoning behind policies and procedures be clear to staff so they can convey them intelligently to members of the public.

Nothing annoys people more than a staff member who can't explain the reasoning of a decision, or the thinking behind a procedure.

We suggest that staff be periodically "re-oriented" about policies and procedures, and the reasons for them. And, of course, when things are changed, it must be clear to staff, why changes have been made.

Remember that a well-informed employee who understands why things are done will be better able to defuse frustrated clients by explaining the reasons behind decisions.

Work Environment Safety

Over the past five years or so, some dramatic incidents of school violence have occurred, highlighting the importance of security and student and staff safety. It's a sad state of affairs that these violence incidents have occurred, but it's a good thing that we are now more cognizant of school safety. Much if most of the tactics that follow should be familiar to most school administrators,

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but because safety is so important, it's worth revisiting, if only as a reminder.

Administrators have a major responsibility to ensure that the environment is as safe as possible. Often this will involve looking at the environment to make sure that it is arranged so that it promotes safety for both staff, students and parents.

Tactic 68: Conduct A Safety Audit

A safety audit is a process where you examine your environment and policies to ensure that they support creating the safest work environment possible. Safety audits are commonly undertaken with respect to workplace space — the school, but can also address how those that work outside of the primary location carry out their responsibilities. For example, if staff meet with parents outside of the school, do they have cell phones to use in case of emergency? Are there standard “check in” procedures if meeting parents elsewhere?

You can undertake a safety audit yourself, but we suggest that you make use of law enforcement agencies and the services they provide. Often your local law enforcement agency can make suggestions about how to arrange your office space, and suggest other things you can do to maximize the physical safety of all concerned. A good place to start is with the community relations division of your local police force.

Remember that a safety audit includes two components — an evaluation of the physical environment, and an evaluation of existing policies and procedures that may impact on safety.

Tactic 69: Create Policy On Violence

One of the hardest parts of dealing with hostile people, particularly those extreme in their behavior, is determining what one can and should do. Some of my clients have chosen to develop a written policy that explains to staff what they are expected to do in particular situations. This reduces the ambiguity and stress experienced by staff. It is a step that I recommend to ALL organizations, including schools, and school board offices that deal with members of the public.

At this point, most school jurisdictions have developed workplace violence policies and procedures. Policies vary, of course, but generally they include some or all of the following:

- when staff can terminate service
- how staff are expected to communicate termination of service
- when staff should request backup (security, police, etc.)
- how staff should request backup
- how threats should be handled
- when management should be involved

- when it is appropriate to use “panic buttons”
- reporting forms (incident reports)

One of the best ways to create your own policy is to contact other organizations that may have done this. It is fairly easy to adapt someone else’s policy to your situation. However you go about it, your policy should be relatively short, not require huge amounts of paperwork, and be unambiguous. And, it should reflect the experience of those “on the line”. Don’t develop a policy of this sort without extensive consultation with front line staff. Front line staff can “reality check” these policies, since many ideas that seem good at first glance don’t actually work when implemented. Front line staff will be able to point out flaws in implementation, often before a policy goes into effect.

Tactic 70: Communicate Safety Policy

You would think it would be fairly clear that simply creating a “violence in the workplace” policy is not sufficient and that each employee needs to understand it. Communication is obviously important. My experience is that a good number of organizations develop excellent policies on the subject but fall short when it comes to communication. Even in organizations that have had such policies in place for several years, I find a good number of people who don’t know what the policy means, or have found that when they follow the policy, they get hassled by administrators.

As an example, one organization (a government office) developed a policy, and installed “panic buttons” at front counters. The policy stated that when an employee felt a potential for physical harm, he was to hit the panic button, and this would summon additional personnel or security.

Unfortunately, the manager of the installation made it clear that staff were NOT to follow this policy unless the threat was immediate and obvious. He said something to the effect of “*You’d better have a damn good reason for using it.*” At the same time, staff were encouraged NOT to file incident reports, and NOT to summon the police when necessary, because these actions created “huge paperwork ‘hassles’”.

Not surprisingly, staff were confused and angry about the manager’s clear violation of corporate policy. In this case the problem was that the manager had not understood that he was expected to implement the policy as written, and that this was part of his job. The problem was inadequate communication to and from the manager. Fortunately, this didn’t result in any instances of violence, but it did create an almost toxic work environment, where employees simply didn’t trust the employer to take their safety seriously.

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This is an extreme case. More often the policy is developed and circulated in writing, to be forgotten the next week. We suggest that the policy be discussed at meetings when it is introduced. We also suggest that the policy be discussed in an ongoing way. Principals and administrators can revisit the policy during staff meetings, requesting input, comments, and real life experiences about how it is working. This makes the policy come to life, and says to employees that management is taking its safety obligations seriously.

Chapter Summary

We have discussed a number of tactics related to how management can support staff in dealing with hostile parents. Don't underestimate the importance of the management role. Non-supportive principals who communicate inconsistently can seriously affect the ability of staff to deal with difficult parents, while effective managers can be valuable assets to staff, reducing the "fall-out" from hostile situations.

We suggest that administrators, managers and supervisors complete the checklist on the following page that outlines responsibilities and actions you can undertake.

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Principal/Administrator Checklist For Helping Staff Deal With Difficult Interactions

Task	Yes	Not
I have ensured my staff are well trained in		
I model appropriate defusing behavior when		
I model appropriate defusing behavior when		
I use staff meetings to discuss difficult defusing cases so we can all learn from each other.		
I debrief staff after difficult defusing situa-		
I publicly recognize when an employee defuses a difficult parent or member of the public.		
I coach my staff to help build their defusing skills in a spirit of learning, and not judgment.		
I privately congratulate employees when they		
I have initiated a yearly safety audit to look at how we can structure the school environment to promote safety.		
I have invited law enforcement to talk to staff		
We have a written policy on safety/violence.		
I have ensured that staff and management understand the safety policy.		
I have obtained input about the safety policy		
When I reverse an employee decision, I explain the reasoning to staff.		
I ensure that staff understand reasons behind regulations and policy.		
I have developed my own defusing hostility		

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Chapter 16 — The Effect of the Medium—Email and Telephones

Before we discuss the various technologies and media by which you communicate with parents and community, here's an important point. **When the medium changes, so does communication.** Here's a simple example. When you talk to a loved one on the phone and say: *"I'll see you tomorrow"* is it the same as standing together, face to face and saying the identical thing? It IS the same words, right?

It's not just the words that communicate. Media differ in terms of the "sub-channels" they include and the diversity of information they can convey, with face to face interactions being the richest. More is communicated in person than on the telephone, which, in turn is different from, let's say, e-mail. This alters how you use the different media. As another example, consider the differences between television and radio. The skills needed to come across well on television are quite different than those required to come across well on the radio.

The medium alters the message. Just as importantly, different messages are suited for different media. Part of dealing with parents now involves choosing the RIGHT medium for the type of communication or issue. This idea hasn't fully penetrated into the heads of those that claim that social media contacts will replace email and the telephone. Blogs, Facebook and Twitter have so many severe limitations that they simply are not suitable for most CONVERSATIONS with parents. They may be useful for superficial contacts and announcements, but fail miserably when it comes to conversations about serious, and usually confidential discussion.

Let's begin by discussing the most familiar medium (besides face to face) for interacting with angry and difficult parents and members of the public — the telephone.

Telephone Communication

Many educational staff deal with parents and community members on the phone. Some feel that angry people are easier to deal with via phone, while others feel that hostile people are more difficult on the telephone. Here are some things to consider.

First, there is a tendency for hostile people to be MORE abusive in telephone conversations. The reason is that they don't see you as a person, but as a disembodied voice. People WILL say things on the telephone that they wouldn't say if they were standing in front of you. It's that "depersonalization" process.

Second, one advantage of telephone conversations is that you do not face an immediate physical threat. This may allow you to feel

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less intimidated, although with the advent of cell phones, you don't know if the person on the phone is 10 feet away from you.

Third, because telephones involve voice only communication, you may need to adopt a different, stronger tone than you would in person. That is because you can't use non-verbal tactics (e.g. body language) to take control of the interaction.

Fourth, remember that you have more control over phone conversations as compared to in person discussions. It's easier to end a phone conversation than it is to end an in-person one

There's a summary of advantages and disadvantages of telephone based communication in Table 16.1.

Let's look at some tactics that apply specifically to telephone conversations.

Tactic 71: Use A Stronger Tone

When trying to gain control of a telephone conversation, speak

Advantages	Disadvantages
You have more control (terminate discussion)	Person can keep calling, you probably still need to answer
Provides extra feeling of safety from violence	Poor medium for communicating bad news or with emotional people since there is no non-verbal feedback.
Conversation is not available to a lot of other people/onlookers	Difficult to communicate with more than one person (e.g. a couple or family if that's required)
Interaction does not require travel for you or other person, making it more convenient	As with face-to-face, details tend to get lost, so not effective on its own if issues are complex
	Tendency for caller to be more abusive due to perception of anonymity
	Can attract chronic nuisance callers who just like to complain or are lonely

Table 16.1 Advantages/Disadvantages of Telephones

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more loudly than you would in person. This doesn't mean yelling, but it may mean raising your voice so you can be heard. Louder volume should NOT be accompanied by an angry tone, or one that communicates frustration.

Tactic 72: Use a Very Quiet Volume

Using a louder tone of voice can work to gain control, but so can speaking quietly. This forces the client to listen. If you try a louder tone and it is ineffective, try speaking very very quietly, so your words are barely audible to the other person. This may be enough to cause the person to pause, and ask you to repeat yourself, returning control to you.

Tactic 73: Use More Obvious Word Stresses

In a face-to-face interaction your non-verbal behavior is used to accent the important parts of what you are saying. On the phone you can't do this. You may want to accent your words in a different, more obvious way.

Let's look at the following sentences. Try to hear the differences in word stress. When you come to a capitalized word, that means that the word is emphasized or stressed.

Sir, I must have your name in order to help you.

Note we haven't capitalized any words to indicate heavy emphasis. When spoken this might sound OK, but it also might come off as disinterested due to the mild or non-existent word.

Look at this example.

Sir, I MUST have your NAME in order to HELP you.

The capitalized words are the ones that are stressed. This pattern conveys energy and conviction due to the heavier emphasis on some of the words. It comes across as "something to pay attention to". On the phone, you probably want to use the next example, though.

Now, the third example.

SIR, I MUST have your NAME, in order to HELP you.

In this example, we emphasize an extra word (SIR), and emphasize the stressed words more heavily. (the capitalized words). This slightly stronger set of stresses is more appropriate on the phone. One tip -- don't emphasize too many words in a sentence, since this will sound angry. Better to put extra stress on fewer words.

It's hard to convey word stress patterns on paper. Try to "hear" the differences by saying the examples out loud.

Tactic 74: Always Summarize

So much information gets lost or distorted in both face to face

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and telephone conversations. The fact that you have discussed an issue with the parent, and seemingly come to an agreement, does not mean that you both understood the conversation in the same way.

Therefore at the end of any phone conversation take a few seconds to summarize what you said, and what the other person said, and any agreements made, including actions each can or will take. It sounds like this:

“So, let me recap. I’m going to send you a new copy of your bank statement, and you’ve promised to make sure the overdraft is paid before April 2nd. Is that how you see it?”

This will also help unearth and avoid misunderstandings that can be resolved DURING the conversation, rather than discovering them much later.

Tactic 75: Use Follow ups/Written Note When Possible

Verbal summaries can reduce misunderstanding and future conflict, but there is no substitute for the printed word (paper or e-mail) as a means of summarizing a conversation. Written follow ups are important when there is a significant degree of detail the parent must be aware of, including dates, times, specific regulations, contact names, and so forth.

Following up with details can be very effective in reducing misunderstandings or at least catching them before they blow up, but of course, there is the practical issue of time. Do your best given the time and practical constraints you may have.

Written summaries prevent misunderstandings that, left unrecognized, can create conflict.

Tactic 76: Use Other Relevant Tactics

Almost all of the tactics that relate to verbal behavior work equally well on the phone or in person. The CARP system applies, as do verbal self-defense techniques, acknowledgment techniques, disengaging, etc. In particular, be prepared to set limits and enforce them, being sure to let the caller know that he or she is welcome to call back when ready to abide by the limits you have set. This is because it’s often not possible for an employee to “refuse service” to a parent without incurring additional grief down the road.

Tactic 77: Telephone Silence Revisited

Tactic 33 (Telephone Silence) was described in Chapter 8, as a means of gaining control of a telephone interaction. It’s included here because it is SO important.

When a caller will not stop talking on the phone long enough for you to get a word in edgewise or obtain even the basic

information you need to try to help, you **MUST** get the person to be quiet, or it's all a waste of time. If you interrupt, it tends to increase the length of time the person talks, since he or she restarts the rant from the beginning.

The solution is to be completely silent. Make sure no sounds reaches the microphone in the phone, or at least, as little sound as possible. Relatively quickly, the person will eventually ask "*Are you there?*" At this point you respond, take control of the conversation, and use the rest of the CARP model. It doesn't work all the time, but then again, nothing does.

Tactic 78: Chronic Nuisance Caller Tactic

Since calling on the phone is so easy, some people call repeatedly to voice their concerns, or because they are lonely. Often such callers don't have any particular issue that can be dealt with through problem-solving, and they can eat up lots of time because they call so often.

Your employer may frown on "cutting someone off" completely by refusing to answer their phone calls, and you can't really "order" them to stop calling. In effect the only things you can do, besides dodging phone calls (which isn't recommended) are a) to elicit their cooperation and b) to set and enforce assertively constructed limits.

Often, chronic callers are fairly pleasant, so you can request, suggest or assert that one call per [day, week] is all you can handle, but that you would be happy to spend a few minutes talking if it's once a [day, week]. Then if the person calls more often, or the caller tries to extend each call beyond a minute or two, apply limits and enforce them. Eventually, your chronic caller will "learn the rules" and abide by them, and/or call somewhere else for his or her conversations.

Certainly, it's understandable if this doesn't fit your busy schedule, and if you have many chronic callers, you aren't going to be able to give this "service" to callers. However, keep in mind that you don't have the control to never answer the calls of chronic callers or to hang up on them. If you do either, you may be called on the carpet yourself. Investing a little time once in a while may be preferable to creating a situation where there is head to head open conflict.

If the chronic caller is calling about a specific issue -- an issue you cannot help him or her with, then look to redirect the person to talk to someone who has more authority (Redirect tactic—49). Offer a phone number if possible, or an address (e-mail or otherwise), and do so courteously. Consider asking the person to call you back in a week or two to let you know how it all turned out.

If you have an "over-caller", someone who calls repeatedly in a

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short time for someone else in the office who is unavailable, here's an example how one might handle the situation if one is an administrative staffer.

Caller: *"Is George Pappas in?"*

Employee: *"No, he's still away from his desk. Is this Ms. Meriwether calling?"*

Caller: *"Yes, it is. Why is he never in his office, or is he dodging my calls? I need to talk to him urgently, and he's not calling back."*

Employee: *(1) "I can see you are pretty concerned, so here's what I can do. (2) I handle all of Mr. Pappas messages, and I promise you that I will give this to him personally, by hand, and let him know that you'd like to speak to him immediately. (3) I know he's very busy today, so let me set up an appointment for a phone call. I'll call you at 3:30 on the dot, and that way you don't have to sit by the phone all day. (4) How's that sound?"*

In (1) the employee acknowledges the caller's feelings and concerns. In (2), assurances are given and a promise, and in (3) the employee offers to solve the immediate problem of getting the two connected. In (4) the employee uses a question to provide a sense of choice.

Of course, what you say will depend on what commitments you can reasonably make. If the person continues to call back, then return to the promise, set assertive limits, enforce them, and end the conversation with *"Mrs. Meriwether, I'll speak to you at 3:30. Bye for now"*

Tactic 79: Having And Using Referral Resources

It's common to have callers who have been told to call you on a particular issue, or think you are the person to call, when, in fact, you have nothing to do with the issue. Those callers can be unruly because they will feel they have been given the runaround, or false information. Rather than simply saying you can't help, the proper approach is to have a list of contacts in to whom you can refer the individual. Having a list of referral contacts for handy for recurring situations is a good idea.

For example, you could get a call from a person calling the school about a tax issue. You have nothing to do with school taxes, but if you say *"I'm sorry, but we have nothing to do with setting school tax rates"*, and stop there, you'll anger the person, and invite abuse, since that response is unhelpful. If you have a list of resources/contacts to which you can refer the person, or better yet, actually transfer the person to the proper contact, you've made an effort, and you'll be less likely to be targeted for verbal abuse. Best of all you know you've helped.

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Communication Via E-mail

E-mail has supplanted paper letters and even phone calls as a major method people contact organizations, primarily because it is cheaper, and more convenient and **appears** faster to users. While e-mail may resemble “written communication (paper), it doesn’t work the same way, and effective communication via e-mail, particularly with angry or upset individuals requires taking into account the unique characteristics of e-mail as a communication medium.

You are probably familiar with basic e-mail etiquette and practices like proper quoting in replies, not using all capital letters, and so on, so we will focus on the more important characteristics of e-mail that can cause problems with people contacting you.

The Reliability Issue

When you write a letter you don’t think much about the reliability of the mail system or worry whether the recipient will actually receive it. It’s something we take for granted, although perhaps we should give it a bit more thought.

Similarly, with e-mail we make the assumption that an e-mail sent to a parent is going to be received and read. Unfortunately, e-mail is not nearly as reliable as most people think and that can cause communication problems. It’s easy to forget that while we might send an email, that doesn’t mean the recipient will get it, or read it if it does arrive.

When parent contacts the school about an issue, or asks a question, a number of things can happen, and only ONE of them is good. We hope the individual receives, reads fully, and understands the contents of the message as you intended. That’s what we expect, but it’s not quite that simple. Here are the bad possibilities, all of which represent ways the communication can “go bad”.

Message gets:

- lost in YOUR e-mail server
- sent but gets lost in the Internet on way to recipient
- to recipient’s mail server but server crash results in loss
- to mail server but account no longer exists (mail bounces - you may or may not get notified)
- to mail server but is deleted because it is mistaken as junk mail (spam)
- to mail server but is deleted because your entire domain is blocked (this is common due to forged e-mails)
- to software set up to “authenticate” you, but you never receive notification.
- to recipient mail box but person doesn’t check the account

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anymore.

- to recipient mail box but is never seen because mail client deletes it or sends it to the junk mail folder)
- to recipient but it's missed among a mass of other mail.
- to recipient but person doesn't read it completely.

Daunting isn't it? It would be great if we knew exactly what percentage of e-mail goes awry, but it's hard to assess this because of the use of anti-spam software. The available numbers, while perhaps not definitive, are worrisome. In 2004, a study of major ISP's (Internet service providers), suggested that as much as 25% of REQUESTED corporate e-mail was inaccurately identified as junk mail and sent to the junk folder or deleted.

How do we cope with a potentially unreliable mail system, then, when there is strong pressure to provide help and services to parents and the community through e-mail. Here are some ideas

Tactic 80: Modify Your E-mail Mindset

Get out of the habit of assuming e-mail you send and e-mail people send to you always arrives properly. If you don't address this you are going to make mistakes and wade through misunderstandings and problems that are unnecessary. Do not assume. When involved in an email discussion, if it appears you are talking at cross-purposes, the FIRST question to ask is "*Let's make sure we've been receiving each other's emails, OK?*"

Tactic 81: Use An E-mail Disclaimer Notice

Organizations often tag onto the end of an e-mail some disclaimer or notice about confidentiality, and while that may be a good idea, it's far less useful than having a single disclaimer that explains that e-mail tends to be unreliable and if no e-mail response is received within x days, to follow up using a specified phone number. Not only should such a disclaimer be on each e-mail, but it should be on every website, blog, or other online presence, beside the list of e-mail contacts.

We cannot control the reliability of e-mail, but by being informed, and by informing email users, we can prevent problems and anger when e-mail goes awry. Better to have a parent understand the reason he has not received a response is due to lost mail rather than disinterest.

Tactic 82: Use E-mail Follow-Ups

When you send an e-mail, if you do not receive a response when one might be expected, follow up with another e-mail to investigate. Simply say that you responded to the person's request on [date] and that you want to make sure your e-mail reply was received. That said, it doesn't completely get around

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the e-mail reliability issue, and it does require you to track outgoing e-mails, or use some sort of reminder/bring forward system. Do it if it's possible.

Tactic 83: Use Other Follow-Up Methods

Obviously following up on an e-mail with another e-mail isn't always going to work, so if the conversation is "important", you may want to follow up with a phone call, provided the individual has already provided his or her number. As with the e-mail follow up this demonstrates effort on your part. Now that Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are so popular you could also try contacting the person on one of those, using the search function to find their login name(s).

Keep in mind that some people are very concerned about privacy issues and will wonder how you got their phone number (if they hadn't provided it) or their Facebook or Twitter identities. Some may be deeply offended by a contact that has not been previously authorized, so for this reason consider whether contacting the person via an alternative medium without permission is absolutely necessary.

E-mail: Not Conversation, but Not Letter Communication

E-mail is a deceptive medium because it appears to share characteristics of a real time conversation, since the interchanges can be so fast. It also appears to share the characteristics of letter communication. In fact, it **incorporates the worst aspects** of both, requiring great care in communication. It's a very unique medium.

Below are some e-mail characteristics and some tactics to counter-balance the challenges of communicating with angry people via e-mail.

- E-mail is an impulsive medium compared to letter writing. It's "impulsive" because people write off the tops of their heads, and hit the send button, often NOT reading before sending.
- As with the telephone (only worse), people say things in e-mail that are not considered or reflected upon. Hence, it's hard to judge the degree of upset from the tone of an e-mail, and it is easy to send an e-mail that conveys the wrong meaning or is easy to misinterpret. Many a person has wanted to "recall" an e-mail sent while angry, and some have even lost their jobs as a result of an impulsive e-mail!
- People often do not read e-mails in their entirety, as is also the case with anything that appears on their computer screens. Comprehension of your message(s) may be low, contributing to difficulties in resolving the person's concerns.

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It's not uncommon to ask a question via e-mail, only to have your question "ignored".

Tactic 84: Treat E-mail As The Impulsive Medium It Is and Ignore The Bait.

Some people like to write irate e-mails, just like some people like to call on the phone to complain, even though they don't expect anything to change. E-mails are so easy to send that you can collect chronic e-mail senders just as you might collect chronic phone callers. In any event, treat the e-mail content as you would any bait. Ignore the "bait component", and if there is an issue that needs to be dealt with, refocus back to the problem. However, be sure to take note of the next tactic.

Tactic 85: Move Away From E-mail For Emotional Content

E-mail gives users a false sense of emotional connection, but as with any words (on a page or a screen), communicating emotion and/or within emotional situations is difficult using non face-to-face media. For this reason, it's best to rely on e-mail more for the communication of facts, places, times, meeting confirmations, etc., than for the offering of emotional support or addressing emotionally charged issues.

Be prepared to contact the e-mailer by phone (it's better than e-mail although not as effective as face-to-face for emotionally charged situations).

Tactic 86: Be Prepared For Lack of Comprehension and Structure For Comprehension

Most people assume that reading an e-mail or information on a computer screen is the "same" as reading a book or a letter. It's not. Eye scans (the pattern the eyes take) when reading a screen are different than on paper, and reading from a screen results in significantly less understanding of the content than does reading from paper, all things being equal.

This means that when you communicate via e-mail, you will almost certainly come across rather baffling interpretations of what you have written., Recipients tend to scan, and fill in details from their own heads, rather than read each word. This also probably applies to you when YOU read e-mail.

E-mail is a poor medium for helping someone UNDERSTAND complex things, although it is a good medium for summarizing complex things as a follow up to face-to-face or telephone conversations.

Always be alert to the possibilities of misreading, or partial reading on your part and by others. When you send e-mail always re-read it before sending it, and try reading it from the

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perspective of the recipient. Read every word. In addition, structure the e-mail into short, single topic paragraphs. Use headings when possible. **Any paragraph that is longer than five or six lines is too long.**

When reading incoming mail, slow down. Also read every word BEFORE replying, and before replying **READ the entire message**. This will save time. Often, when you read the full message, you'll find your first responses are inaccurate or require editing.

When you draft your e-mail reply ALWAYS use the equivalent of active listening -- summarize your understanding of what the individual said. Request verification that you have understood..

Chapter Conclusions

E-mail and telephone conversations have different strengths and weaknesses. By understanding that you need to take these into account, and making sure you don't make assumptions about the reliability of what you "send", and that there can be a big difference between what you intent to communicate, and what the other person understands, you can avoid a lot of unnecessary emotions, and confusion.

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Chapter 17 — Audiences, Groups, Crowds and Mobs

Introduction

Most of this book has focused on dealing one to one with parents and community members. However, you may find that as part of your job, you are expected to work with groups of people, perhaps making presentations of one sort or another. In the situation where groups may contain members who are hostile or highly resistant to your message, you need to be able to defuse within a group context.

Even if group work is not part of your job responsibilities, groups of two or three (as in a family) may be involved in run of the mill discussions. Having several people involved complicates the process and it's not uncommon to meet with both a mother and father when discussing a student's status. Whenever a meeting involves more than one other person, there is introduced a different and more complex dynamic that affects the interactions.

Finally, of special interest to support staff in schools and education offices is dealing with accidental and incidental audiences, bystanders who may be waiting, and who may observe interactions with other upset parents.

Managing audiences, or meetings that involves several family members requires finesse, grace and patience.

Group Dynamics Change Behavior

How does the addition of more people affect your interactions? It's important to realize that people in a group (a group being more than one person) act differently as a result of being in a group, than if they were alone. The mere fact that a person is with another person who can hear and participate in a conversation with you changes things. It almost always makes it more difficult to communicate a difficult message, or work with an upset person. There's a flip side too. It's possible to use group dynamics to your benefit, so we'll cover that in the section on presentations.

Accidental and Incidental Audiences

Let's deal with a situation when you have to deal with an upset or angry person in public view of others.

When there are bystanders to a difficult conversation, we call them the **accidental audience**, since the audience is there, not by anyone's invitation or vested interest but is just "in attendance" for their own reasons.

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How does this affect your decision making when dealing with an irate person? One problem is that the addition of other strangers to the angry discussion can have unpredictable effects. For example, on one hand the hostile individual may be acting so badly that observers support you, either via their body language, or less commonly, through their own comments. On the other hand, the onlookers may share their own frustrations with the school, and try to pile on, joining the verbal attack. The latter creates a kind of group momentum and while the use of the term “mob” is a little over the top, the subsequent behavior of a group of angry frustrated people joining in can certainly have mob-like characteristics.

Although the effects of the accidental audience are somewhat unpredictable, we know that most of the outcomes are negative, for both you and the parent you are interacting with.

Parents and community members expect some modicum of privacy for their discussions, and do not want to “perform” in front of a crowd. Usually. Then there are the people who will PLAY to the crowd for support, real or imagined, but certainly hoped for, and enjoy the attention.

Even if observers take your “side”, that creates problems if they vocalize, since it opens the door for disputes between and among bystanders, and those can turn violent very quickly.

Tactic 87: Observe Parent For Signs of Playing To Accidental Audience

If you deal with parents and members of the public in a public environment (e.g. a counter, or where there is a waiting area), you can’t serve every person in private or out of earshot of the rest of those waiting. For the most part you don’t have to anyway. However, you may need to take control of a situation where the angry individual plays to the audience while he or she is being unpleasant or abusive to you. When you see signs this is occurring, you need to make every attempt to remove the audience, and/or isolate the person. Here’s what to look for:

- Occasional glancing at/back at the audience while she interacts with you.
- Raised voice in a way that suggests he wants everyone to hear what he has to say (the tone is different when the person wants an audience as opposed to just being angry).
- Obvious directing of comments to the audience (e.g. “Hey, you’re with me, right?”)

Be alert for these signs. When you see them, take action to remove the audience. That may involve moving the conversation to somewhere more private, something one can sell to the client as a means of protecting his privacy. If you don’t, the interaction may go on much longer than otherwise, and you run the risk of

encouraging the mob mentality.

Tactic 88: Check The Bystander Emotional Temperature

Even if the upset individual is NOT playing to the crowd, you need to monitor how bystanders are reacting. Imagine that a parent comes in with what seems to be a reasonable request, but that for some bureaucratic reason, you are not permitted to give him what he wants. It happens. You'd like to help. It makes sense to do it. You just can't. The person gets angry and raises his voice, but isn't showing any desire to involve bystanders.

However, the audience, waiting with not much to do during the wait, watches and listens. How do you think this is going to affect how THEY behave once it's their turn to talk to you and your colleagues?

Of course, they are going to be affected by seeing "another bureaucrat" act "heartlessly", and while many won't say anything, they will still be more likely to be hostile if their own conversations go badly. Some **will** say something, and it's not going to be pleasant

By checking on bystander emotional states you will have a better idea if you need to remove the audience from the equation and prepare yourself mentally for negative comments from those waiting.

Look for hostile body language, out of the ordinary tensing, whispering among the bystanders. There will always be some of this. If you monitor, look for CHANGES. Of course, if the audience is making overt remarks to you, whether they be in support of you, or in support of the individual, it's probably time to change the venue of the primary interaction.

Tactic 89: Smile, They ARE Watching

It makes sense that you would prefer the bystanders be on your side, not on the side of the angry dissatisfied person. While that's natural, you are better off if the audience stays quiet and neutral so as not to increase the possibility of conflict among bystanders, or between bystanders and the person who you are interacting with.

Believe it or not, there are things you can do to keep bystanders neutral, or on your side. First, realize they ARE watching and listening, and specifically they are watching and listening to YOU and how you behave. They don't much care about the angry person, except how his behavior affects them (longer wait), but they DO care about you. They will judge whether you are being fair, and professional.

One thing about most groups is that there is a tendency for group members to step in when they perceive one person being

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unfair and mean to another person. Out of line is the catchphrase. If you maintain your cool, act professionally and calmly in the face of provocation, people waiting will often congratulate you when it's their turns to talk to you. At minimum, they won't jump in to support the hostile person. Being likeable and reasonable provides some protection from mob-like behavior.

On the other hand, the best way to mobilize people in a group is to act unprofessionally, or in a cold, bureaucratic way. You lose onlooker sympathy if you take the bait and argue.

Tactic 90: Control the Waiting Area Atmosphere Through Communication

This is a preventative step to try to reduce hostility generally, by connecting with those waiting to talk to you, or waiting to meet with someone else and seated in a common waiting area.

Connecting with and communicating with onlookers is particularly important when people are waiting. When possible connect with people waiting through both eye contact and announcements to the waiting group. Indicate how long the wait is, on average, and any shortcuts they might take to accomplish their tasks without waiting in line further. Let them know what they will need when they get to you to be served so they can speed up their visit. Remember that people don't like waiting but they absolutely HATE waiting when they lack enough information about why and how long the delays will be.

Do all of this in a non-bureaucratic and friendly voice, not the voice of an army drill sergeant. Yes, you want to offer help to make things more efficient, but you are also creating an image. A positive image will help you when you deal with someone who tries to play to that audience, if the audience already likes you and appreciates your effort.

Tactic 91: Remove The Audience Or The Person

When possible, try to isolate the hostile individual from the audience. This may mean bringing the person out of the public area, or if you are in the field, it may involve some excuse for moving the client away from other people. For example if you are at a public meeting or hearing, and talking to a parent in front of other community members, you might say:

Mr. Smith, let's slide over to that corner so we can talk without being interrupted...

Some offices have small conference rooms to which an upset individual can be relocated if the need arises for increased privacy, or for more isolation from the audience. This is an excellent idea that has proven to be very successful in calming people down by removing the audience factor.

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If you cannot relocate, try to remove the audience effect by requesting that the person could lower his voice so others in the room won't hear his private details. Make the request so it is clear you are protecting his interests, rather than your own. You can also use distraction techniques to try to shift his attention from the audience to a specific object, form or paper that is relevant.

Dealing With The Ally/Friend/Companion (Theirs)

Let's address another audience situation. It's not uncommon to deal with someone accompanied by a friend, family member or other companion. This may be because the parent wants a witness to the interaction, help in making decisions, or simply out of necessity. Most companion situations aren't problematic. Difficulties arise when companions interfere with communication, or encourage abusive behavior. Whatever the reasons for being there the presence of a companion changes the dynamics, again, often for the worse.

In angry situations with a companion, particularly a family member, it's possible to get some strange interfering dynamics. For example, in a husband and wife situation, the husband may be more aggressive than he would otherwise be without his wife present because he doesn't want an argument from his wife when he gets home. In the reverse, the companion may frequently jump in and answer questions you address to the other person present. You really do not want to get caught between and betwixt husband and wife, or any other pair of family members.

How you handle these situation will depend on the context. You cope with a lawyer as companion differently than you would a child as companion. Here are a few tactics.

Tactic 92: Use Eye Contact/Body Language To Focus

Eye contact and body language are useful for maintaining control over a conversation because they signify/indicate with whom you are interacting, AND from whom you expect the response. When dealing with a companion who tends to interrupt, do not make eye contact with the companion and keep your body orientation towards your "target person". Face and make eye contact with the person you wish to speak with, and don't get pulled into rewarding interrupting behavior from the companion.

Gestures can be used to "invite" one person (and not the companion) to answer. For example, ask the question to a specific by making eye contact, orienting your body (leaning) towards that person, adding a hand gesture.

Hold your hand horizontally (parallel to the ground) , PALM UP

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towards your “target”. The palm up position is an invitation to talk. If you are interrupted by the companion, you can glance briefly at the companion, hold your hand up in a “whoa” position (hand almost vertical, palm facing towards companion), then switch eye contact back to “target”.

These movements are consistent with our use of verbal self-defense techniques. It’s better to be subtle. You could ask the companion to stop interrupting if more subtle approaches fail, but doing so calls attention to something that is largely irrelevant to why the conversation is occurring in the first place.

It does happen that a companion may be present as an aide to the parent, for example, in a situation where the parent does not speak English, has some other issue communication, or perhaps has a disability. Then, of course, direct your non-verbals to the companion when he or she is speaking, but make sure you still show you are attending to the prime “target”. A common error is to completely ignore the primary “target” and attend to the companion caretaker, and that’s rude and infuriating.

Tactic 93: Remove, Separate, Isolate

The most effective tactic for dealing with a third party is to remove the third party, separate the people, and/or isolate the individuals from each other. That’s not always possible, because you may not be afforded the physical space to allow that (i.e. two locations, at least one private), or the companion may need to be present to help, or may be permitted explicitly due to statutes or regulations (i.e. a lawyer accompanying a client to an inquiry).

The best approach, if the physical space allows, is to offer a plausible reason for separating that does not focus on your need or desire to keep the companion quiet or out of the picture. Subtle is usually best, particularly at first.

First OFFER the person the option of speaking to you privately, away from the companion, if the companion is not necessary for the discussion. For example, if you are at a front counter:

Mr. Smith, there’s a lot of background noise here, so perhaps you can just come behind the counter so we can talk more privately.
Mrs. Jones, if you would like to take a seat, I’m sure we can wrap this up in a minute or two.

If there are objections choose either a stronger “invitation” and explanation, or give in and deal with both at the same time, depending on how badly the companion is interfering with the process.

You can do a similar thing on the phone if there are children in the background, or there is someone with the caller, and interrupting from the background. You can SUGGEST that the caller move to a quieter area, because you are having trouble hearing, and you want to make sure you understand the caller

so you can help.

The key here is to frame your needs in terms of helping the parent.

Tactic 94: Use A Team Approach

A team defusing approach may be helpful — where you speak to one party, and your colleague deals with the other. Ideally each “pair” is out of earshot of the other. This may or not be practical in your workplace, but if it is, it can be a powerful technique to solve the companion problem.

Delivering Presentations To Resistant and Hostile Groups

If, as part of your job, you give presentations to groups of people, you need to be prepared to deal with resistance, and sometimes outright hostility and heckling. The frequency of these unpleasant events is often determined by the kinds of presentations you are called upon to give. If you often give bad news of one sort or another to groups of people, you will run into these things. And it hurts. There’s nothing more challenging than facing a group of angry people, knowing that what you have to say to them is likely to make them more angry.

Fortunately, you needn’t crash and burn in front of difficult groups, provided you prepare for the eventuality of anger occurring EACH time you speak to a group. Let’s look at some specific tactics directed specifically at preventing and defusing audience situations.

Tactic 95: Know When You Are Headed For Trouble Or Being Attacked

When people do presentations and they are not professional public speakers, they often lose touch with the audience, and don’t know what’s going on in the group. As such it’s possible that you may not notice that the level of resistance and anger in the group is growing, or that you are in fact under a kind of public attack. Heck, there are a lot of things to keep track of when one does a speech so it’s not surprising. It’s important to observe the group — pay attention not only to what you have to say, but how the people in the group are responding. Often you can predict what they will do, and who in the group will be problematic just by paying attention.

Typically resistant groups exhibit some or many of the following behaviors:

- Resistant body language (signs of disinterest/anger)
- Leading and misleading questioning
- Interruptions
- Attempts to hold the floor

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- Outright insults
- Side-tracking to other issues

Inexperienced presenters often react to these behaviors in ways that increase problems rather than decrease them. Consistent with our discussion of the abuse game it is **IMPERATIVE** that you **do not respond defensively or aggressively**.

Tactic 96: Focus On The Best Possible Outcome

Your best ally, and your worst enemy is yourself. If you focus on creating the best possible outcome, and prevent yourself from acting out of fear (defensiveness or aggression), things will work out. They probably aren't going to work out perfectly but they will work out. There will always be some audience members who will leave angry or disappointed, but you can't please everyone. If you can't handle that reality, then you can't be an effective spokesperson, and probably even worse, the stress of disapproval will affect your health and welfare. As you gain more experience, you will realize that you will survive even the toughest situations, and may learn to see speaking to resistant groups as a welcome challenge.

In addition remember "What you focus on you get more of". The more you focus on negative audience behaviors the more likely you will get exactly those behaviors

Tactic 97: Have Faith In The Group Process and In Human Beings.

Groups, even hostile ones, tend to have a sense of fair play. If attackers appear unreasonable, and you appear calm and reasonable, the group will mobilize to discourage the unfair attacks. It cuts both ways. If the group members feel you are evasive, defensive, over controlling, aggressive or arrogant, they will swarm you.

Don't over-react, and stay in control and you can rely on the goodness of human beings to help (at least a little, but sometimes a lot).

Tactic 98: Enhance Credibility

Credibility is enhanced when you appear to present a balanced set of arguments, both in favor and against what you are advocating. Clearly the preponderance of the evidence should be on your side, but you must acknowledge weaknesses in your position. By bringing up the weaknesses, you pre-empt attacks.

Credibility is also enhanced when the audience perceives you as **somewhat similar to them**. Some factors that affect these perceptions include:

- clothing and demeanor

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- level, type and complexity of language (the more similar to the way the audience talks the greater the appearance of similarity)
- demonstrated understanding of the implications of your content/ideas for the audience members
- whether you have “been there”

Credibility is enhanced when you make the concerns of the audience your major focus and concern, as opposed to your concerns or those of your organization.

Tactic 99: Prepare Properly

In order to establish credibility, and reduce hostile behavior you must understand your audience beforehand. This means preparing properly. You need to know the following so you can address them before the audience does:

- concerns, fears, of the audience with respect to your content and organization
- kinds of objections likely to be brought up
- any positive benefits for the audience connected with your ideas and presentation
- the audience’s normal style of communicating (formal, informal, type of language use, academic, jargon use, etc.), so that you can match that language.

Also as part of your preparation do the following:

- Anticipate objections, prepare your counter-position, so you can broach the objections and your position first.
- Prepare and provide a well thought out agenda that outlines the purpose, format and benefits of the presentation for the audience. Plan on including time for questions and comments, as part of the agenda. In situations where a person tries to sidetrack the gathering, you can refocus on the agenda (but you have to have one in the first place).

Tactic 100: Focus On The Concerns of Your Audience

Your credibility will be enhanced when you make the concerns of the audience your major focus, as opposed to YOUR concerns (company concerns). The audience will be more open if they feel you are there for them, and not as a mouthpiece expressing the party line. It’s understandable that you feel your job is to get across the points your organization wants you to cover. If that is all you do you will be in big trouble. You must demonstrate to the audience that you understand their concerns. You do that in two different ways, explained in the next two tactics).

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Tactic 101: Preempting Objections and “Their” Issues

Since you’ve done your homework and know enough about your audience to anticipate their concerns and objections to your message, what do you do with that information? You intentionally bring up their concerns early on and address them as best you can. It’s much better for YOU to explain:

“I know what’s probably going on in your head. You are concerned that the changes in the curriculum will mean even more homework for your kids. Let me address that.”

If they bring it up, you lose the initiative and if you bring it up it shows you understand them.

Tactic 102: Balance, Not Propaganda

Pretty much everything has pro’s and con’s. That will be the case for whatever you are presenting to an audience. There’s a mistaken notion that concentrating ONLY on the good points will be better than a balanced approach which admits to the “con’s”. Rarely, a onesided approach will work, and then only with a naive, uninformed audience, that won’t catch on that you are not being open with them. It’s NEVER a good idea to assume that. If you present a balanced perspective, which, of course is slightly weighted in favor of your position, you will be perceived as fair and open minded. That reduces attacks. Balanced presentations are also more credible.

Tactic 103: Team Up

We’ve already talked about team defusing on a one-to-one level, but this also applies to presentations. If it is at all possible, present with a teammate. While presenting in tandem adds additional complexity to the process, since you need to have your signals straight, it provides some strong benefits.

First, there will always be someone there to “jump in” if the other gets befuddled, lost or stumped by a question. Second, there will always be one person “observing” and it’s easier to read the temperature of a group when you can sit back and watch. The third reason to present with a partner is to allow each of you to specialize in a portion of the content, so as to lighten the load. This is particularly useful when your message is complex.

Finally, two presenters can mean two different viewpoints, and perspectives. For example, a team of one male and one female would be far superior to one or other only, when presenting on a topic like pay equity or sexual harassment in the workplace. The

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advantages to team presentations are simply huge, provided it is practical.

Tactic 104: Techniques For Handling Side-Tracking, Direct Insults, Heckling and Interruptions

Side-tracking issues and off-topic questions should be acknowledged. To refocus you can re-introduce the purpose of the session from the agenda, acknowledge that the person's concern is important to him, and offer to discuss it in another forum (coffee break, after main session, etc.).

Do not focus on the sidetracking. If the person persists, repeat your offer to discuss his concern after the meeting. Never argue. Repeat until the person gives up. You can also focus attention on the formal agenda, and suggest time restrictions are such that you have get back to the next item.

Direct insults should be dealt with briefly. Start by acknowledging the emotion of the attacker (usually anger, or concern). Try this phrasing:

Clearly you feel strongly about this, and want to talk about it further. Let's discuss this at (name time/venue). How does that sound to you? (note the cooperative question at the end)

Repeat this in calm tone, if necessary. Avoid taking any bait. Often people hurling insults simply want you to lose your composure.

Heckling and interruptions are handled differently depending on their persistence. Sometimes they can be ignored, sometimes you can stop talking until the person stops, and add a non-verbal hand sign for the person to stop. Sometimes you can ask the person to stop, while inviting discussion privately. Or you can ask the person to "hold" the question or comment until the pre-planned question period.

Persistent heckling needs to be dealt with strongly if it is preventing you from accomplishing your goals. You are within your rights to set a limit. For example:

Let's give John 2 minutes to make his comments. Then I will have to ask John to allow the rest of us to continue. If John persists in interrupting, I will have to end the presentation. (note the flexibility and fairness of this).

Heckling can also be handled by calling an intermission (coffee

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break), to allow the group to address the problem by itself. This will only work if you are being attacked unfairly (from the audience's perspective) and you have acted in a dignified, fair way.

Civil objections and points should be encouraged as time allows. Allow the audience member to finish, listen carefully, and then respond by acknowledging the emotion the person has expressed. Then respond to the points as briefly as possible. If you attempt to quash dissent, you will lose the entire audience. Avoid interrupting.

Chapter Conclusions:

Dealing with audiences, either accidental ones, or companions, or doing presentations to resistant groups is a little more challenging than simple one-on-one situations, but if you can maintain your poise and self-control, and avoid getting flustered, you can then use the various techniques we've included in this book.

You will find it gets easier as you go, and you will become a bit smoother applying the techniques. You may also find that if you don't do presentations to audiences for a number of months, it will become more difficult again, and you'll have to shake off the rust. That's all normal.

Is there a bottom line to this? Perhaps. Particularly when you present to resistant groups, you must have a thick skin because it's simply impossible to please everyone in the group. Often you will be a third party coming in to speak to a group that contains at least two other factions who disagree with each other, and disagree with your message. It happens. Clearly, you can't please all the people all the time.

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Chapter 18 — Final Comments

Introduction

By now you have probably developed a preliminary feel for both the principles of defusing hostility and the tactics you can use. Congratulations!

I would like to tell you that the hard part is behind you, but that isn't the case. The hard part isn't learning ABOUT how to defuse emotions. The hard part is USING them and making their use a regular habit. It's one thing to know that you shouldn't take bait, and another completely different thing to avoid taking bait. It's one thing to know a few verbal self-defense techniques and another to have them at your fingertips so you can use them smoothly and quickly.

Now that you have completed this book, how are you going to keep improving at dealing with challenging parent situations? That is the question you need to address. You can always get better. All of us can.

Working through this book will give you the raw material to continue getting better, provided you make a conscious effort to do so. However, you must work at it, particularly over the next few months, when you will be trying to develop and refine your skills.

How do you continue to develop? We end this book with a series of tactics you can use to continue to develop your skills.

Tactic 105: Remind Yourself

At the beginning of each working day where you anticipate communicating with parents and stakeholders, remind yourself of one or two defusing tactics you would like to focus upon. It might be “not taking the bait”, or using a particular empathy statement, or recognizing when it is a good time to refer to a supervisor. It can be whatever you like, provided that you choose SOMETHING each day. Then mentally set a goal or two for that day in terms of using the techniques.

Tactic 106: Review Progress

Since you are setting “goals” for your work days, we suggest that you take a few minutes at the end of the work day to review how you did. Did you manage to remember what you wanted to remember? If not, try again tomorrow. Nobody is perfect. If you are pleased, pat yourself on the back. Reminding yourself in the morning and reviewing in the evening need not take more than a few short minutes. After a month or two it may not be necessary to continue this practice, but it IS important at the beginning to help you continue to learn.

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Tactic 107: Keep A Hostility Diary

If you want to be a bit more formal, you can keep a hostility diary, where you record “critical incidents” that occur with parents, and how you handled them. In that diary you can include whatever you find useful, including daily reminders and goals, and the progress you are making. This approach isn’t for everyone, but you may find it useful. It has the added benefit of documenting interactions with parents in a more permanent way, so that if you have to go back to see exactly what was said, you have a record.

Tactic 108: Defuse In Your Private Life

Many of the tactics described in this book work really well with co-workers, spouses and even children. You can gain a great deal from applying them to the rest of your life, and doing so allows you to additional opportunities to practice. Tactics particularly useful in private life include:

- avoiding bait
- empathy statements
- listening statements
- problem solving tactics
- avoiding being triggered

Just one caution: The tactics in the verbal self-defense section can also be effective in private life, but you need to be very expert in their use, or they can backfire.

Tactic 109: Talk To Colleagues

Your colleagues also deal with emotional and difficult parents and have insights and ideas that you may not have considered. So, talk to your colleagues about tough situations. Consider sharing some of your experiences about what works and what doesn’t. Listen, learn, and teach.

Tactic 110: Revisit This Book

Now that you have worked through this book, don’t put it away on the shelf to be forgotten forever. Set a date, say three months from now, to reread this book. You don’t have to read every single word when you go through it a second time. You may want to skim it. You may find that your second reading will give you a different slant on things. At minimum, browse the pages and read the various boxes/aids on the pages.

Tactic 111: Read Other Books

There are a number of books available on the topic of dealing with difficult/hostile people. Some are good, some aren’t, but the more you read, the more you will be able to assess the value of

what you read. Read with a questioning mind.

One author that I can heartily recommend is **Suzette Haden Elgin**. She has written a series of books on verbal self-defense that I have found informative. While I do not endorse all of her suggestions, her books will give you additional knowledge and ideas that we haven't included here.

Tactic 112: Consider Our Seminars

I offer seminars for teachers, administrators, and school board officials on this topic, in addition to doing keynote and conference speaking. Rather than having a "canned" program, I tailor each session to the needs of your organization, and can craft a professional development or in-service experience for you. Sessions can be short, let's say an hour long if we're talking about a conference presentation, or as long as a day and a half of intense training. My policy on cost is that I'll try to work with you to stay within your budget and not let cost become a barrier to equipping staff with important skills.

If you like the content of this book, you'll like the keynotes and professional development seminars.

Finally, at present, I don't offer seminars an individual can sign-up for. I work at the invitation of educational organizations to work with their staff.

Contact me for more information at ceo@work911.com or at (613) 764-0241.

Or, visit the services section at [It Takes A Village To Teach A Child](#), our website.

Tactic 113: Visit Us Online

To support you in your endeavors with hostile angry situations with parents or other stakeholders, we've created a website where you can share information with others, leave comments, and ask questions. I'll do my best to help as time permits.

I often discover additional techniques that are effective in dealing with those difficult parents, either via my own research or by talking to educators. It's likely you'll find extra tactics that are not in this book and as they become available.

You'll also find links to articles on subjects of interest to teachers, principals, and other school personnel. For example, there's a section on best practices for parent-teacher conferences. We'll continue to add new and relevant material, and there's also a signup form so you can be notified via email when there's new additions.

The companion website is at:

<http://parents-teachers.com>

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[It Takes A Village To Teach A Child](#)
[Building Bridges Between Schools And Parents](#)

Concluding Remarks:

In closing I want to wish you well, and good luck. My crystal ball says that angry parents and frustrated stakeholders aren't going to go away. As we continue to face economic challenges as a society, and the demands on our schools increase and become more complex, blaming school staff for the ills of society will become even more common.

Teachers and educators have a huge and largely unheralded role in contributing, not only to the success of each student in the present, but to our collective future. The better you can build bridges and work with parents to create success for the children, the more you will be contributing to the future of our planet. I hope, as you do so, you'll pat yourself on the back for not only doing a difficult job, but contributing in ways more important to our future than the leader of your country, or the CEO of a large corporation.

Bacal & Associates offers bulk discounts to those that would like to order multiple copies of this book. If you would like a quotation for your order, contact us at the address below.

For more information about my seminars, or if you wish to share what has worked or not worked for you, you can contact me at the following address.

Robert Bacal
Bacal & Associates
722 St. Isidore Rd.
Casselman, Ontario
Canada, K0A 1M0
(613) 764-0241
Email: ceo@work911.com

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