Stay calm by practising S-T-O-P

**12. Managing confrontation**

The following tips will help you take control of a situation where the complainant is being confrontational.

**Signal**: take note of your body’s early warning signs of tension (such as shallow breathing and throat tightness).

**Take** control through power breathing:

• take a deep breath through your nostrils. Do this without exertion and without raising your shoulders or puffing out your cheeks

• hold the breath for a second

• push the breath into the extremities of your body (skull, hands and feet)

• slowly breathe out through your lips

• breathe in and out a few times, smoothing out the inhalation and exhalation to experience an unbroken inflow and outflow of air

• as you breathe out, feel the tension melting from your body into the floor through the soles of your feet.

**Opposite**: a habitual response under tension is to tighten up our muscles and to negatively self-talk, ‘Oh no!’. The opposite response is to breathe deeply and smoothly and to say to yourself, ‘calm, in control’.

**Practise:** a good time to practise is just before an appointment you think might be confrontational.

Let the complainant have their say

**Actively listen:** let the complainant know you are listening by using appropriate verbal and non-verbal cues.

**Don’t interrupt:** an interruption will only lead to the complainant starting at the

beginning again.

**Listen for the sigh:** don’t move to developing options until the complainant has indicated a readiness and willingness to engage. One way they might do this is with a sigh, and by dropping their shoulders.

Deal with the complainant’s emotions

**Acknowledge emotions:** acknowledging the complainant’s emotions helps make them feel valued, and helps develop a partnership with them.

**Restate content and emotion:** let the complainant know you heard them by paraphrasing what they said and expressed.

**Be empathetic:** show that you understand and are sensitive to the complainant’s feelings, thoughts and experiences. This is not necessarily the same as sharing those feelings or agreeing with the complainant’s position.

**Identify underlying needs and concerns:** clearly identify the real problem and make the problem — not the person — the problem.

Respond to criticism non-defensively

**Acknowledge any truth in a concern or complaint:** accept that there may be some truth to criticism of you or the school.

**Guard against absolute responses** such as, ‘I can assure you I would never say something like that!’. Say things like, ‘… you might be right about that … perhaps I could…’.

**Request specific feedback to criticism:** for example, you could say things like, ‘What specifically did I do that …’, ‘If you were in my shoes, what would you do differently …’, ‘I’m not sure I’m clear about your concerns …’, ‘Can you give me some specific examples?’.

Avoid negative triggers

To successfully resolve confrontation, you need to use language that expresses your desire to work in partnership with the complainant to find a solution.

Negative triggers have the effect of setting up roadblocks to, or shutting down, discussion.

They make it harder, not easier, to find a solution.

The table below shows some negative triggers and some positive alternatives.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Negative Triggers** | **Positive Alternatives** |
| It’s our policy to | Here’s what we can do |
| I can’t | I can |
| No, I don’t know | No, I don’t know |
| But | And |
| You should have | I understand why you |
| Why didn’t you | I can see why |
| The only thing we can do | The best option I think |

Sound helpful

Address the complainant by name, use a tone of voice that sounds helpful and ask the complainant to help you. For example:

‘Ms …, I am not clear about the issue you are raising. Can you identify the precise issue you are concerned about and what you feel needs to happen, so I can investigate the issue on your behalf?’

Delay action to provide ‘time out’

By not taking action immediately, you give yourself and the complainant ‘time out’. For example, you can say things like, ‘Ms..., I think we need some more information before we can move any further …’.

Other resources

Ombudsman Victoria, ‘How to deal with challenging behaviours’, in Complaint handling guide for the Victorian Public Sector, at: <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/Publications/Guidelines>

Better Health Channel, Stress, at: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/stress>

Better Health Channel, Workplace conflict, at: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Workplace\_conflict