

Dealing with Difficult People: Some Rules for the Road

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Overview

Conflict is inherent in every superior/subordinate relationship due to resentment. Nobody wants to be the child in a parent/child relationship. Avoid rubbing someone's nose in your authority. Faculty and others in authority should be careful not to exacerbate resentment. Those in superior positions should ask themselves if they are the source of the problem. *Often, we are the problem.* As leaders, remember that leadership depends on followership.

Causes of Verbal Conflict: especially heightened in a post-COVID environment as people return to school/jobs.

1. Everyone is under the influence! Our problems *and stresses* influence our decisions. Expect bad decisions from yourself and others!
2. Watch non-verbal cues (e.g., eye roll, personal space, looking at watch). They may undermine your message.
3. Watch your inflection, tone, pitch and volume (e.g., I didn't say you are stupid.”)
4. Expect to be misunderstood so attempt to understand what you are hearing.
 - Francois Garagon, author of Jade and the Blessed Mysteries of Life, wrote: *"Between what I think I want to say, what I believe I'm saying, what I say, what you want to hear, what you believe you understand, and what you understood, there are at least nine possibilities for misunderstanding."*
5. You are not how you are perceived and others don't see themselves as you do (i.e., 2=6).
6. Your words and actions may antagonize someone from a different culture, generation, and personality;
7. People with different perspectives don't see the world like you (e.g., speeder vs. officer) → different expectations.
8. Control your ego. It's not about you! You are here to serve.
9. Think before you speak.
10. Do not infringe on someone's freedom of speech.
11. Don't let prior interactions or perceptions create a self-fulfilling prophecy.
12. Do not inflame a situation by saying the wrong thing: “Calm down”; “Because those are the rules”; “I’m not going to say this again.”
13. Mental health (40% of college students surveyed: too stressed to function) - embarrassment, frustration, shame
14. Implicit biases: subconscious associations that may trigger behaviors that contradict explicitly stated values

Response Guidelines

1. Create empathy with a disputant to create bonds that generate rapport and cooperation.
 - Don't say you *know* how disputant feels; *validate* (“I understand why you may be upset.”)
 - Avoid communications barriers: judgmental, not listening, criticizing, name-calling, ordering, threatening, minimizing, arguing, engaging in power struggle, embarrassing.
 - Focus on the meaning, not the actual words
2. Listen actively: “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.” (Stephen R. Covey, Seven Habits of Highly Effective People)
 - Paraphrase to ensure you understand what the person considers to be the actual problem
3. Allow an individual to save face. Do not handle a difficult person in front of an audience. Address the problem after class or dismiss the class if you must (i.e., avoid on-lookers/audience).
4. If you make a mistake, admit it, apologize, and explain why you did what you did.
5. Explain and when possible, request.
6. Remain professional lest you cede control of the conversation to your opponent.
7. Do not go immediately go to your endgame (ask, explain, give options [+ → -], confirm non-compliance, act).
8. Bring a colleague into the discussion.
9. Know your triggers.
10. Recognize danger signs (flushed face, inability to speak, shaking, pointing, invading personal space, speaking very loudly or softly, looking around [to see if there are witnesses], giving an ultimatum, making a threat).
11. Never be complacent.
12. Mental health: patience; don't debate: interact in private; calm voice; give space; don't touch; ask what is needed.
13. Don't generalize from a group to an individual.

When All Else Fails, Options Include:

- Care Team
- Private Meeting (Wait a day for emotions to stabilize). You may want a colleague to attend the meeting.
- Call the police (last resort: when safety is at risk, academic operations are jeopardized, criminal activity, fear)

Remember the 3 E's: Empathy, Explanation and Ego Control.