

Building Community, Enhancing Learning, Fostering Innovation

Classroom conflicts or heated moments can be one of the most difficult classroom situations to deal with for any instructor. The following suggestions and strategies will help you prevent and respond to any conflicts that may arise:

INDIVIDUAL CONFLICTS

Instructor Dos

- Remain calm
- Use a respectful tone and volume
- Isolate the person(s)
- Set limits (calmly assert what the person cannot do)
- Be aware of nonverbals (yours & theirs)
- Attempt to listen

Instructor Don'ts

- Panic or overreact
- Get into a power struggle
- Fake attention
- Ignore
- Threaten
- Personalize

Typical verbal escalation pattern of persons out of control and suggested responses:

Phase	Student Action	Instructor Response
1	Question and challenge authority.	Answer questions, remain calm and rational, redirect if possible.
2	Refuse your direction or suggestion (noncompliance).	Teacher response: Restate, clearly and concisely, what the person can and cannot do.
3	Have an emotional outburst (verbal venting).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow student to vent; isolate if possible. Listen empathically—rephrase and reflect the person's concerns. • Validate the person and/or the problem. Paraphrase if necessary and acknowledge the perceptions. (Perceptions are reality.) • If the person is speaking loudly, ask him/her to speak more slowly. This will bring down the volume naturally and help the person regain emotional control. Keep your own voice mellow and modulated.
4	Attempt to intimidate or threaten you or someone else.	Take all threats seriously; calmly repeat what the person cannot do.
5	Begin to reduce his or her tension/stress level.	Assist the person with problem solving and resolution. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you are at fault, accept and acknowledge the responsibility • Help the person formulate and evaluate potential options and alternatives. • If necessary, document the meeting and be sure the person has a copy of the discussion notes. • Follow up within a reasonable amount of time.

Other Effective Responses

- *Let me think about that.*
- *I can tell you're upset. Tell me more, please.*
- *Please speak more slowly.*
- *What would you like me to do?*

Less effective Responses

- *This is why you have a problem.*
- *Please lower your voice.*
- *Well, sometimes life just isn't fair.*
- *My hands are tied.*

GROUP CONFLICTS

Prevention strategies:

1. Involve whole class in setting ground rules
2. Ask groups to set—and sign off on—ground rules
3. Ask groups to set—and sign off on—reasonable goals

Intervention strategies:

1. Call for individual group members to write down their perceptions of the problem(s) or issue(s) causing the conflict.
2. Collect the information and identify common themes.
3. Schedule and facilitate a meeting with the group, using the information you've collected as a basis for discussion (make it clear that you are using information; no names, no finger pointing, please).
4. Clarify the perceptions through guided discussion.
5. Explore differences in points of view, causes of the conflict.
6. Develop agreement on one or more resolutions to the conflict.
7. Specify a plan of action; require that individuals sign off in agreement. You also sign and date the plan. Be sure everyone gets a copy.
8. Close with a positive appraisal of the group's efforts to resolve the situation.

Excerpted and adapted from:

Bianco, Arnie. (2002). *One-Minute Discipline*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
"Handling Difficult Classroom Situations.doc" [accessed June 20, 2008]
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