

# Chair Leadership Academy: Conflict De-Escalation



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# Scenario 1: Chair/Faculty

Read the following scenarios and make recommendations for how these situations could have been handled differently and de-escalated:

A faculty member schedules a meeting with you in your office and begins:

*“Don’t ask me how I am. I’m mad. You keep feeding us this bullshit from the administration. In the faculty meeting yesterday you were talking about DFU rates and classes with high DFU rates. Aren’t we supposed to be educating students?”*

*The Chair quickly responds, “Yes.” The faculty member immediately responds, cutting the Chair off.*

*“So the faculty say, but I don’t see how. We keep lowering standards. Pretty soon we’ll be a community college. Anyway, that’s not really what I want to talk about. I want to talk about my Fall schedule. You switched my classes, now you got me teaching on Monday-Wednesday when for the last five years I’ve done Tuesday-Thursday. Is this some retaliation for what I said about that student in the grad program? It’s true, when she was an undergrad her name was Kendra, now she wants to be called Ken. I get confused because he still looks like a she.*

*The Chair states, “Give me a fucking break. Retaliation!? The only reason you call it bullshit is because you have the worst rates in the Department. You were lucky I didn’t call you out in the meeting. Anyway, go ask the dean about the switch.”*

## Scenario 2: Student Issue

An instructor of an upper division course, finds out that a student in their course has posted a petition online complaining about the quality of instruction in the course. The instructor forwards you the petition and is so upset that the instructor wants the student expelled – claiming bullying, defamation of character, damage to their reputation, and negative image online. The instructor has already threatened the student that their petition is a violation of the conduct code, and they could be subject to expulsion (FYI: conduct is purview of VPSA).

The petition:

*Since we have gone remote, these last couple of semesters have been difficult and students have struggled in this environment. As upper-division students, we are concerned that Professor X's communication, teaching, and engagement has ceased. We are not being prepared to take part in our professions upon graduation, and become gainfully employed.*

*Students have attempted to seek support from Professor X, and they are now afraid to ask questions, seek advice, and ask for explanations due to the toxic environment caused by this professor's condescending responses and lack of engagement. Professor X does not want to help us succeed, and it has become a hostile environment. Our hope is to gain enough signatures to bring attention to this issue by the university, as we are paying thousands of dollars in tuition for an online education.*



# Conflict is Inevitable:

- **Normal part of life {in all relationships}**
  - Role differences (perceptions of responsibilities in roles)
  - Status differentials (hierarchy and institutional standing)
  - Resource control (views on how resources should be used and who makes the decisions)
  - Value differences
- **Without anticipation and preparation conflict can be scary, and uncomfortable**
  - Acknowledge your own feelings around conflict
    - Hide? Thrive? Dive?
- **But, if not resolved can become toxic and harmful**
- **Can be an opportunity for growth**

# Factors that contribute to conflict:

## **Poor communication**

- Role expectations
- Responsibilities

## **Process expectations**

- This is what I am doing, when I am doing it, how I am doing it, how I will communicate it, and how frequently I will communicate it

## **Result expectations and accountabilities**

- In higher education there may be a desire for shared governance and decision making but there is not shared accountability

# Factors that contribute to conflict:

## Failing to listen

- Interpersonally
- Structurally (absence of institutionalized feedback loops – students, staff, faculty, alumni, administration)

## Feeling unheard

- We shout when we do not feel heard

## Feeling unrealized

- Frustration when outcomes do not meet expectations



# How to Manage Conflict



# Know Yourself – Personal Reflection and Growth

- *Have you done your emotional work?*
- *Who are you?*
- *Who do you want people to believe you are?*
- *How do you think people see you?*
- *How do people see you?*
- *What are your values?*
- *What are your triggers?*

Our decision making is influenced by both our values and who we want people to believe we are (whether or not that is who we are.) We often do not like in others what we do not want to see in ourselves. These traits are often our triggers.

# Manage Yourself

- Anticipate triggers
- Speak calmly without raising voice
- Avoid “you” statements and accusations (Focus on the behavior or circumstance. State, for example, “It was reported that assignments were not graded for one month.” This decreases personalization in comparison to, “You didn’t grade assignments for a month.”)
- Avoid interrupting

# Manage the Conversation

- Set the time and allow for adequate discussion
- Set goals of the meeting at the outset (express verbally)
- Express and clarify what is heard and how it is interpreted (interpretation is important for all parties)
  - Acknowledge both agreements and disagreements of interpretation
- Set an action plan and identify responsibilities and time frame for completion
- Summarize the results of the meeting at the conclusion; additionally, in writing.

# Address Early

**Ignoring does not mean it will go away. Some suggest that ignoring issues or behaviors is a strategy for conflict management but it tends to worsen the conflict over time. Only ignore as a tactic when the cost outweighs the benefit. It is best to address issues as they arise.**

## **Understand the difference between addressing and intervening**

- Addressing involves calling attention to a situation or behavior
- Intervening involves assigning a solution

# Accommodate

**If the issue or situation addressed has a remedy that is in line with policies and institutional values, accommodate. Be certain that short term accommodation has long term benefits and that it is viewed as in alignment with equity across the division/institution.**

- Be careful not to personalize as a win or a loss
- Do not confuse with abandoning personal or institutional values or ethics

# Compromise

**Circumstances often have elements where parties may have opportunities to gain partial accommodation to demands. Ask the person how they would like to address the conflict. As with accommodation:**

- Be careful not to personalize as a win or a loss
- Do not confuse with abandoning personal or institutional values or ethics

## Consult with Others

- Inform others of the issue/behavior (with confidentiality).
- Gain policy guidelines
- Gain institutional history
- Enlist other perspectives
- Determine whether to include others in meetings related to the conflict



# Communication: Taking Ownership (in-person/virtual)

- Remember: Tone cannot be determined in writing: Interpretation happens in the listener's/reader's/receiver's head – Ask for feedback/thoughts
- Avoid blaming language – Seek understanding instead
- Pick up the phone or set up a meeting (in-person or virtual) when you know the subject matter can become escalated.
- **REMINDER: There is a human on the other end of that conversation**
- **GOLDEN RULE: Treat others the way you want to be treated.**

# Handling Abusive Conversations (in-person/virtual)

- You do not need to subject yourself to abusive conversations.
- Let the person know that you are not in agreement, or the meeting is not productive, and end the meeting.
- Follow up in writing and share what you needed to say and/or what the outcome is.
- If the person insists on continuing, please follow the disruption guidelines.

## In the Classroom: No Imminent Threat and/or Manageable

- If a student is difficult/disruptive, ask to meet during office hours/after class/virtually/during break to address behavior  
**address behavior ~ offer resources ~ consequences ~ follow up in writing**
- Place the student on notice and warn that further violations may result in the following: referral to our office, or the chair/AD, or they can be asked to leave the session.
- If you are uncomfortable meeting with the student alone, ask Chair/AD to attend meeting with you.
- Connect with our office for guidance on how to proceed as needed.

## In the Classroom: Imminent Concerns or Egregious Disruption

- Warn privately (if possible), and let them know they will be asked to leave the session if they continue. Hopefully this will resolve.
- If student does not cease after warning, you may privately ask them to leave for the session, and then report to our office/chair/AD.
- We acknowledge that you don't always have the luxury of warning privately in matters that may elicit threats and major disruption.
- If they do not leave, let the student know you will call DPS. If they still do not leave, call DPS to help de-escalate OR dismiss the class. (If virtual, remove student from a session).

# Situations Warranting Immediate Intervention

- Dangerous situation – Verbal threats or physical violence, or creating a unsafe environment (*Contact DPS*)
  - Expressions of Suicidal Ideation/Mental Health Concerns (*Contact UCS or DPS*)
  - UCS crisis/urgent care and consultation 24/7
    - Monday-Friday, 8 am – 5 pm - (818) 677-2366 and select Opt. 1, or come to BH, 5th fl., Rm. 520
    - After-hours (evenings, weekends, holidays) - (818) 677-2366 and select option 3.

**Although we acknowledge the harm policing has created, the police are the only personnel who have authority to immediately remove any individual from any space; and, assess for welfare checks in conjunction with University Counseling Services, when necessary.**

# Application of what you Learned:

- You get accused of always siding with students with grade disputes
- Your ASA refuses to sign a performance evaluation saying that it is biased
- A student assistant comes in *looking* high
- A tenured faculty member refuses to serve on any committees
- You find out that your last two ASC's transferred to other departments because they reported you as being hard to work with
- An email from a student says that CSUN is only about money and doesn't care about students
- A faculty member is always late to meetings, disruptive in meetings, and leaves early each meeting
- A faculty member brings their dog to summer school classes
- An instructor tells you only in passing that a student in their class called another student "honey"
- A faculty member wants you to remove a student from class over a perceived slight, or they will quit teaching the class.



# Q & A

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