

Managing Crisis Situations: A Framework for Understanding Confrontation and Acting in Interpersonal Crisis Situations

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The Conflict Paradigm

Crisis and confrontation are a result of interpersonal conflict out of control and/or mismanaged. Foundational conflict has four elements: (1) at least two people with (2) different points of view. The presence of (3) strong feelings fuel the difference and make some (4) negative outcome likely.

Needs Meeting 101

As crisis is conceptualized as involving needs meeting problems, a foundational basis for understanding needs meeting is important. According to Carl Rogers, "behavior is basically the goal-directed attempt of the organism to satisfy its needs as experienced, in the field as perceived." All behavior has a purpose, and that purpose is to meet a need. People make their best personal choice as they select each behavior from their repertoire based on their most pressing need at the time, and their perception of needs-meeting availabilities in the environment. Each of their behaviors, whether consciously or unconsciously selected, makes sense from their phenomenological perspective. If there were another behavior that would better meet their needs, they would have selected that behavior.

Education and participation in school meet many current and anticipated future needs. If anything puts that goal or that participation at risk, conflict or crisis is likely. These educational and school related goals are in addition to all other human needs students bring to school with them, as well as external problems.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Basic physical needs – the ability to provide for basic needs for food and shelter. In some schools, for some students, attendance may actually allow a student to have a predictable meal schedule. Students may feel that their future ability to provide for themselves is contingent on their education.

Safety – the ability to feel secure in the environment and safe from threats. The alternative to being in school may be perceived as less safe than being in school.

Belonging – the ability to be have meaningful relationships with others; to be part of a group; to experience love and affection. Certainly peer group affiliations are an important part of school to most young people. The stability of relationships in school may be especially important for students with fragmented or unstable home lives or with poor community and social integration.

Esteem, achievement – the ability to move toward and reach important personal goals, especially goals involving gaining social status, esteem, respect and competence. School is the legitimate channel for moving toward appropriate social goals.

Meaning, self-actualization – the ability to have a significant impact, to make a difference; service to a higher value. School allows students to move toward "the dream" and to make their personal contribution.

Non-escalating Responses

Non-escalating responses are ways of interacting with others in potential crisis situations that are designed to reduce tension in yourself and others, and reduce likelihood that the situation will escalate.

1. Stay calm. This improves others' perceptions of you as a person in control, and improves your problem solving.
2. Use low voice tones and slow voice patterns.
3. Show a non-defensive/ non-aggressive posture. Avoid retreating or pressing.
4. Use first names.
5. Watch your hand movements. No finger shaking or arm waving. (Hold your hands.)
6. Get to eye level. Don't loom or cower. Try to keep them seated (if appropriate).
7. Watch interpersonal space. Moving in for confidentiality can be seen as invasion.
8. In escalating situations, try to isolate them from the group.

The Hierarchy of Responses

This five-stage model is designed to prescribe the most appropriate response type in situations that have the potential to escalate into a crisis.

1. You need to work through each stage each time.
 2. Your behavior is constrained by policy, both in terms of limits (what you can and can not do) and expectations (what you must do). This model must be applied with consideration for your local policies.
 3. A foundational relationship (as discussed earlier) can be beneficial. If you do not know the other person, you should have reputation for fairness, caring, concern, and respect.
 4. "Shifting gears" between stages changes their environment and can so change how they choose to behave.
1. Sympathy - sharing the feeling of the other, as a basis of meaningful human interaction. "I feel your pain."
 - Establishes your foundation of humanity, and attempts to connect with them as another human being.
 - Tends to frame issue as their personal problem, for which they might want to seek assistance.
 - Think about referral channels, inside or outside the agency.
 2. Empathy - demonstrating understanding of the experience of the other with caring and concern.
 - Part of the helping foundation of empathy, respect and genuineness.
 - Starts "counseling-type" problem solving (exploration, goal setting, action), and student ownership of problem.
 - Helping student come up with other options that can improve their repertoire, and so help them make better choices (especially now).
 3. Matter-of-fact - making clear your responsibilities, and student options and consequences. You show a flatter affect and adopt a "legalistic" tone. At this stage you communicate that further discussion about this issue will not happen, and you state for the person their options and expected consequences.
 - Stating options may make emoting student think, and so can help manage "out of control" emotions.
 - Also points out to student other possible behaviors to current repertoire.
 4. Directive - as the student becomes more out of control, you become more in control. This stage includes closing skills. When a conflict reaches this stage, you are usually forced to "lose" (at least temporarily) this student's participation especially if continued meaningful activity by the rest of the group is a high priority. Central messages are that:

- This behavior is unacceptable,
- This is your last chance to cut your losses,
- This behavior can only continue to make your situation worse (including jeopardizing your ability to continue to participate in this group), and
- "Your behavior requires me to discharge my legitimate responsibility to maintain order."

Leaving should be considered as a preferred option for them. Your anticipated behaviors at this stage should be practiced, and confirmed as appropriate by management.

5. Security - the safety of yourself and others becomes the primary concern. Procedures for the notification of appropriate support persons must be known. Be prepared to minimize the impact of the disturbance on the rest of the group. This is the last resort, and will only be really justifiable if you have gone through each of the other stages.

Summary

- Conflicts have similarities.
- Behavior makes sense, needs meeting is important.
- Practice non-escalating responses.
- Have a plan and think about changing the field.
 - Be human
 - Know responsibilities/ options/ consequences
 - Practice directives
 - Have a safety plan
- Have a workable goal. Making everything OK for everyone is not a workable goal.