Tomorrow’s Academic Careers

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**Managing Anger and Confrontation**

General strategies to use to reduce angry and confrontational behavior

* Attempt to anticipate inappropriate behavior by looking for signs and triggers in the student and in yourself.
* Try to remain calm when faced with someone who is angry as it is important to listen to what they say and acknowledge their feelings.
* Set the rhythm for the discussion with your first response. Respond rather than react.
* When responding make sure you do so constructively.

-            Always explain to students the reasons for your actions.

-            Show respect towards students and do not belittle or humiliate them.

-            Permit students some dignity. If necessary give time and space for both of you to calm

             down.

* Sometimes it will be better to give a clear instruction and then move away from a student.
* Make it clear that you have the expectation that compliance will occur.
* Do not get pulled into a power struggle – keep your responses low key and do not allow the situation to escalate.
* Do not take things personally. Do not become defensive.
* Try to keep the situation in perspective.
* Try to persuade the other person to think positively about the situation. Help them to reframe negative thoughts and give these a positive spin.
* Show genuine concern and help the student to take control of the situation.
* Use pauses between responses. Using a form of tactical pausing can reduce the chances of confrontation and also shows respect as this demonstrates that you are reflecting on what they are saying.
* Remember that silence can be very effective.
* Convey non-aggressive intentions in your body language – avoid waving your arms as this can exacerbate the confrontation.
* When reading non-verbal communication in students we can easily become misled. Do not read single examples of non-verbal communication – always read ‘gesture clusters’. Look for congruence between non-verbal and verbal forms of communication.
* Avoid having an emotional reaction to misbehavior. Put up a wall between yourself and what the student is doing.
* Avoid excessive eye contact as this can be seen as threatening and challenging. Allow the student to look away. Standing at right angles or alongside the student will help to avoid issues relating to eye contact.
* Avoid squaring up, invading their personal space (46cm), and making any threatening movements. Remember that appearing to retreat by moving away from the student can lead to problems.
* Do not copy their mood. For example, if they shout and you then shout louder, this can lead to an upward spiral of confrontational behavior. Reflect an increase in emotional level to show that you are really concerned.
* Try to be solution-focused and allow the student to save face. Give them an escape route.
* Show that you are willing to accept a compromise, a solution that is acceptable to all and allows everyone to feel a winner. Making token concessions can be worthwhile, for example by admitting that they may have a point (known as the 1 percent technical error strategy).
* Use inclusive language: ‘we all get angry so it’s OK to feel this way – we will certainly be able to find a solution.’ This can prove useful as some learners will become scared by their extreme behavior.
* Avoid trying to resolve the situation whilst the student is still angry. Giving them time out to reflect can be a useful strategy, particularly if they are not in the right mental state or the conditions are not suitable. Buying a period of time for reflection is important so try to utilize a time-out strategy.
* Avoid the ‘oxygen of publicity’ generated by public exchanges by taking the discussion somewhere private (but not away from a third party, otherwise you may be vulnerable). The situation is likely to become worse if it is acted out in front of a student’s peers.
* Respect students’ right to disagree and have different opinions to yours.
* Using attention diverters with distractions, real or imagined, can be a way of breaking the cycle of anger. For example, stand and look out of the window and say nothing – you may find that soon the student will join you in looking out of the same window.
* Sometimes you may need to use wrong-footing tactics and behave in a way that is different from what the student would normally expect from you.
* Think about what you will do in certain situations beforehand and produce scripts for these. Use friendly gestures. Do not point. Use the palms of your hands or place your hands by your side.
* Try to establish a rapport by matching and mirroring students’ body language and listening to the language of their sensory preference (refer to Chapter 5).
* Stay in control of yourself by checking your body language and speech volume. Keep clear of power struggles and avoid hostile remarks where sarcasm and ridicule are used.
* When in a conflict situation it is sometimes easy to make idle threats that can never be followed through. Use certainty not severity – say what you mean and mean what you say.
* Use humor to relieve the tension of the situation.
* Avoid the ‘Bad day/I am in a mood’ syndrome that all staff can suffer from given the pressures they face.