Dear Supporter of Quality Education

Are you (too much of) a peacemaker?

Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler meet in Munich, 1938

Whether it's the classroom or staffroom, most teachers try to avoid conflict. Teaching is tough enough. We don't need to add interpersonal conflict and might be inclined to walk away from it. Yet is it sometimes better to bring conflict right out into the open?

History is full of cases where – by being too much of a peacemaker – conflict soars. Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister of Britain around the time of the Second World War, is such an example. His foreign policy was one of appeasement. Avoid conflict. As Hitler's brutal policy of invading neighbouring countries *(lebensraum)* goose-stepped across Europe, Chamberlain tried to placate him.

On 30 September 1938 Chamberlain signed the Munich Agreement with Hitler. The agreement was that Nazi Germany would not invade other countries. On his return to England, Chamberlain famously (or infamously) held up a document that he had co-signed with Hitler proclaiming that there would be, "Peace in our time." Hitler was contemptuous of the document and had no intention of honouring its' contents. A year later a world war started which resulted in millions of people being injured or killed.

In a school situation, being too much of a peacemaker can have dire negative outcomes. Conflict festers. An unhappy work environment is created. The school becomes a place of never-ending bullying amongst and between the children as well as staff. Scholastic standards often drop; staff turnover can become high.

What do you do if deep down at heart you're a peacemaker? Sometimes you still might need to have the tough talk with a colleague. Joel Garfunkle, an American executive leadership coach, offers suggestions. He accepts that most of us want to be liked. However, one needs to realise that it's not the most important thing. Think long-term. If the conflict is managed well, the long-term benefits are huge. The school becomes a happier and higher achieving place for almost everyone.

Garfunkle maintains that a difficult conversation should start from a place of curiosity and respect. Have self-respect for who you are but also

have respect for the other person. Be curious as you try and understand what the core reasons are for the conflict. Respect the other person's viewpoint yet also expect the same in return. Be curious to know if your behavior and the way you make decisions, contribute to the conflict.

Most of your curiosity will be answered by simply doing one thing. Be a good listener. You don't need to dominate the conversation. Take the pressure off yourself. Let the other person do most of the talking. Focus on listening, reflecting and observing body language.

There's a stage in the conversation where's the need to get to the nitty-gritty. It's time to get to the core of the conflict. Both parties will need to be frank with each other and speak openly. This still needs to be done in a mutually respectful manner.

Peacemakers are inclined to defer from having the difficult conversation. They rationalize by saying to themselves comments such as, "The problem will disappear in time" or "I'll bring it up next time it happens." Action delayed often results in a solution being denied.

Don't overthink what one will say. Have a gist of one or two important things that need to be aired. Discussions on conflictual issues don't follow a set routine such as one has in a normal meeting. There'll be twists and turns. Remember that in the big picture you have one goal – to reach a peaceful resolution.

It's natural to want to be liked but it's not always the most important thing.

Expect a positive outcome from the difficult conversation. Henry Ford of motor car fame once quipped, "Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right." Believe in the worst and it's likely to turn out that way. Yet if you have a positive mind frame, the outcome is likely to be just that. Instead of thinking, "This meeting will be a disaster and make matters worse," rather reframe it as, "At the end of this discussion, we'll understand each other better. We'll work better together."

Quality teachers are invariably peacemakers. Their emotional intelligence levels are usually high! They work hard at getting on well with others. That's an aspect of their special quality. Yet another aspect is their courage to have those difficult discussions.

Finally and on a different matter, this Covid-19 pandemic year is almost over. It's a year that for many sad and unfortunate reasons, is indelibly imprinted on our minds. Let's look to the future. May the upcoming Festive Season herald happier times. May 2021 be a kinder, better year for us all.

Sincerely

Richard Hayward

Reference

Garfunkle, J 2018. How to have difficult conversations when you don't like conflict. *Harvard Business Review-On Point*. Fall 2018 : pages 12-13.

Do staff raise issues openly?

A formal setting might discourage free-flowing discussion

A familiar question asked of a candidate at a job interview is to describe their leadership style. Usually the reply is that the person has an open-door policy. Nobody says that their policy is a closed-door one! Yet in the everyday world of school leadership, how many staff members feel free to openly discuss issues with those in senior management? What are the causes for caution?

The Fear Factor

In an article written by James Detert and Ethan Burris (2018), they state that there are two main reasons for caution. The first one is the fear factor. Staff are scared of angering their superiors. There could also be fallout such as losing out on promotion chances or even losing their jobs.

So, what can be done to take away the fear of raising concerns? Detert and Burris make the point that the unintended behaviour of leaders could ramp up the fear.

There are those schools that encourage anonymous feedback. Suggestion boxes are put in foyers and reception areas. Everyone's invited to put their comments into them. Yet there are flaws in encouraging anonymity. They include:

- When a person is told to raise issues in this way, the sub-text is, "It's not safe to share your views openly in this organisation. So we've created other channels to get the information that we need."

- Senior management might receive the feedback in a hostile manner. It could cause resentment. A witch hunt could start as to find out who made the comments.

- When a complaint is anonymous, it's difficult to fully understand the situation and understand all the issues that affect the person who is directly involved. Often the complainant might be able to offer solutions if there was an open, honest discussion.

If you're presently working in a school, where are the offices of senior management? Often they're in a separate and sometimes controlled-access section of the school. The principal's office could be at the end of a long corridor. To reach the office and have an open-door policy experience, you might have to pass the gauntlet of going past a number of staff members. They might be curious as to the reason for your visit. After their interrogations, only then do you reach the holy-of-holies or inner sanctum! When the principal makes a general invitation to everyone to come forward if they want to discuss a matter, too many people get to know of the intended visit.

Another unintentional fear factor created by the leader is, according to Detert and Burris, 'sending signals that you're in charge'. Go back in your mind to the last principal's office that you've sat in or the one that you presently work in! What does it look like?

Are the furnishings somewhat different and more imposing than other offices in the school? How does the principal's desk compare to desks found in other rooms? Is the principal's chair considerably more elegant than other chairs found in the room and around the school? If so, could these factors unwittingly make a person feel somewhat in awe and a little ill-at-ease?

An informal setting makes it easier to have free-flowing discussion

The Futility Factor

The second factor why staff don't speak up – the futility factor – is often given as actually the most important reason. What's the point of complaining or raising issues when nothing happens? Raising concerns is seen as a waste of time.

What can leaders do to make people feel that it's not futile to speak openly? The starting point is with the person who wants to get the feedback. The leader should be a good listener but also personally be seen by others to speak out on issues. They also need to be vocal. Followers need to hear the leaders raising issues that are important to them. The leaders in a school, for example, should get a reputation for following through with those who hold superior posts to them. Such a person could be a District Director of schools in a region.

To reduce the futility factor further, the leader gets everyone

focussed on where the input is needed. Meetings shouldn't meander meaninglessly from one topic to another. Focus on one or two important concerns. Discuss the issues. Make resolutions. Follow through. Ensure implementation. Everyone can then see that the meetings aren't a waste of time.

A sense of futility can also set in when there aren't enough resources. The majority of South African schools have enormous financial restraints. Yet, as the simple saying states: "The whole elephant can actually eventually be eaten. It's done bite by little bite." To encourage input from staff, there's need to make them believe that a worthwhile goal can eventually be reached. When the resources are there – or are possible through strenuous effort – folk will realise that having a sense of futility is nonsense.

Beating the Fear and Futility Factors

Take away the fear and futility factors and there will be far more open discussion. Complaints and conflict are aired; suggestions are made as to how to further improve the school. When that happens, a happier and higher achieving school can be created.

Five suggestions made by Detert and Burris (102-104) to create such an organisational climate are:

1. Ask frequently for input

Don't wait for a crisis or huge problem to happen before asking folk to give input. Be proactive. Deal with small smouldering fires before there is an inferno. Make meetings frequent and regular. Encourage expressions of opinions. Take away the novelty of such sessions. The more often that they're held, the more comfortable people will feel in voicing their opinions.

2. Be transparent

Tell people what route is going to be followed once they raise an issue. For example, a request is made for an improvement in a condition of service at the school. The staff need to know that it will be taken to the School Governing Body which will be meeting on a specified date. A report-back will then be given to the staff. Everyone can see the process. The staff meeting isn't a futile toy-telephone activity.

3. Reach out

As mentioned earlier, senior management staff offices can sometimes be far away from the rest of the school. Management needs to get out of the offices. Remember to do MBWA (Management by walking around). Walk the corridors. Have informal chats with children, parents and staff around the school. Attend extramural activities. Be visible. Be part of the every-day scene.

4. Soften the power cues

If you're in a senior management position, what does your office look like besides the pile of 'to-do' paperwork on your desk? Does it ooze power such as the Oval Office in the White House? What can be done to make it look less intimidating and more friendly?

Is the only swivel chair in the room the one that you sit in? Would it be possible to include a small round table where all the chairs are of equal height thereby encouraging more relaxed communication? If there's not enough space in your office, maybe you could sit on the same side of the desk as the person who has come in to speak to you.

Does a Suggestion Box encourage open communication?

5. Close the loop

Once folk have spoken up at a meeting, close the loop. Tell them what happened to their recommendations. Tell them how it was adapted or adopted. Even if their ideas were rejected, give them the reasons. Commend them for raising their concerns; show appreciation for their efforts.

Whatever position you hold in the school, it's in your personal interest to be on good terms with others. When there are issues that make others unhappy, there's much to be gained by talking about them openly but obviously in the right forum. That will happen when nobody fears having frank discussions and knows that by having them, they aren't futile.

Reference

Detert, J R and Burris E R 2018. Can your employees really speak freely? *Harvard Business Review – On Point*. Fall: pages 98-104.

The principal doing MBWA (Managing by Walking Around)

"That person is so toxic!"

In the ideal staffroom everyone gets on well with each other … it's all sweetness and light. Well, in the real-world staffroom, it might be a little different! Yet in most schools, staff work hard to keep the interactions friendly and positive.

It's important to distinguish between a difficult and a toxic staff member. The difficult person has idiosyncrasies or mannerisms that make it hard for others. Maybe there's a lack of tact or a tartness when talking to colleagues. The person is forever finding faults. In contrast, the toxic teacher is someone who causes much harm through malicious gossip and deliberate damaging of the staffroom 'vibes'.

How does one deal with the toxic staff member? There should be a commitment by the school   to deal decisively with the matter. A toxic person can – if not managed – cause huge emotional damage.

A starting point is to try to understand the reasons for the unacceptable behaviour. Meet with the person and be an attentive listener. Tough questions need to be asked and answered. Has the school treated the person unfairly? Are the demands of the job too much? Are there personal issues that can explain the behaviour?

If the person makes reasonable requests about where the school can or should make improvements, they should be implemented.
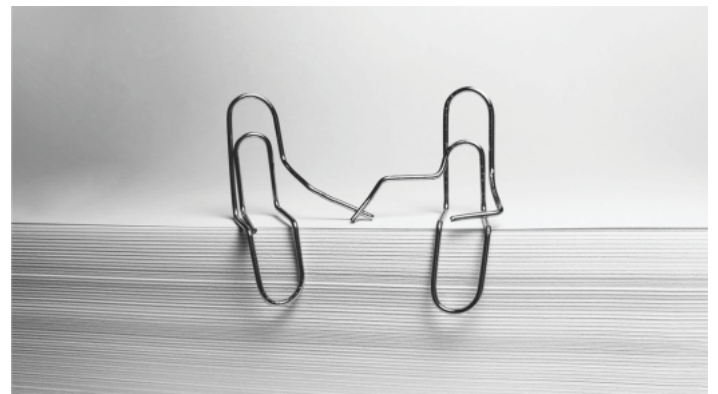
In the discussions the toxic person needs to be made aware of those precise aspects of their behaviour that are causing staffroom unhappiness. This feedback should aim for respectful interaction. The person deserves chances to change behaviour. Guidance should be offered.

As far as is both reasonably possible and tactful, minimise the individual from other staff members – especially those who could be sucked into the negativity. If not subtly ring-fenced, the toxicity becomes a verbal cancer spreading throughout the school.

Unfortunately, not all toxic individuals change their ways. It might be necessary for the person to have to leave the school. It's therefore important to keep an accurate record of all the intervention meetings. That will include all the advice and strategies adopted by the school. If dismissal is eventually needed, make sure that the school has followed the correct legal steps.

In many situations where toxicity might start to appear, there's one way that helps reduce it. Make many opportunities available for staff to speak frankly and openly. Then there's no need nor excuse for any bad-mouthing behind anyone's back.