

Managing Challenging Conversations & Conflict



WORKBOOK



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Learning Log & Action Plan

Learning Point	Action	Priority	By When ?

Challenging Conversation Topics ?

Challenging Topics?	Methods of Communication?

What People Want

Imagine you have a difficult subject to get over, for example to an elderly service user Iris and her family. It is not possible to provide a specific requested service as part of a care package, such as an evening visit by a visiting home care service. This will increase the pressure on the daughter of Iris. You anticipate some resistance to this but based on the assessment and decisions with your manager it is all that can be offered at this time.

What people want in situations like this is that they have been heard and understood. What they don't want is to sense that you are indifferent or even hostile to their feelings.

Suppose you encounter strong resistance from Iris's daughter. What you don't want to do is resist your "opponent" by arguing. This will only help to add scale to the point of view. However, by acknowledging from the start that the concerns are valid and showing empathy for the situation, should help to engage them and help them to recognise that their concerns are not being ignored or discounted.

So much of communicating tough topics is about unwanted change or perception of need, expectations and entitlement. Another point to note is that perhaps, 'bad news', is not always bad for everyone and some may see it as an opportunity.

There are **5 things that people want** when tough topics are raised.

They want to talk about their fears - Let them have their say. People need to express their concerns; they need to react and articulate their feelings. Your role, is to listen and respect their views even if you think their comments are illogical and unfair.

They want you to acknowledge that their concerns are valid - Never dismiss the feelings of others. Their feelings are very personal to them and by dismissing them an immediate barrier will be formed which subsequently will be very difficult to break down.

They want a role in deciding the outcome - Allow people to work out for themselves how to adapt to the situation and allow them to have input where possible.

They want to hold on to the familiar - Keep as much of the familiar as possible. People will naturally want to hang on to what they know. Like and / or want.

They want a good reason for any decided outcome - Explain the decisions be they yours or based on policy, procedure, Law. It helps if they can see something good from the decision so explain the decision and emphasise the benefits as much as possible.

What People Want - Activity Notes

Make a brief note of a difficult discussion topic or challenging conversation you have had to deal with. Then note the outcome. Then thinking about the 5 points of 'What People Want' consider what, if anything, you would do differently if you were to do it again? Prepare to share your thoughts with the whole group.

Challenging Topic or Conversation?	Outcome?	How could it have been handled differently?

Planning & Preparation - Activity Notes

Imagine you have been tasked to visit a service user in their home to deliver some unwelcome news. Make this relevant to your own professional role.

What would you consider as part of the planning and preparation prior to carrying out the visit. Think What?, When?, Where?, Why?, Who?, How? Note your ideas below.

Planning & Preparation Considerations?

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Structuring Your Message

When news is communicated, it helps if there is a structure to the various elements of the news. If we structure the communication in a logical manner, we will ensure that people clearly receive the message and that there is less likelihood of misunderstanding.

The order of giving the news is:

Context – What you are going to be talking about

The headline - The heading of the subject matter

The detail – The detail

The reason for the news – What's caused it

The rationale – What led to the reason, the background behind it

The consequences – What this actually means to the individuals, what will happen

Alternative actions – What, if any, other actions can be taken

Internal Statements

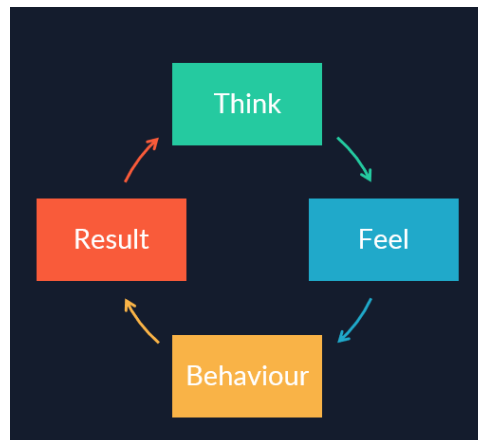
A difficult message is just that, we are unable to avoid the fact that it has to be communicated. What makes a difference is the way in which it is communicated and the impact that the facilitator has on the group.

Before starting a conversation or a meeting in which you are going to discuss something which you think will be unpopular, there are probably several thoughts going through your mind.

It can be difficult to change this view of how our difficult sessions are going to run because we make the assumption that we are right in our way of thinking. If we accept that we may have beliefs which limit what we do, there is an argument for challenging our thoughts. If you hold the belief that you will fail at something, then you probably will.

We therefore need to have an internal conversation, or argument to enable to see things from a different perspective.

Thinking Affects Results



We have direct control over what we **think** and this impacts on everything else in the cycle shown. First it will impact on how you **feel** when communicating. If you think it will be a complete disaster, this is how you will feel and this in turn will affect your **behaviour** – What you do and what you don't do, how you will be perceived by your audience. This will manifest itself in how you speak, your body language, how you challenge individuals, (possibly in a too passive or aggressive manner which will in turn impact on how they respond to you).

It is inevitable then that this will affect the **result** or outcome of the session. Of course, it doesn't mean that everyone will leave the session happy and smiling but you will know that you've communicated the subject in an appropriate manner, giving you confidence for future tough topics.

Unhelpful Internal Statements - Activity Notes

Unhelpful Internal Statements	Re-written Statements
'This is going to be awful'	
'They are expecting something from me'	
'They know more about this than me'	
'They've already made their mind up that it won't work'	

What is Conflict?

We define conflict as a disagreement through which the people involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns. Through this simple statement we can pull out four key elements of importance when we talk about conflict. These are:

- Disagreement
- People involved
- Perceived threat
- Needs, interests or concerns

Your Experience of Conflict

Consider a conflict situation that you have encountered. Write a brief explanation of the situation below...

Now note what specifically happened in relation to each of the elements below...

Disagreement (true and perceived):

People Involved (and not involved):

Perceived threat (as opposed to truth):

Needs, Interests or Concerns (emotions involved):

How to Spot Conflict

Most people respond to conflict in predictable ways. They may confront it head on, avoid it or perhaps tackle it from another angle. We can label these approaches as aggressive, passive and passive aggressive.

In order to identify conflict, it is important that you learn to spot differences in people's behaviour and how they respond to each other. You probably know how you typically respond and it's just as important to be able to identify how others might.

Aggressive Behaviours ?

Passive Behaviours ?

Passive Aggressive Behaviours?

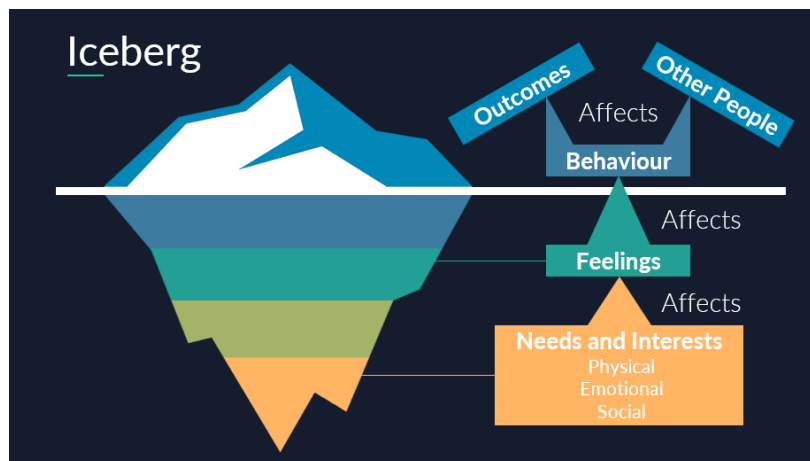
Although these responses are typical signs of conflict, never assume that conflict has occurred simply when you see one of the behaviours take place. People are complex and it is possible that there are other reasons behind these actions.

Why Conflict Can Be Difficult to Resolve?

The main reason that conflicts are so difficult to resolve is that they are predominantly influenced by emotions. When emotions like anger and resentment are felt it is often difficult for people to behave rationally. The likelihood of the person understanding the others point of view diminishes as their own strong emotions take over.

Emotions play a role in how people make sense of their relationships, concept of power, and social status. People constantly evaluate situations and events to work out if they are personally relevant. These understandings and appraisals are infused with various emotions and feelings. So, emotion not only serves a side effect of conflict, but also frames the way in which parties understand and define their dispute.

Secondly, within the context of relationships, emotions typically express people's agendas, desires, and goals. When people perceive that they have incompatible goals or that others are interfering with their desires and pursuits, this elicits emotions and leads to conflict.



Imagine an iceberg, a small percentage is above the water and visible, while a large part is below the water line and obscured from view. The small part represents our behaviour; we can see and hear it.

Just below the surface is our emotions – we can neither see nor hear them, but we can often guess how we and others are feeling by observing the behaviours. For example; when someone is smiling, we can guess they are happy, when they frown we guess they are sad etc.

If we go deeper down the iceberg we get to a place that represents the things that are most important to us: our needs and interests. These are the things that drive our emotions and in turn cause us to act and react the way we do when in conflict.

When dealing with conflict it is tempting to overlook the emotional aspect and often we are told to treat things only from an objective point of view. This is dangerous and usually leads to failure. Our aim should be to identify that emotions play a part and look for methods of addressing the emotive issues. Only then can we overcome the substantive needs of those involved.

Positions and Interests

Another reason why conflict can be so hard to resolve is that people tend to focus on positions rather than interests. The difference between the two is both important and significant.

A position represents a person's perception of the solutions that will meet their own needs, whereas an interest represents their underlying concerns. Interests lie at the bottom of the iceberg and positions are above the surface.

It is often the case that although two parties have a differing position, there is much that they would agree on if they focused on their interests instead.

In the wheelie bin debate you have the opposing POSITIONS of the locals and the council. The locals are extremely angry that they have to pay for wheelie bins and refuse to do so. The council are sticking fast to their position and say that if the locals refuse to pay for their own wheelie bins, then taxes will be made on collections. Both positions are held strongly and any debate around them seems to be fraught with problems as no side will budge.

If both parties focussed solely on their positional needs in this scenario then the likely outcome is one of dissatisfaction on both sides. However, there is an alternative and that is to focus on the INTERESTS.

These are the underlying thoughts and beliefs that are held by both parties. It is typical that the thinking behind their positions is similar. However, if they only focus on the positions rather than these underlying interests, the outcome is one of impasse. Focussing on interests tends to find many and varied methods of resolving issues.

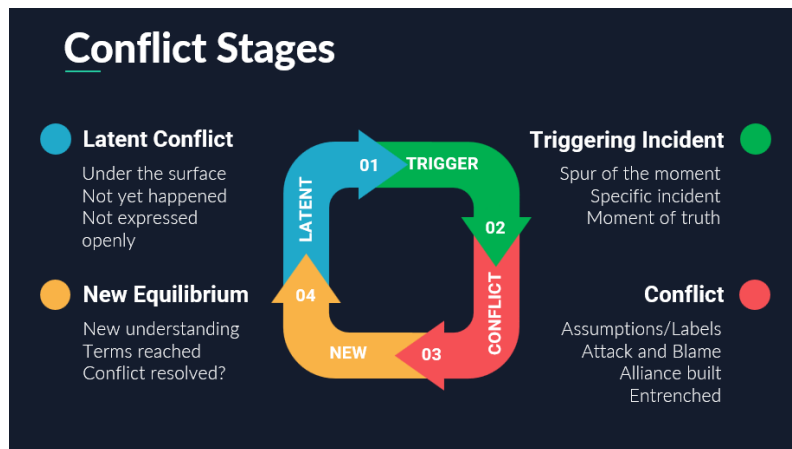
The most effective way to uncover someone's interests, even your own, is to ask questions that are probing while expressing a degree of empathy. Here are some examples...

Uncovering Interests

- What's important to you about..?
- You seem concerned about...tell me more...
- How would that improve the situation?
- What would that do for you?
- What will be different when..?

The Stages of Conflict

Conflicts tend to follow certain stages and allow each conflict will be different; there are certain distinctions you will notice if you observe closely enough. It is useful to understand the stages involved and even if the particular conflict you are examining differs from the stages outlined, you will at least be able to identify what is emerging. This will assist you in helping the conflict to a peaceful settlement by intervening appropriately.

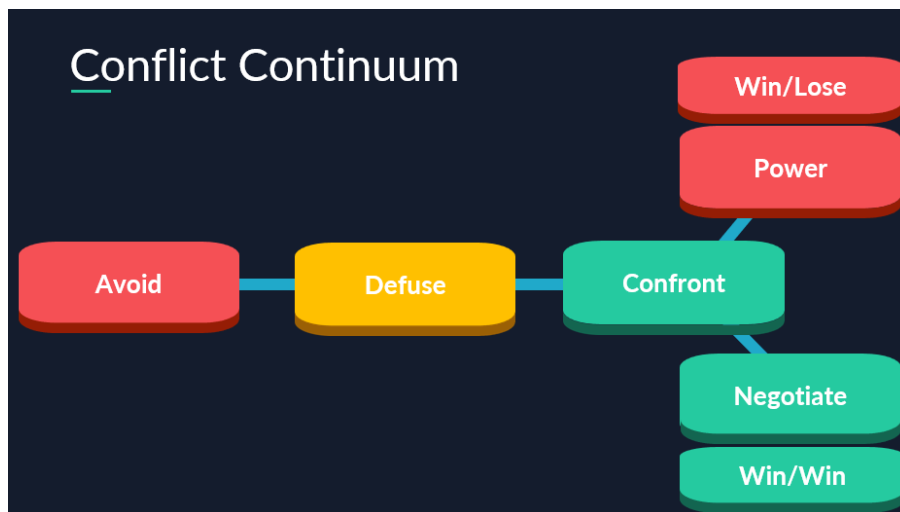


Latent conflict – It can be argued that there is always some conflict bubbling under the surface, particularly in the work environment. This is conflict waiting to happen. It may be that the conflict never happens or that by spotting latent conflict early a good practitioner can manage the situation and avoid it altogether.

Triggering incident - After a conflict has remained latent for some time, if the underlying grievances or frustrations are strong enough, a "triggering event" marks the emergence or the "eruption" phase of the conflict. This event or episode may be the first appearance of the conflict, or it may be a confrontation that erupts in the context of a protracted, but dormant, or low-level conflict.

Conflict – At this stage the issues begin to be aired. Parties start to make assumptions based on their positions and might label others. There will also be an element of blame being placed; people start to invest emotions and resources into remaining in the entrenched position and typically build alliances to strengthen their position.

New Equilibrium - Even after a settlement is reached, this is by no means the end of the conflict. The settlement has to be implemented. If it is just a conflict between two people, this may not be too hard: those two people do what they agree to do, and past problems may be solved. However, when there are more involved it can be difficult to maintain. Those people that resolved the conflict may need to manage carefully the egos and emotional issues of all parties.



Avoid - Often the first response taken to any conflict, may be in response to a safety issue or violence. Avoiding should only be avoided in the short term. This may lead to escalation and flourishing of a problem and could make it even more extreme, challenging or improper

Defuse - This could be an appropriate way of tackling the conflict, but again in the short term as it takes the pressure off but in the long term if left unresolved could lead to the same outcomes as if avoided completely. There may be emotional responses that are making it difficult to communicate leading to this approach, for example those involved may be tearful, upset or angry. If you choose this option initially point out the issue that is stopping the communication to continue, then explain what you plan to do in terms of returning later perhaps when things are calmer.

Confront

The earlier the better but you need to choose your approach carefully.

- **Power** - Might be your position in seniority or another 'power' dynamic you have to make decisions or intervene. There is an assumption here that power will prevail, there is a WIN/LOSE situation, a power imbalance that could be seen as passive aggressive and an approach that may cause resentment or breakdown in a personal, professional or working relationship.
- **Negotiation** - The ideal position if possible, make it clear from the outset that you would like to negotiate and why. Highlighting the benefits for all involved in the conflict.

Resolving Conflicts You Are Involved In

Resolving conflict when you are involved can be difficult, uncomfortable and often soul destroying. The key to resolving these issues effectively is preparation, both in your own mind and with the potentially difficult conversation.

It is always best to approach these situations with the best intentions in mind and to ensure you have the correct and compassionate attitude. There are also certain skills involved that will prove important. These include: Listening, Questioning, Rapport, Reframing (saying a similar thing, but in a different, more positive, way), Empathy, Assertiveness, Self-Confidence.

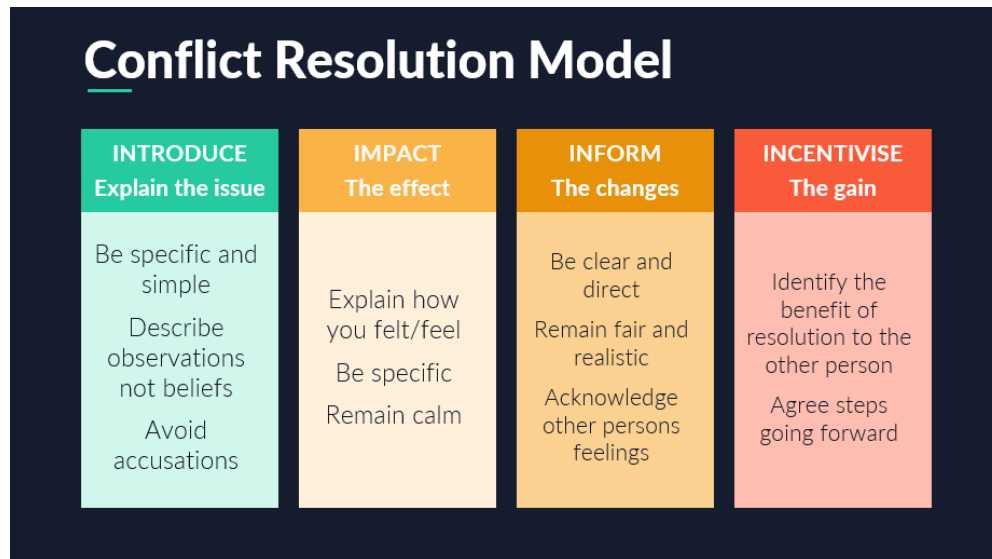
Aside from having the correct skills to handle conflict situations, it is also important that we prepare effectively and approach any discussion we are likely to have in a structured way. By doing this, we can be sure that we take into account the likely impact of our conversation.

Our preparation need not be overly complicated and in fact a simple approach that we can feel confident about will usually get the best results.

The first thing to consider is what our objective is i.e. what we want to be different as a result of challenging the situation. It helps to write this down. We should also consider where and when we will discuss the issue as this can have an impact on the response we are likely to receive.

Once we have established that, we can look at how we will approach the actual discussion.

The Conflict Resolution Model



Introduce – At this stage you need to explain in detail the issue as you see it and why you are having the conversation. You should avoid making assumptions, being overly critical or placing blame. You should be clear and specific in your statement, whilst using simple language.

Impact – At this stage you are describing the effect the situation is having on you / the situation. It helps to acknowledge your own feelings and it is also important to remain calm and focused.

Inform – Here you should make it clear what you would like to be different. Again, clarity is important. You should also be realistic in your request and leave room for negotiation while recognising that the other person has feelings and desires too.

Incentivise – There has to be some value in the person changing their behaviour, attitude or approach. Ensure they see what you are stating as a benefit and offer things that you know can be delivered.

Conflict Situation – Activity Notes

Consider a conflict situation that you are currently experiencing (if you cannot think of one, choose one from your past).

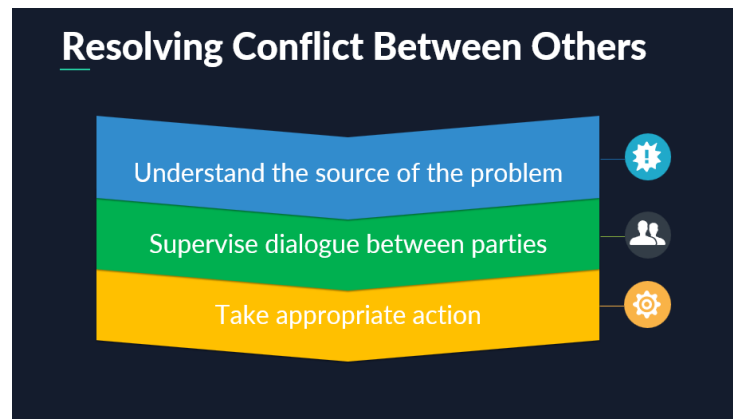
Use the conflict resolution model to prepare an outline approach to managing this conflict.

Describe the conflict situation:
The Objective:
When/where I will be when I discuss this:
Introduce:
Impact:
Inform:
Incentive:

Resolving Conflict Between Others

The method of resolving conflict between others is not dissimilar to when you are involved. You still need to demonstrate the same set of skills and the conflict management model also suits the purpose. However, you should be careful in your approach to handling conflict in others as if badly handled; you can become embroiled in the issue.

A conflict between people in work, family or social settings can foster many problems. This undermines professional work, and can irreparably damage relationships and lives. This is why such problems must be identified and resolved as quickly as possible. Here are three simple steps to take that may assist you to assist in resolving the conflict.



Understand the source of the problem - The first step to take is to talk to all parties involved in the conflict and try to understand what causes the conflict. You may wish to test your assumptions by approaching each with your personal observations. Remember to keep this factual and specific. It is also important to show empathy while highlighting your concerns. Your aim is to change the current perceptions and help those involved view things from a different point of view.

Supervise and facilitate dialogue between parties – Where resolution cannot be gained without getting directly involved, it may be necessary to hold a meeting between parties. You should be there to ensure that the conversation stays focused on the matter at hand and respectful. You might have to paraphrase or sum up during the dialogue to ensure that it leads to a resolution. Try to follow the conflict resolution model to make this process flow.

Take appropriate action – Where resolution can be gained, this stage is simple; you will agree steps going forward and then manage accordingly. When a solution cannot be agreed upon it may be time to escalate the issue or to find ways of working around the problem. In the work environment, it is often necessary to bring HR into the process where things cannot be resolved.

Challenging Personalities

Of course, there are times when you communicate messages that people become awkward, which will make it hard for you to get your point across and resolve conflict. What can you do about this?

First of all, you need to recognise why they are behaving in such a manner. One of the main reasons people behave in an awkward manner is if what they want from the situation is different from what you want.

We will look at some of the different challenging personalities that you will encounter but we need to remember that we can't change people's behaviour; they can only decide to do that themselves based on the situation and circumstances we present.



Challenging Personalities- How to Deal?

- Acknowledge the person and the way they are feeling
- Acknowledge your position
- Make it clear you understand their position by listening to their views with empathy
- Where possible move the situation forward by putting the incident in the past tense if possible
- Consider the most suitable method of communicating

When dealing with challenging personalities, don't try to change the other person; you will only get into a power struggle, cause defensiveness, invite criticism, or otherwise make things worse. It also makes *you* a more difficult person to deal with.

Change your response to the other person; this is all you have the power to change. For example, don't feel you need to accept abusive behaviour. You can use assertive communication to draw boundaries when the other person chooses to treat you in an unacceptable way.

Challenging Personalities Suggested Responses

Challenging Personality Type	Behaviour	Response
Time Hog	Spends too much time asking or answering; doesn't give others the opportunity to talk	Ask "How does that relate to what we are discussing?" or if in a group ask another participant to comment. See DEAL model.
Tangent	Asks questions off the topic	"That's an important point, and even though it doesn't relate to our current topic, I'd like to capture it for future reference by making a note of it.
Blocker	Disagrees with other's views consistently and repeatedly	Assure them that their experience is valuable and that an integral part of working together on this issue is to exchange experiences and ideas.
Withdrawer	Won't participate; converses privately	Call on them by name, asking a question you know they can answer. Give that person responsibility to engage.
Recognition Seeker	Boasts; talks too much; conscious of status	Listen silently until person is finished, then ask others if present a chance to comment. May need to ask person politely to give you and others a chance to express their thoughts and views.
Topic Jumper	Continually changes the subject	Probe to see whether person feels topics are related. "How does your comment tie into the topic we are discussing?" If this isn't the case, summarise the discussion to that point and ask the person to directly address the issue.
Aggressor	Criticises and deflates status of others; disagrees with others	Keep your cool. Do not get personal. Give person enough time to make their comment or statement, get the opinion of the majority if others are present or share your assessment of what they have said. Point out the behaviour and the effect it is having on being able to work together on the issue.
Manipulator	Tries to take over; assert authority; manipulate group	The most destructive type of participant. Draw out their motives and respond to aims rather than the content of the statements. Point out the behaviour and the effect it is having on being able to work together on the issue. See DEAL model.
Devil's advocate	More devil than advocate	Remain calm. Affirm any good points, but toss bad points to the group for discussion if present.
Clique	Group stays together	Separate where possible
Terrible Trio	Three stay together	Have one be the spokesperson or separate meetings where possible.
Dynamic Duo	Two stick like glue	Have one be the spokesperson or separate meetings where possible.

How to DEAL with Disruptive Behaviour?

If you notice a pattern of disruptive behaviour having ignored the first two or three episodes of behaviour then use DEAL



Describe - BEHAVIOUR - 'I need to let you know that every time I speak or ask a question, you interrupt'

Quite often this is enough, they may not realise and describing their behaviour may just be enough to stop it happening again.

If continues then repeat the Description stage and add / move on to the **Explanation** stage...

Describe BEHAVIOUR - 'I have let you know that every time I speak or ask a question, you interrupt...'

Explanation – '.....this makes it difficult for us to talk things through together and it will take longer to cover the issues I need to talk to you about' Again this may be enough.

If not then repeat these two stages again and add the **Action** stage.

Describe - 'Again, when I speak or ask a question , you interrupt...'

Explanation – '....as explained earlier, this makes it difficult for us to talk things through and it will take longer to cover the issues I need to talk to you about and for us to find a solution...'

Action required – '....please do not interrupt me when I am talking, allow me to finish what I am saying, I will do the same when you are talking'

If this does not have the desired effect then you repeat the three stages again and then finally move to the final '**Likely Consequences**'

D - 'A little while ago I pointed out interruptions'

E - 'I explained this makes it very difficult for us to work together and to find a solution together'

A - 'I must ask you again not to interrupt me when I am talking to allow me to finish what I'm saying'

Likely Consequences – 'I have raised this with you several times but there has been no change, if this carries on I will have no option but to'(specify consequence)'

Challenging

There may be times where you need to challenge, specifically regarding the actions or behaviour of another. Also, perhaps where you have been provided inconsistent or an incorrect account or information.

Try using this model, it is a tried and tested way of challenging facts and accounts in a professional way.

It is often used in investigative interviewing, where the facts and evidence must be tested and checked, and where interviewers must be fair and avoid acting in an oppressive or judgemental way towards those under investigation. This approach can sometimes assist with conflict resolution and whilst trying to encourage and retain engagement with people we are working with.

Challenging – As Simple as ABC

A

'Earlier you told us that you never leave your children alone at home at night'

B

'The police inform me that last Wednesday they were called to your house at 01.30 a.m. and that the only people in the house were your two children'

C

'Help me understand what happened?'

Notes

Notes