



# Workp conflic

and what to do

HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH  
WORKPLACE CONFLICT?  
START BY SETTING THE  
STANDARDS OF APPROPRIATE  
BEHAVIOUR FOR THE WHOLE  
SCHOOL COMMUNITY, SAYS  
DEBRA FERGUSON.

IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE THERE WAS no conflict, where we agreed on politics, all barracked for the same football team and never had a disagreement. Let's face it, life would be pretty dull, not to mention tough for all the other football teams. The truth is, of course, that such a world isn't going to happen because we are human, we are all different and, therefore, conflict is natural.

Every day of our lives we experience conflict in some form or other. Our television shows report, dramatise or even create conflict. Our politicians thrive on it. In our own lives, conflict may take the shape of an aggressive driver on the road, a distressed family member or an angry email.

Conflict is about power – its use and misuse. It can be either positive or negative, serious or trivial. Very often we cannot control the conflict; what we can control is our response to it.

When conflict is positive, participants listen, without judging, and assert their point of view and needs. The power position is respectful and just. This form of conflict has brought great benefits to our world through debate about ideas and innovations. It helps our society to evolve.

When conflict is negative, however, people can feel threatened. Power misuse means that someone is being disadvantaged, and that can make us feel angry and resentful. Unchecked, it can be dangerous and can potentially spiral out of control. Negative conflict can diminish our wellbeing, relationships and productivity. Negative conflict in the workplace can lead to high staff turnover, low morale, absenteeism and poor public image.

#### **Workplace conflict**

Just think of the number of people you deal with on a daily basis. There's your family, your students, colleagues, school administrators and ancillary staff. Then there are the parents. Let's face it, educators are constantly managing conflict of some sort.

Most of us may not even notice in the natural ebb and flow of the day just how much we are problem solving as we deal

with the myriad different situations that arise as we interact with different personalities in different moods.

An unresolved workplace conflict, however, can encroach on our personal lives and may manifest itself in different ways. Maybe you are losing sleep, getting headaches and back pain or just not feeling the pizzazz you usually feel. Remember, we live with a finite amount of energy. When our energy is being consumed by conflict, there's less left over for other parts of our lives. We have to decide: how much energy am I prepared to invest in this problem; and is this conflict worth it?

Basically you've got three choices. You can ignore an unresolved workplace conflict, you can change the other person or people who bring the conflict about, or you can change how you deal with it yourself. Try not to blame someone else for what is happening to you. Remember, we have the power to choose how we respond.

Generally, people operate within the bounds of what we consider appropriate behaviour. Sometimes there's just one person who is really difficult. Sometimes it's a situation that causes you grief. Unresolved workplace conflict can be tough. If it doesn't get better and if it doesn't go away, you need to do something about it. But what can you do?

Let's meet Troy's mum. Troy is not his real name. Troy is fictional and so is his mum, but maybe you'll recognise her. In her eyes, Troy is brilliant. He is kind, respectful and great at sport. He is the most popular boy in Year Seven. Everyone wants to be his friend.

The Troy you know is quite different. To be honest, he's lazy, certainly not academically brilliant and he never says 'please' or 'thank you.' He's quite talented at sport, but has the unfortunate habit of bossing some team members around and taking over. Where does he get that from, you wonder? What upsets you, however, is the way his mother comes unannounced into the classroom and demands to speak with you 'right now!' This happens usually once

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a fortnight. In a loud, accusing voice, she demands to know why you are not providing Troy with the education he requires. You've heard that she talks behind your back to other parents in a way that demeans you both personally and professionally. She constantly writes you emails that have a condescending and critical tone. When you open the email at night, it can ruin your evening and sleep.

You have tried to cajole, humour and listen to her, but nothing is right according to her. When you see her coming, your heart starts pounding just waiting for the next instalment.

So what do you do about it? If you want change, then you're going to have to face the issue and do something.

For a start you need to stop everything and just focus on yourself. It's your responsibility to keep yourself safe. Do not let this mother diminish your wellbeing any further.

The choices of action are simple and clear. You can choose to do nothing, speak to her about her behaviour or involve a third party to speak to her.

### *Do nothing*

If you don't take any action, it's likely that the offending behaviour will continue – Troy's mother will assume it's acceptable. By doing nothing you are condoning her behaviour. It may also reflect on you being 'chicken' and not wanting to confront her. Remember, if it is unacceptable to you and it's negatively affecting your wellbeing, then you need to do something.

### *Speak to the mother*

Have you in fact told Troy's mum that her behaviour is not appropriate, it's harassing and you would like the harassment to stop? Maybe Troy's mother doesn't understand what is appropriate in the school community. Try to find out why she is behaving as she is and what she wants. Each person has his or her own way of managing people, but the one thing that difficult people have in common is their ability to manipu-

late people. Remember, it's about power. Sometimes just talking to someone early on will nip a potentially difficult situation in the bud. Inadvertent harassment is common and having a private word can help change behaviours. Some people are just not aware of their effect on other people. Choose an environment and time that is safe, secure and non-adversarial and aim for a positive confrontation.

This may not work with some people. If you have tried to tell her and she hasn't listened and she continues to harass you, then it's more serious. Her behaviour may be a form of workplace bullying. Check your school's workplace bullying and harassment policy for your rights and responsibilities. If it is workplace bullying, you may choose to be represented when meeting with her.

### *Involve a third party*

Dealing with difficult people can be very challenging and fraught with emotion. Having someone to support you in a meeting may help with the resolution. It could be your principal or another person of authority who can tell the mother that according to the standards of your school her behaviour is not acceptable. The aim is to resolve the issue so that both parties 'save face.' It's best to do this in a private and confidential manner.

Emotion can complicate matters so keep it simple. Deal with the issue of the behaviour rather than the person and deal with one issue at a time. Predetermine a time limit so you can keep the meeting short and to the point.

It's a good idea to start small. Deal with the issues that can be most easily resolved. You might begin with the classroom interruptions, but do this with the end in mind. What do you want to achieve? By when? Then think about how you will do it. Here are a few simple steps.

- Let your needs be known. As a professional you need to assert your need to control the classroom. Make it very clear

that the mother's uninvited interruptions disturb this. Letting her know your needs and boundaries is the foundation for all the discussions.

- Listen. Troy's mum may be defensive so use your listening skills. Have you really heard and understood her? Try to put yourself in her shoes and try not to blame. You may even gain some insight into her situation.
- Stand up for what you believe. If you don't agree with what she says, then be specific and aim for a 'powerful and polite' response. It's really beneficial to rehearse with a colleague or friend to determine your contingency plans in case of disagreement.
- Think of different solutions. Try to work out solutions in a joint contribution to 'save face.' When we own part of the resolution we are more likely to commit to making it happen.
- Be very clear. Prevent misunderstandings by repeating back what you have understood.
- Choose a mutually-agreed solution. Together, select a solution you think will work and determine a time when it should start.
- Take action. Make sure everyone does what has been agreed.
- Is it working? Take time in a week, month or term, to reflect on how it's going. Do you need to change any part of it?

Okay, you may have heard all this before. Let's refresh what we know. Ultimately you need to keep yourself safe. Remember negative conflict is about the misuse of power and it can damage your wellbeing and self esteem. Learning to harness your own power and stand up for yourself is integral to success.

It may not work the first time. When a person has spent a lifetime behaving in a certain way, it's probably worked for them and they're likely to be really skilled at it. Troy's mother won't change just because you want her to, but because she'll get something from it.

Suppose Troy's mother is so bloody minded that she won't take on board your concerns and has no empathy for your situation: you may have to take it further. This generally happens when nothing you have tried has worked. This might include going to an external body to get help in the form of mediation.

### Policies and training

An effective risk-management system helps schools to develop awareness about potential risks such as dealing with difficult parents. Policies and procedures need to be developed to support the whole school community. A policy is like insurance for the workplace – hopefully you'll never use it, but it's there for those times when you need it most. Like now.

This might be a timely reminder to refresh your policy or code of conduct and check it's relevance. When it hasn't been tested for a long time it may need to be modified and new controls may need to be introduced.

The benefits of training the whole school community cannot be overemphasised. Communication skills are the most universally applied skills and teaching is in essence the communication of ideas, yet most people haven't been trained in it.

When everyone agrees on the code of conduct in terms of communication, security and positive regard you have a benchmark from which to proceed. For cultural change to be successful you need to start with the individual, so that respect and dignity for each other becomes the norm.

Change is hard for most people. Difficult people find it even harder to change. If things are going to get better, you'll have to take responsibility for the changes. It's up to you to put difficult people and conflicts in perspective if you're going to protect your wellbeing. It's your responsibility.

Remember, take a deep breath, harness your own power and invest in yourself. Life will be easier and you'll have more fun and energy for the things that you want to do. Beyond that, the change you enable may just help Troy's mum, and maybe Troy as well. ▀

### FURTHER READING

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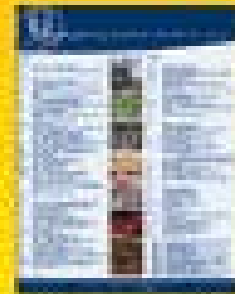
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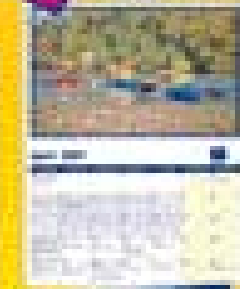
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*Debra Ferguson offers training sessions in the promotion of workplace wellbeing. As an experienced teacher and an award-winning business woman, she is on a mission to encourage people to take control of their wellbeing. Specialising in education, her presentations are fun and interactive, challenging and encouraging participants to make shifts in the way they move through life. Her presentations include: 'That Rollercoaster called Life: Strengthening your resiliency muscle and protecting yourself from stress and burnout'; 'Workplace Harmony is Possible – OHS Bullying Prevention: Imagine a dynamic work environment free from harassment'; 'To be Human is to Experience Conflict: Respond rather than react to difficult behaviour'; 'Detox your Workplace: The seven sins of the workplace, how to get over them and move on.' For training in your workplace, contact Deb Ferguson at Red Deb Consulting by phoning 0410 212 001 or emailing [deb@reddeb.com.au](mailto:deb@reddeb.com.au)*

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