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Two Key Aspects of Maintaining Professionalism During a Conflict

Abstract

Rational detachment and effective communication are tools Extension professionals can use to increase their effectiveness at handling agitated individuals in conflict situations, such as those that can occur during certain 4-H events. If you need to enhance your ability to defuse conflicts, understanding these skills is an important step. You can learn to handle conflicts effectively and professionally without becoming angry or responding improperly. Rationally detaching from altercations can help you gain credibility and, thus, make your points more profoundly. Also, by using a three-pronged approach to communication—incorporating appropriate body language, tone of voice, and empathic words—you can gain control of potentially explosive situations rather than try to control those involved.

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According to the Crisis Prevention Institute's crisis development model (Nonviolent Crisis Prevention, 2005/2014), anxiety is the first level of behavior manifested by a potentially acting-out individual. Because there are many occasions in which anxiety can present itself in the 4-H program, such as competitions, public speaking, and performances, 4-H professionals should be versed in recognizing and addressing anxiety so that it does not escalate.

Conflict can be an unsettling experience, and people tend to avoid it. However, Extension professionals are responsible for the welfare of those participating in their programs and must intercede so that a program can continue relatively disruption free after interruption by an agitated individual.

In New Jersey, I have trained 524 educators working in kindergarten through grade 12 on how to de-escalate mounting tensions in a professional manner. The training focuses on rational detachment and effective communication as tools for de-escalating aggressive behavior. The educators who have taken the training represent 19 school districts across three counties. In a self-reporting survey administered after the 8-hr training, they expressed increased confidence in the ability to handle agitated individuals. Additionally, months after the training, the educators reported overall decreases in the numbers of incidents requiring physical restraint.

Rational Detachment

Keeping a professional attitude can be a challenge, especially when a disruptive person is invested in lashing out or arguing rather than resolving a situation. Rational detachment is the ability to keep calm and stay in control of one's behavior during an uncomfortable situation despite feelings of anger or frustration (Nonviolent Crisis Prevention, 2005/2014). The Crisis Prevention Institute outlines three strategies professionals can use to rationally detach and not take an acting-out person's behavior personally: have a plan, release negative energy, and use self-talk (Don't Take It Personally, 2013).

Have a Plan

Knowing beforehand how disruptions or other issues will be addressed goes a long way toward building your confidence in handling conflicts. For example, when planning a large event, determine who will handle paperwork or registration issues the day of the event should a mistake be found. Decide who should be called when someone is getting agitated at the event. Identify an area where an agitated person can be escorted to, and thereby removed from other participants, so that the event can continue. Make sure the area for addressing agitated individuals is not isolated but is instead near a security detail or outside the venue itself. Most people participating in an event are tolerant when mistakes are made. However, staff members' handling of mistakes after they occur can de-escalate or further escalate behavior. Using empathic statements—such as "I see your point; follow me and we'll resolve this"—conveys that the agitated person has been understood while allowing you to remove him or her from an "audience" (other participants).

Release Negative Energy

Conflict can leave people with feelings of doubt, anxiety, and tension. Professionals need to release these feelings in order to perform at their best. Talk to colleagues to prevent replaying a scene over and over in your head, or take a walk to clear your thoughts. These are two effective ways to calm down after an incident. Using humor is another effective way to cope with stress from conflict (Torretta, 2014). Debriefing with colleagues after an altercation is also an important step in addressing a precipitating factor (e.g., the registration deadline was not posted or there were not enough staff to handle registration).

Use Self-Talk

Remind yourself that even if you are the target of an outburst, you likely are not the cause (Don't Take It Personally, 2013). Anxiety, frustration, and other precipitating factors over which you have no control are usually the culprits when someone becomes agitated. Reminding yourself that anxiety is a precursor to defensive behaviors and is inherently present during 4-H competitions can help you build confidence. Repeat to yourself over and over "I can do this."

Effective Communication

The other key aspect of maintaining professionalism during a conflict is communicating effectively. By combining the power of body language, paraverbals, and effective words for conveying the message intended, you can build a solid, yet simple, communication foundation (Nonviolent Crisis Prevention, 2005/2014).

Body Language

Body language includes stance, hand gestures, demonstration of awareness of personal space, and facial expressions. Sometimes professionals add to anxiety and escalation inadvertently when their body language conflicts with what they are saying. For example, you may unintentionally infringe on personal space while attempting to be supportive, and doing so may escalate a person's anxiety. A study by Iachini, Ruggiero, Ruotolo, Cola, and Senese (2015) showed that the more participants rated themselves as anxious, the more they increased their distance from confederates. By being more aware of body language, you can reinforce your intended message.

Paraverbals

Paraverbals are *how* you say what you say and include tone, volume, and cadence (Nonviolent Crisis Prevention, 2005/2014). Avoid inflections of impatience and condescension that can detract from your intended message. Paraverbals convey feelings and may be the most difficult to control because individuals have various emotional reactions to an escalating situation. If your attitude is incongruent with the words you are using, people will pick up on your tone first (Mehrabian, 1971).

Empathic Words

Increased anxiety is generally associated with decreased cognitive functioning (Meissel & Salthouse, 2016). Therefore, when an individual is venting defensively in an agitated state of anxiety, you must use fewer words so as not to add to the person's cognitive confusion and inadvertently increase his or her agitation. Using short empathic phrases such as "You're right," "I see," or "I'll fix this" will aid in de-escalating a situation.

Takeaway Message

It is important for Extension professionals to be aware of their own behaviors and body language and how those elements affect an agitated individual. Additionally, finding positive outlets for the negative energy absorbed in a situation will help foster a rationally detached view of an unpleasant situation (Torretta, 2004). It is not easy, but by planning and putting a few preventative measures in place, you can add these tools to your skill set for handling agitated individuals and keeping disruptive behavior to a minimum.

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