

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

HAAVI MORREIM, JD, PHD
PROFESSOR, COLLEGE OF MEDICINE, UTHSC
PRINCIPAL, ADR INSTITUTE



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CONFLICT: IT PERMEATES EDUCATION

TEACHERS
ADMINISTRATORS
COUNSELORS
STUDENTS
PARENTS
INFIRMARY STAFF
OTHER STAFF



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MY OWN PERSPECTIVE

- Legal setting: mediating for the courts, family-v-family
- Mediation training: for attorneys, for healthcare
- Clinical healthcare setting:
 - Ethics consults: rarely about moral puzzlement, much more often about conflict
 - Med-mal litigation: deeply hurtful, often damaging to everyone (patients, families, physicians, nurses, administrators . . .)
 - Patient safety, quality of care: day-to-day conflict in the workplace → errors, adverse outcomes, burnout, costs
- Overall: the stakes in education are high (not like the local coffee shop . . .)



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COMMON RESPONSES IN CONFLICT

- Power, authority: Ability to require or force others to accede to one's wishes; compliance via coercion
 - Director to teachers: "I'm in charge here. Mr. A will do this, and Ms. B will do that . . . There now, it's settled."
- Rights: standards of fairness, claims of entitlement; often a counterbalance to power
 - Parent to administrator: "You can't make me agree to that! I have my rights as a parent!"
- However: there's another focus available for responding to conflict . . .

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COMMON RESPONSES IN CONFLICT

- (Power)
- (Rights)
- **Interests:** Underlying needs, fears, goals, concerns
- If underlying interests are not addressed, contests between power and rights tend to spiral upward, unproductively
- Attention to interests promotes dialogue, collaboration, problem-solving

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WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF MUCH OF OUR CONFLICT?



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FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE: SOURCES

- Being provided with inaccurate information
- Not soliciting the other person's information, personal perspective
- Not *listening* to the other person's information, perspective when presented
- Not having your own information solicited, heard
- Listening that is **colored by presumptions** from our own perspective → **parallel messages** (often the misalignment is never detected)




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PARALLEL MESSAGES



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PARALLEL MESSAGES




This was the note her daughter brought into school the next day.

Dear Ms. Davis,

I want to be very clear on my child's illustration. It is NOT of me on a dance pole on a stage in a strip joint. I work at Home Depot and had commented to my daughter how much money we made in the recent snowstorm. This photo is of me selling a shovel.


Mrs. Harrington



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A QUESTION


- When you want information about what's going on around you (in the world, in town), where do you go?



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- Al Jazeera? An Nahar? Al Anwar?



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A QUESTION

- When you want information about what's going on around you (in the world, in town), where do you go?
- Al Jazeera? An Nahar? Al Anwar?
- Internet – which sites?



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A QUESTION

- When you want information about what's going on around you (in the world, in town), where do you go?
- Al Jazeera? Lebanon Post? Al Anwar? Cedar News?
- Internet – which sites?
- → Future TV? Al Manar? (if you faithfully believe one, you probably won't accept the other!)

- What about your friends, neighbors?
 - Which ones?



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A QUESTION

- Where do students, parents, and families get their information about the school and their children's education?



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A QUESTION

- Where do students, parents, and families get their information about the school and their children's education?

- A wide variety of places

-



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A QUESTION

- Where do students, parents, and families get their information about the school and their children's education?

- A wide variety of places

- Not always from the school . . .



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**BOTTOM LINE:
WE ALL GET OUR INFORMATION
FROM THE EXACT SAME PLACE:**

TRUSTED SOURCES



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**WHEN A TRUSTED SOURCE TELLS YOU SOMETHING,
AND YOU HAVE NO IMMEDIATE REASON
TO QUESTION IT ...**

- How often do you go out and verify it?
- How often do you even think about verifying it?

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SO WHAT MAKES A SOURCE *TRUSTED*?

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- A colleague says: "When one of my students acts up, clearly the best approach is a good swift slap across the mouth!"
- What's your first thought?

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- How many thought: "OMG!! Where has this idiot been living all these years?! Where did this idiot go to school !!?"
- → Trust for this colleague's knowledge, competence is suddenly in a "deficit"
- → The colleague will need to earn our trust back, bit by bit

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HOW DO WE FIGURE OUT WHICH SOURCES TO TRUST ?

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HOW DO WE IDENTIFY TRUSTED SOURCES

- The person's information is consistent with other things we know/believe
- Admired, trusted by others (others we trust and respect)
- The person is like us (does not sound funny, dress weird or do squirrely things . . . speaks our language)
- The person listens to us, understands us
- The person cares about us, shows interest in us as a person; has not disrespected or harmed us

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HOW DO WE IDENTIFY TRUSTED SOURCES

- Example: Ebola
- Government authorities provide descriptions, advice, information, mandates
- But: people may not accept government information, requests (in African nations and elsewhere)
- → For them, government is not a trusted source

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IF YOU ARE NOT A TRUSTED SOURCE,
IT DOESN'T MUCH MATTER WHAT YOU SAY




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IF YOU ARE NOT A TRUSTED SOURCE,
IT DOESN'T MUCH MATTER WHAT YOU SAY
... OR HOW INSISTENTLY YOU SAY IT



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IF YOU ARE NOT A TRUSTED SOURCE,
IT DOESN'T MUCH MATTER WHAT YOU SAY
... OR HOW INSISTENTLY YOU SAY IT
... OR HOW CORRECT YOU ARE



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SO: EDUCATORS
MUST BUILD TRUST


TO COMMUNICATE
TO AVOID CONFLICT
TO RESOLVE CONFLICT



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HOW DO EDUCATORS
BUILD TRUST ?


HOW DO YOU BECOME A **TRUSTED SOURCE**
FOR PARENTS, STUDENTS, COLLEAGUES?



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SOME SKILLS FOR
BUILDING TRUST:

A FEW TOOLS FOR YOUR TOOLBOX



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BUILDING TRUST

FIRST RULE: START SLOW TO GO FAST

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SKILLS FOR BUILDING TRUST

- Start slow to go fast
- **Normalizing:** this [whatever] is normal, common
 - ("You're not alone; you're not from outer space")
 - "It is very normal for a parent to be upset in this situation"
- **Managing expectations:** provide information ahead of time, where disappointment or confusion might otherwise occur
 - Staff members, roles of each
 - E.g., "expect that things may take longer than expected"

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SKILLS FOR BUILDING TRUST

- **People are far more willing to trust those who are willing to listen to them**
- Active listening
 - **Give the person the benefit of the doubt**
 - Assume s/he has a good reason for doing/saying what s/he did

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- Active listening
 - Give the person the benefit of the doubt
 - Assume s/he has a good reason for doing/saying what s/he did, and that part of your job is to find those good reasons
 - Nonverbal
 - Sitting at eye level, eye contact, open gestures, calm tone & pace ...

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SKILLS FOR BUILDING TRUST

- People are far more willing to trust those who are willing to listen to them
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 - Nonverbal
 - Sitting at eye level, eye contact, open gestures, calm tone & pace ...
 - Verbal
 - → →

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SKILLS FOR BUILDING TRUST

- **Active listening: verbal skills**
- **Probe** for information (while giving benefit of the doubt)
 - "Tell me more"
 - "Help me understand"
 - "And then what happened ..."
 - "What" and "how" questions (rarely "why")
 - "What are your greatest concerns at this point?"
 - "What would that look like?"
- **Summarize:** draw things together in your own words
- **Restate:** capture the person's actual wording as best you can
- **Verbal mirroring:** reiterate (just) the person's *last 3 words*

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SKILLS FOR BUILDING TRUST

- **Affect labeling:** naming the emotion
 - "You're frustrated"
 - "You sound frustrated"
 - "In your situation I'd probably be pretty frustrated – do you feel that way?"
- Evidence from fMRI: language may help person transition from "hot" zone to rational part of the brain
- Emotions include: anger, betrayal, disrespect, hurt, fear, frustration, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, resentment, blame, shame – pride, happiness, joy ...
- Be comfortable with emotion in the room – it's usually not about you!



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SKILLS FOR BUILDING TRUST

- Distinguish: **positions** from **interests**
 - Position: the person's demands, conclusions
 - Interest: the "why" underlying those demands, conclusions
- Seek out the **interests** underlying the person's **positions, demands**
 - Position: "I refuse to work another night shift!!"
 - Temptation is to say: "That's too bad – it's part of your job!"
 - Better: "Tell me more . . ."; get at underlying interests
 - Interest: "I'm so tired from all the night work, I'm starting to make mistakes. Someone will be hurt – it's only a matter of time. I can't let that happen."



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SKILLS FOR BUILDING TRUST: OVERALL

- How to get at the **positions** underlying the **interests**
- Use active listening skills (see above)
- **Probe:**
 - "Tell me more . . ."
 - "Help me understand . . ."
 - "What led you to that conclusion ..."
 - "What" and "how" questions (rarely "why")
 - "What are your greatest concerns at this point?"
 - "What would that look like?"
- **Summarize:** draw things together in your own words
- **Restate:** capture the person's actual wording as best you can
- **Verbal mirroring:** reiterate the person's *last 3 words*
- **Affect labeling**



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WHEN YOU'RE A TRUSTED SOURCE

- You'll be better able to find out what's *really* going on
 - Deeper level of information can completely change the picture
- With better information you'll be better able to participate in collaborative problem-solving that can lead to a durable resolution
 - "Bullied acquiescence" doesn't usually work very well
- When others feel heard they will be more willing to consider, even accommodate your perspective
- . . . And you'll be less likely to end up in self-defeating conflict



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