

The Tutoring Times

STEP-BY-STEP CONFLICT RESOLUTION FOR TUTORS

“...avoiding conflicts will weaken the partnership while successfully resolving conflicts will strengthen the partnership.”



Sometimes, we must work with students who are angry or frustrated. Perhaps the student is upset because he or she performed poorly on the last test. Perhaps the student is angered that you will not help with a take-home test. Perhaps the student wishes to reschedule his or her weekly appointment during a time you are not available.

While each of these conflicts is certainly unique, there are common steps you can take to resolve a conflict with any student whose emotions are running high. In this article, we have condensed Howard Y. Masuda and Reyna I. Torres's work on conflict resolution for tutors to give you a sure-fire method of handling conflicts diplomatically.

Although it is hard to be faced with someone else's anger, Masuda and Torres remind us that “difficult people are merely expressing a need, although they are choosing

an inappropriate and impolite way to communicate that need” (Martin, qtd. in Masuda and Torres 152). Knowing that an angry person is merely expressing a need makes it easier to follow the cardinal rule of conflict resolution in the workplace: Don't take anything personally. If we keep this rule in mind, the following steps can be used to stay calm, helpful, and wise in stressful situations:

STEP ONE: Remain Calm

STEP TWO: Adjust Your Posture and Facial Expression

STEP THREE: Listen Attentively

STEP FOUR: Reply to the Student's Concern

STEP FIVE: Close the Discussion

Let's start with **STEP ONE—Remain Calm**. It may help to take a deep breath.

Next comes **STEP TWO—Adjust Your Posture and Facial Expression**. Try to convey a firm but non-threatening presence. If the student is seated, stay seated. If the student is standing up,

stand up. Keep your arms at your side and avoid crossing them, which indicates defensiveness. If standing, place yourself between two and four feet from the student. Make eye contact with the student. Maintain a neutral expression and be sure not to glare or scowl.

Now that you are presenting a neutral stance to the student, focus on **STEP THREE—Listen Attentively**. As you listen, you are trying to accomplish two things. First, you are trying to understand the problem by gathering information. As you listen to the student and piece together the nature of the issue, don't let your feelings about the student or the student's actions cloud your judgment. By focusing on the problem and not on issues of personality, you will have a better chance of finding a workable solution to the conflict.

By listening attentively, you are also accomplishing another important part of conflict resolution—

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STEP-BY-STEP CONFLICT RESOLUTION FOR TUTORS (CONT.)

making the student feel heard. Often people raise their voices when they are afraid they will not be heard. If you indicate to the student that you hear his or her concerns (by nodding or saying uh-huh), you will assure the student that his or her concerns are being taken seriously. The student may even begin to express him or herself more calmly.

Let's pause here. What if the patience and tact you have shown so far does not de-escalate the conflict? For example, what if the student curses at you? Masuda and Torres suggest saying something like this: "I understand that you're upset. I really want to resolve this. I'm having trouble focusing on the problem because of the language I am hearing. Could you please not use that kind of language?" (153). If the student persists, or if he or she appears to become more hostile, seek the help of your supervisor or another campus staff member. If you fear the student may become violent, remove yourself from the situation and call campus police.

In all likelihood, the conflict will not escalate to this level. In most cases, you can move on to **STEP FOUR—Reply to the Student's Concern**. First, show some empathy for the stu-

dent. Do not apologize unless you were at fault, but let the student know that you understand why he or she would be angry or frustrated in the given situation.

Next, reaffirm your intention of resolving the conflict and ask the questions to clarify the nature of the student's issue or complaint.

Finally, propose a solution to the problem. In proposing a solution, keep in mind the policies of the tutoring program, but also keep in mind BC3's commitment to providing a student-centered environment. For example, policy requires that you do not help a student with a take-home test without the instructor's permission. Yet, in the spirit of student-centeredness, you can offer an alternative. For example, you can offer to work on sample problems that are similar in nature to those which appear on the test. This solution preserves academic integrity while showing the student that you are committed to helping him or her succeed.

What should you do if the student finds the alternatives you provide disagreeable? In the case of the student who wants

to reschedule your weekly tutoring appointment, perhaps you have proposed some alternative times and the student has refused, insisting that you meet him on Thursdays at 3:00 PM. In this case, you can invite the student to participate in solving the problem. You may say something like "I understand that you need to reschedule, but Thursdays at 3:00 PM will not work for me. What do you think would be a fair way to resolve this?". The student may then be prompted to offer more alternative times to meet.

If the student still finds the compromise unacceptable or if he or she has a request that you are unsure you can fulfill, see a Coordinator of Tutoring or refer the student to a Coordinator of Tutoring. The Coordinators can clarify program policies or find solutions to conflicts.

Finally, we come to **STEP FIVE—Close the Discussion**. Before the student leaves his or her appointment, summarize the steps that you have taken to resolve the conflict and the solution that you have agreed upon. Close by thanking the student for bringing the issue to you. If you plan to meet with a Coordinator and get

back to the student about his or her question, let the student know when he or she will hear back from you.

Almost no one looks forward to conflict, but conflict is an important part of life. Tutoring is a partnership between a student and a tutor, and as is the case with any partnership, avoiding conflicts will weaken the partnership while successfully resolving conflicts will strengthen the partnership. To read more about resolving conflicts, check out the sources below.

Foord, Erin. "Summary of the Five Steps of Successful Conflict Resolution." Online. 2014. November 2014.

Masuda, Howard Y. and Reyna I. Torres. "Conflict Resolution." *College Reading and Learning Association Handbook for Training Peer Tutors and Mentors*. Ed. Karen Agee and Russ Hodges. Mason, OH: Cengage Learning, 2012. 152-156.

Martin, W.B. *Quality Customer Service*. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp, 1993.

PA Department of Health, "Fair Conflict Rules." Handout. n.d.

Ruiz, Don Miguel. *The Four Agreements: A Toltec Wisdom Book*. San Rafael, California: Amber-Allen Publishing, 1997.