

If one can abide in perfect
composure in the midst of
chaos . . . you will find
yourself in Nirvana.



-Suzuki Roshi

Composure in the
Midst of Chaos:
Intervention Strategies for
Difficult Persons

Turi Honegger, Ph.D.

Financial Aid Staff Training

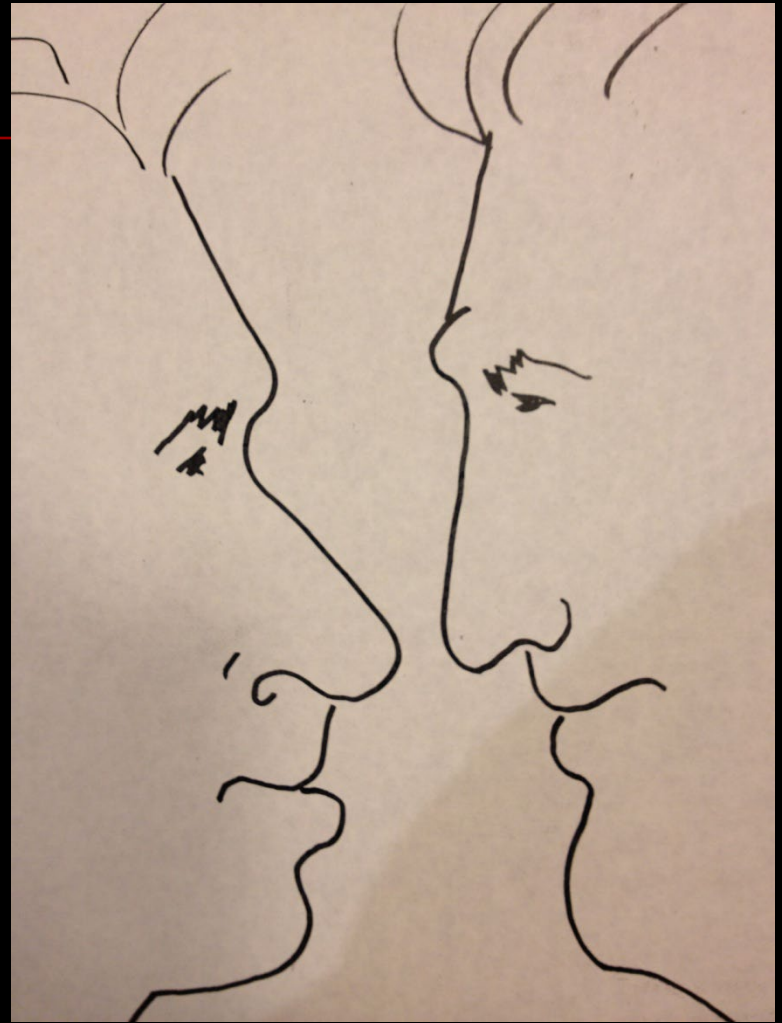
University of California, Santa Barbara

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Basic Premise . . .

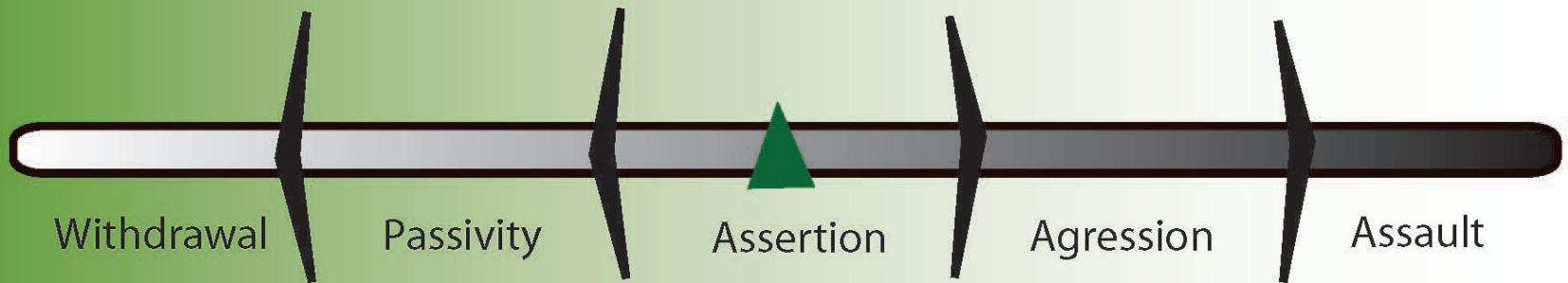
Staff who have developed professional and assertive communication habits as well as a plan to stay calm in difficult situations are exposed to less conflict and more likely to resolve conflicts while promoting harmony . . .

. . . than staff who have not.



What are your patterns of communication like?

- Assertiveness
- Can you set limits?
- Firmness? Specific? Direct?
- Making eye contact
- Checking in with other staff when something seems odd



Withdrawal

Passivity

Assertion

Agression

Assault

COMMUNICATION

Attenuate Negative Emotions - i.e. Sympathetic Comments

- You are not agreeing with their statement of facts and perception, you are simply acknowledging that they are upset about something that is important to them
 - Speak to the emotions first so that your message is heard
 - Empathy vs. sympathy vs. validation
 - Deal with emotions first
 - Meet people where they are
 - Sympathy *de-escalates*
- Only *after*, move on to questions and solutions.

Sympathy

“Dear Mrs. Lin, I’m very sorry to hear about your predicament and it sounds like you’re very angry about what happened.”



Did she say the word “angry”?

- Does everyone need sympathy?
- Don’t make assumptions
 - Putting words in people’s mouths
 - Portraying people as more emotional than they are

Sympathy

angry
furious
mad
terrified
pissed off
confused
outraged
impatient
frustrated
irritated
triggered
emotional

I can
imagine/understand
that you're feeling...

upset
concerned
disappointed
displeased

...about what
happened

I can
imagine/understand
that this situation is...

upsetting
concerning
disappointing
confusing
unsettling
frustrating
challenging
difficult

Clarification

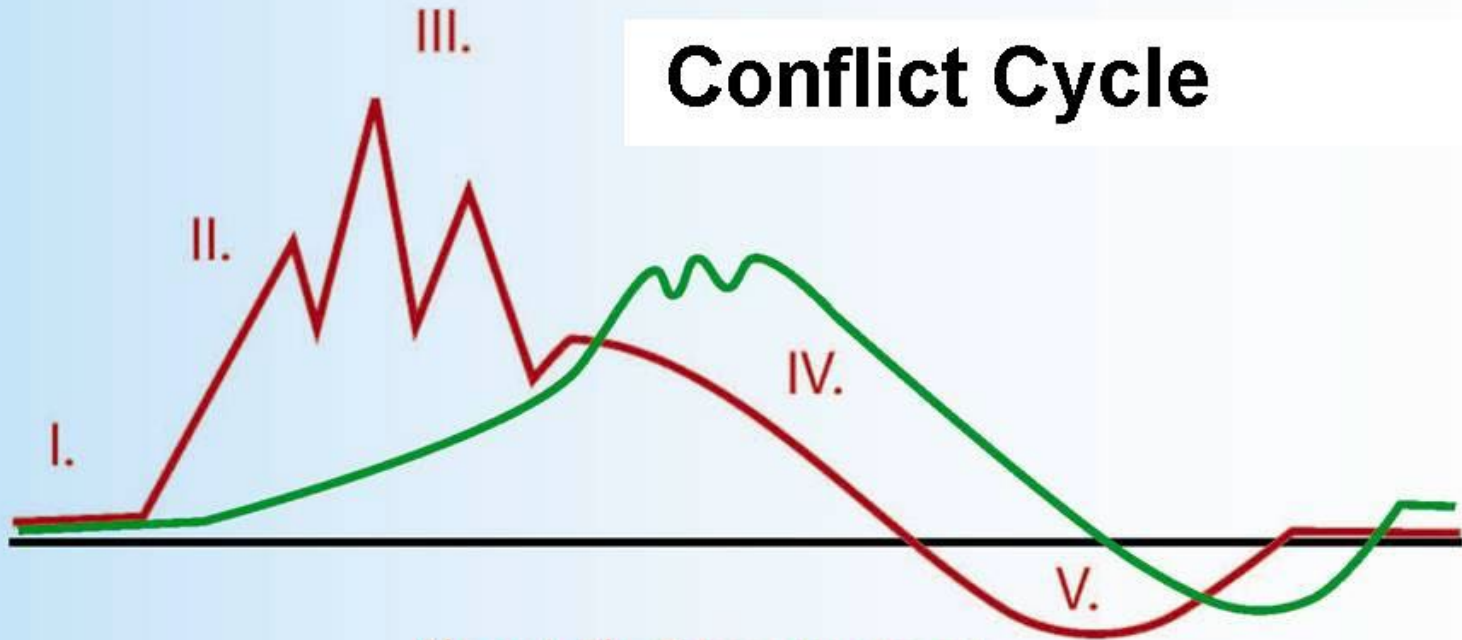
- Also known as “active listening” and “mirroring”
- Again use their words wherever possible
- Use when email is unclear or you need more context
 - Do **not** say “Your email was unclear/confusing.”
 - Do say “I would like to make sure I understand your request correctly.”
- **Often this can help steer an emotional complaint into the solution focused realm**
- Does this situation warrant a phone or in-person conversation?

Moving from Professional Dialogue to De-Escalation Communication

- Clear and calm professional exchanges will often de-escalate tensions
- Often the person is already upset or triggered when you meet them

How do you know when you are needing to de-escalate a situation?

Conflict Cycle



- Phase I: The Triggering Event
- Phase II: Escalation
- Phase III: Crisis
- Phase IV: Recovery
- Phase V: Post-Crisis Depression

Self Control Plan

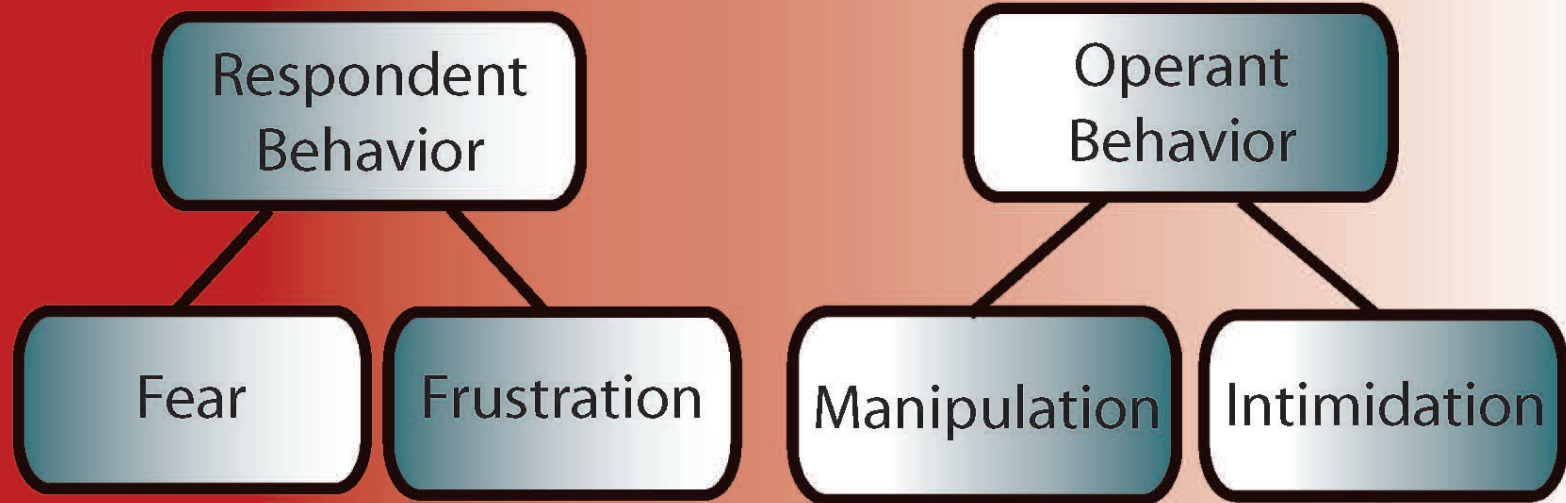
Key ingredients:

- Knowing what you don't want to do
- Step that counteracts Fight or Flight
- Rehearse language that works for you
- Awareness of basic options like getting assistance or inviting them to leave

Principles of Crisis Communication

Smith et al., 2002.

- Maintain your Self-Control
- Assertive but sympathetic approach
- Get help or support
- Identify what is problematic – yelling, non-responsive, threats
- Communication – keep it simple
- Patience
- Spontaneity (flexibility/ humor)



Behavior is Communication

Fear

- Perceived need to escape, defend, or eliminate a threat
- Signs include tension, pale, wide-eyed, difficulty speaking (unable, pleading), illogical, rapid or shallow breathing.



Staff Response to Fear

- Action: Threat Reduction
- Outcome: Perceived Safety
- Guidelines for reducing threat . . . Slow moving, relaxed, hands showing, off to side, some distance, reduce size, calm and firm reassuring voice, offer eye contact. Be logical, explain your actions, and offer realistic help if possible

Frustration

- Irrational attempt to gain control by becoming physical
- Signs include tense, red tones, glaring, hands clinched, loud or menacing voice, heavy breathing



Staff Response to Frustration

- Action: Lending Control
- Outcome: Self-Control
- Guidelines for lending control . . .
 - Confident, directive, firm, stand directly in front of the person or sit up straight, positioned just outside of reach, quiet but firm voice quality, direct eye contact.
 - Speech is repetitive with specific directives

Manipulation

- Indirect attempt to obtain or avoid something in exchange for not losing control.
- Often there is a legitimate need.
- If you are confused then . . .
- Usually has a “gimme”
- Accusations, minor tantrums, or multiple requests that are confusing (often one main objective)



Staff Response to Manipulation

- Action: Benign Neglect
- Outcome: Healthy Re-engagement
- Guidelines . . . Assumption is that nothing will be gained, posture is relaxed, relaxed posture but poised to intervene as necessary, detached voice quality, repetitive content, minimal eye contact.
- Beware: may switch to frustration

Intimidation

- Calculated attempt to get something in exchange for safety or avoiding aggressive interaction.
- Signs include strongly stated demand, intense eye contact, believable threat, and may be invading your space.



Staff Response to Intimidation

- Action: Identifying Consequences
- Outcome: Safe Choices
- Guidelines . . . poised and ready to move but not anxious, minimal hand movement, flat tone, firm and clear statements about consequences but not threatening. Keep eyes on hands and make eye-contact only to add emphasis to statements.

Four Approaches

- **Fearful** – threat reduction and perceived safety
- **Frustrated** – lending control and self control
- **Manipulative** – benign neglect and healthy re-engagement
- **Aggressive** – identifying consequences and safe choices

No matter what they do, your goals are self-control and assertive communication

Supporting a Colleague

- More than additional information, you are likely there to help de-escalate the situation or maintain a calm atmosphere
- You can “lend” them your self-control by modeling it
- Be clear and use simple communication between staff and with the difficult person

SA Guidelines – See Summary Handout

If somebody is. . .

- Doing something to make you feel unsafe
- Creating a disturbance
- Interfering with university business
- In your office and has no legitimate business

Call immediately for police assistance

911 in an emergency or x3446 in a non-emergency.

Campus Police can often be helpful in difficult situations.

- Does not need to be an emergency for them to respond.
- Give police as much information about the situation as possible to inform their response.

UCSB Student Affairs

Guidelines for Dealing with Difficult People

These guidelines are intended to focus on non-students. Though all of the suggestions below can be used in situations involving students, please be sure to follow the **Distressed Student Protocol** (www.sa.ucsb.edu/distressedstudentsguide/Protocol) in situations involving UCSB students.

DO

- Remain calm
- Listen attentively and show interest & concern
- Do your best to clearly understand the issue or concern
- Communicate with your colleagues
- Ask a colleague to join you (two heads are better than one)
- Call a supervisor or manager if the situation escalates

DON'T

- Tolerate rudeness, aggressiveness, threats or disruption
- Promise anything
- Assume the role of therapist or counselor
- Remain in a situation that feels disrespectful, uncomfortable, or unsafe

IMPORTANT: If you feel unsafe, someone is creating a disturbance, interfering with university business or has no legitimate business in your department, call immediately for police assistance - 911 in an emergency or x3446 in a non-emergency.

Campus Police can often be helpful in difficult situations. It doesn't need to be an emergency for them to respond. Be sure to give the police as much information about the situation as possible to inform their response.