Diffusing Anger in the Principal’s Office

“No man can think clearly when his fists are clenched!”
—George Nathan

Handling problems in schools is inevitable. Principals often must make decisions on critical issues and incidents, such as determining disciplinary actions and consequences for student misbehavior, and confrontations with irate parents. In all such cases, they must be able to provide necessary assistance in solving problems while avoiding the temptation to explode in anger. Unfortunately, responding in anger has developed into a misperception that this is the only means of obtaining desired results. So, what is a principal to do when confronted with situations where anger threatens to surface?

Here are a series of recommendations for how school leaders should deal with their own and others’ anger; ways for principals to handle stressful problems and situations; and suggestions for proactively changing the overall negative perceptions often associated with the principal’s office.

When Anger Threatens

Calm down. The best medicine for controlling anger is to calm down by exercising positive physiological responses. Take three to five deep breaths before you speak. This allows oxygen to flow freely to the brain for better thinking and reacting.

Exert a mental release. Before blurting out something that might come back to hurt and haunt you, sit down and write a furious e-mail or letter to the individual who upset you. Then, read it out loud, make any necessary additions or deletions, and then discard it or just file it away.

Engage in a physical activity. Walk away from the building for a block or two. If necessary, go to the gym and throw a ball, lift weights, or run a few laps. Any release of physical aggression is good for the system and most certainly helps in dealing with the issue or situation.

Openly communicate. Remember that there are always at least two sides to every story. Allow all parties involved in the issue, problem, or conflict to speak freely. Using open communication enables the principal to handle a problem more easily because the individuals involved will know and understand that you have their best interests at heart.

Pray or meditate. Seek guidance and direction and then listen for the answer. Prayer and meditation have been found to relieve stress and free the mind to think more freely and positively.

When Problems Arise

Anticipate and prevent. Identify potential problems (e.g., an administrative regulation that creates resentment among faculty members) that may aggravate or create anger, and then take the necessary steps to reduce or eliminate them.

Deal with the problem immediately. Issues ignored, avoided, or prolonged do not go away; they simply fester and develop into bigger and more troublesome problems.

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Meet and talk privately with the individuals involved. This can be an excellent strategy in resolving conflict because it avoids a public forum where both sides might feel compelled to not “give in” to the other. Additionally, the principal who confers directly and privately with the opposite party is often perceived as being caring, compassionate, reasonable, and understanding.

Listen, contemplate, and respond. Professionally acknowledge the individual involved by checking for understanding with a rephrasing of what has been stated and heard, and agree with what has been said that is true. But be prepared to speak up if your words or actions have been misinterpreted or misconstrued. Always contemplate your response and speak up in a nondefensive manner.

Exit gracefully. Avoid the explosive nature of an angry attitude by smoothing the pathway for an open and graceful exit, especially when the individual involved has expressed or experienced strong feelings of resentment. Graceful exits can be accomplished by showing compassion, concern, and even humor.

When Seeking Solutions

Recognize sources of anger. A principal can prevent anger by engaging and interacting with those individuals with a propensity to explode rather and apologize later. Something as simple as “Good morning; how was your weekend?” or “How are you today?” can serve as the “social lubricators” necessary to bring about civil interaction between two parties who may very well despise one another. By being civil and interacting with people—even with those they do not care for—principals can cultivate feelings of empathy, understanding, genuine interest, and ultimate trust.
Recognize the potential for conflict. Develop an atmosphere within the school community whereby the right to disagree and express other points of view becomes the rule rather than the exception. Effective principals recognize that open discourse, whether agreeable or disagreeable, with open channels of communication can result in positive outcomes, improved relationships, reduced anger, and a common bonding that enables team members to work, play, and even agree to disagree in a most civil manner.

Recognize and change a negative culture. The culture of a school is often described as “the way of doing things” and is most readily associated with certain behaviors. When the culture enables negative behaviors (e.g., anger), the principal must create means to neutralize these behaviors by enhancing the culture’s positive aspects.

Develop a positive climate. When a school has a positive and open climate, the principal is more able to discern the potential for conflict and to be proactive in responding immediately and appropriately. The development of a positive school climate is closely related to the quality of the principal’s leadership and ability to handle problems associated with conflict and anger.

Implement an open-door policy. Some of the most helpful information related to controlling conflict and anger before it occurs can come from asking for feedback from others about their perceptions of your own behavior and its impact on the organization’s overall effectiveness.

The school principal who is able to control his or her own anger, as well as the anger-related responses of others, and who can anticipate and proactively inhibit potential sources of anger and conflict, can expect more positive, anger-free resolutions to most negative situations.

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