

Preface

Many school administrators are finding that hostile conversations with adults in school settings are becoming more commonplace and intense. These conversations range from annoying situations in the faculty lounge, where peers or subordinates whine and gripe, to incidents in which parents or community members loudly harangue us at public meetings, to encounters with out-of-control individuals under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Tragedies, such as the series of fatal shootings in a half dozen schools, have made us mindful of our precarious position. But what actions should we take to reduce the risk, safeguard the schools, and effectively communicate with those who are hostile to us? Consider the following vignette.

While enjoying coffee with my friend Dave, superintendent of a midsized suburban school district, I listened as he related an unnerving incident that had happened to him a few days earlier. Dave explained that as he was leaving the central office building, an agitated stranger confronted him. A large red-faced man blocked the path to his car in the deserted parking lot and began screaming about the school district's plan to institute a uniform dress policy for students. Dave admitted that with all the violent school-related acts reported in the news lately, his first reaction was fear.

As he recounted the story, however, it became evident that no serious consequences came from the incident. He handled the encounter well. He calmed the man down, defused the situation, and arranged a later meeting where he could control the setting and circumstances.

Dave's story sparked my curiosity. I asked him what techniques he used to defuse this potentially dangerous scenario. After a few thoughtful seconds, he admitted that he really wasn't sure. He said that he had simply reacted by doing what seemed appropriate.

Dave is not the exception to the rule. Successful school administrators ought to have excellent verbal and interpersonal skills. Many do. However, like Dave, few administrators are actually aware of the strategies they use during stressful conversations.

We all operate by a personal set of rules to cope with difficult situations. Also, we create strategies to implement our rules. If, like Dave, we encounter an individual who has antagonistic rules that are alien to us, we must devise a new set of proven strategies to engage them and defuse the situation.

If school administrators could identify and apply the strategies that are proven successful when dealing with hostile adults in schools, they would have additional tools to be effective leaders. Rather than just reacting to potentially dangerous confrontations, administrators could become proactive.

These considerations, along with Dave's experience, became the catalyst for a study spanning eight years. During this research study, we surveyed and interviewed in depth over 250 actively practicing school administrators. The study identified the most stressful verbal confrontations school administrators face with adults in our schools, and the proven strategies that help us effectively communicate and defuse those situations.

This book is based on the information gained from the aforementioned study. The first 11 chapters address the most stressful encounters. The vignettes told in each chapter are true stories shared with us by the study participants. The names, places, and times were changed to maintain confidentiality. After reading the opening vignette you, the reader, are encouraged to ask several self-reflective questions. Would I have managed this situation similarly or differently? How would I have acted? Why would I behave this way? How well did the administrator manage the encounter? What skills can I learn and apply from this example?

As you read the other sections, you might have your analysis affirmed, or you might learn new solutions that you have never before utilized, or the chapter analysis might serve as a trigger for your mind to create yet a better strategy.

The vignettes serve as a starting point, and then each of the vignettes is rated for the level of stress it engenders. Although varying encounters elicit different stress levels in individuals, the rating given to each story is an average for the study participants.

Each chapter analyzes the motives and actions of the hostile adult and the effectiveness of the school administrator in managing the situation. The psychological and administrative viewpoints are presented. Strategies and suggestions for application to additional circumstances are highlighted.

The first 11 “story” chapters are ordered in a manner to aid in comprehension and application. There are eight sections in each. Each section has a specific purpose to help you in your learning journey. They are:

1. The Story—a true story shared by a colleague.
2. How Taxing Are Such Encounters?—the average “stress” score of 250 study participants.
3. A Psychological Perspective of This Situation—an analysis of the actions and behaviors of the hostile individual.
4. A Practitioner’s View—an analysis of the performance of the involved administrator from an educational administration framework.
5. A Clinical View—an analysis of the performance of the involved administrator from a psychology framework.
6. Additional Suggestions—a collection of additional recommended strategies that would be useful in situations of this nature. These strategies are not all-inclusive but are those most often suggested by the study group.
7. In What Other Cases Do the Learned Techniques Apply?—a collection of situations where the discussed strategies would be most helpful. Again, these are not all-inclusive.
8. Summary—an encapsulation of the recommended strategies or best practices.

At the end of each chapter, you will find a list of Suggested Readings, a list of reading material that is germane to the topic discussed. Chapter 12 is separate and unique from the previous 11 chapters. It identifies and explains the 15 most effective strategies used in hostile conversations. These strategies provide us with a collection of skills useful in our profession. The book concludes with Resource A, the Kosmoski/Pollack School Administrators’

Code of Ethics, which provides the practitioner with a foundation on which to operate successfully.

Skill in communicating is essential in our profession. The wisdom of our colleagues can help us deal successfully with conversations with hostile adults. If we can apply these identified strategies during hostile conversations, we will become more effective educational leaders in today's schools.

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John W. Cook
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School of Education
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Redlands, California

Harry Hufty
Principal
School District 57
Prince George, British
Columbia

Virginia Drouin
Principal
Alfred Elementary School
Alfred, Maine

Jeff Jones
Assistant Principal
Calgary Board of
Education
Calgary, Alberta

Sondra Estep
Director, Adventures of the
American Mind
Governors State University
University Park, Illinois

Beatrice Lingenfelter
Assistant Professor
Benerd School of Education
University of the Pacific
Stockton, California

Bill Grobe
Junior Division Teacher
Mother Teresa Catholic School
Waterloo Catholic District
School Board
Cambridge, Ontario

Bert Lundgren
High School English Chair
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Big Horn, Wyoming