

CHAPTER ONE

Defusing the Angry Screamer

THE STORY: Rant and Rave

THE PLACE: An Impoverished City Junior High School

John Cooke is the veteran junior high school vice principal of discipline for 900 adolescents. John has had plenty of practice calming down young people. He is no stranger to agitated, volatile, and hostile individuals. Silent pouting, crying, and irrational screaming are behaviors he encounters on a regular basis.

John Cooke finished straightening his desktop. He looked at his daily planner for tomorrow's schedule. Yes, Thursday looked like an average day. John glanced at his watch; it was already 4:15 p.m. Where did the day go? It was too late to drop off his discipline reports. He would have to do that on his way to school the next morning.

As he stuffed the reports and several other files into his briefcase, he heard a loud voice coming from the outer office. John sighed and slipped on his sport coat as he headed for the connecting door. Just one more thing to take care of before heading out.

Opening the door, John was greeted by the sight of a short, burly, middle-aged man leaning over the counter. The visitor was

2 MANAGING DIFFICULT, FRUSTRATING, AND HOSTILE CONVERSATIONS

sweating profusely, slamming his hand repeatedly against the countertop, and yelling at Mrs. Williams, the office receptionist. His face was livid with anger and his jugular vein coursed with blood. Mrs. Williams was the only person left in the office and seemed very relieved to see John Cooke enter. John nodded at her and said in a level tone, "Thank you, Mrs. Williams. That will be all." Mrs. Williams immediately backed away, averted her eyes, and returned to her desk.

Before John could reach the counter or introduce himself, the man rounded on him. "Who the hell are you? I want some answers and I want them now."

In direct contrast to the man's booming, shrill, and breathless voice, John spoke slowly and kept his voice low and calm. He stated, "I'm John Cooke, the vice principal here. May I have your name, sir?"

Ignoring John's remarks, the man thrust his hand into his pants pocket and produced a half-sheet of crumpled yellow paper. John recognized the paper as a Discipline Action Report form that is sent home to parents. The man peered at the paper and then at John. "Yeah, you're the idiot I'm looking for. Just what the f___ is this?" With that, he threw the slip at John's face. Before John could grab it, the paper fluttered to the floor on his side of the counter. Cautiously, John bent down and retrieved the paper. He laid it on the counter, smoothed it out, read it, and used the opportunity to calm himself. While John perused the slip, the outraged parent continued to rant and rave. The man sputtered something about "getting him" for being a troublemaker. This angry man did not seem to need to stop to breathe.

Recalling the student's last name on the action sheet, John Cooke took a chance and cut in. He said, "Mr. Crass?" But the man did not respond to the use of the surname, Crass. John therefore concluded that he had correctly guessed the man's last name and continued, "It sounds like you have some concerns regarding this Saturday's in-school suspension for your daughter, Carrie."

"You're damn right! What the hell do you think you're doing here? You're not going to get away with this. We have other plans for Saturday and if I have to, I'll get a lawyer to stop this Saturday prison," screamed Mr. Crass.

John studied the man more closely. His fists were clenched, his upper torso rigid, and his voice very loud and shaky. Mr. Crass

seemed to be struggling to keep verbal and physical control of himself. John concluded that what he was witnessing was an adult temper tantrum.

John Cooke vowed that he would not let Mr. Crass's tirade and manner intimidate or upset him. While Crass sputtered, John made eye contact, nodded, and regularly interjected short, active listening phrases such as "I hear you are upset with me," "What did I do to upset you?" and "I see you are very angry and upset."

After about a minute, John Cooke attempted to direct the conversation to the points he needed to make. He proceeded, "Mr. Crass, I can see that this matter is very important to you. I'm glad you are concerned about Carrie. I care about her too. We do need to talk about the situation and resolve this issue. But right now we are both pretty upset and it's hard to think clearly. We really have a lot to discuss. I understand that we have to clear this up before Saturday. I really want to take our time and come to a fair understanding. No rushing."

Mr. Crass nodded his head and let out an affirmative grunt. John hurried on before he could be sidetracked, "Unfortunately, I'm already late for a meeting that has been scheduled for some time at the district office. Could you possibly come in tomorrow or Friday afternoon so we can sit down together and do what's best for Carrie?"

For the first time, Mr. Crass was silent. He appeared to think before speaking. When Crass spoke again, his voice was more controlled and level. He responded gruffly, "Well, I guess I might be able to get here about the same time tomorrow. You know, some of us do work."

John put on a big grin and replied, "That's great! I'll clear my schedule so we have all the time we need to resolve your concerns. Do you know your way back to where you parked?" Mr. Crass nodded and moved toward the office door. John waved and said goodbye, as Mr. Crass gently closed the office door behind him.

Mrs. Williams smiled and shook her head as she collected her purse and jacket. She turned to John and said, "Thanks, Mr. Cooke. You were great. That's another R&R on ice."

John was puzzled. "Rest and relaxation on ice?" he asked. "No," said Mrs. Williams as she turned the hall doorknob, "A ranter and raver in the cooler. See you in the morning."

4 MANAGING DIFFICULT, FRUSTRATING, AND HOSTILE CONVERSATIONS

HOW TAXING ARE SUCH ENCOUNTERS?

All of the 250 school administrators surveyed reported that they had been confronted by a person who ranted and raved. Not one was immune to this type of verbal attack. The great majority who felt they had handled the situation successfully had used a calm and rational approach. Most school administrators who felt that they had had an unsuccessful experience admitted that they had engaged in a yelling contest. They acknowledged that they had screamed as much as the other party involved.

When asked how stressful this type of situation is to them, the administrators responded this was a **5—most stressful**.

5—most stressful	4—more stressful	3—stressful	2—little stress	1—no stress
------------------	------------------	-------------	-----------------	-------------

A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THIS SITUATION: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT PEOPLE WHO YELL TO GET THEIR WAY?

Anger is about power. The very angry individual who is acting inappropriately does not feel that his or her opinions or feelings are being recognized, adequately considered, given any weight, or accepted. Mr. Crass was willing to force his point of view on another person. How far he was willing to go was indicated by his inappropriate behavior. He had burst into the main office, yelled at the secretary, yelled at the assistant principal, thrown a note onto the floor in an attempt to humiliate the administrator, and used very inappropriate language in a school setting. The amount of socially inappropriate behavior is a good measure of the anger of the individual. It is also a good measure of the actual threat to school safety.

Mr. Cooke quickly attempted to engage Mr. Crass with a friendly greeting. He was not only rebuffed, but Mr. Crass tried to escalate the meeting into a confrontation when he threw the form in Mr. Cooke's face. This was an attempt to elicit anger from Mr. Cooke, so that the confrontation could be taken further—it was, in effect, a challenge to a duel. If dueling were still in vogue, Mr. Cooke

might have been looking for a second. Fortunately, that aspect of the age of chivalry is dead. Instead of responding to the dueling challenge, Mr. Cooke acted like a gentleman and picked up the paper. By this act, he began to disarm his adversary. It is true that by picking up the paper, he put himself in a vulnerable position, but it was this act that caught Mr. Crass by surprise.

When John calmly placed the piece of paper on the counter, he indicated that, unlike Mr. Crass, he was going to act in a socially appropriate manner. John's controlled behavior subtly suggested to Crass that the piece of paper was important to both of them. He allowed Crass to continue to rant and rave because he was not going to respond to an attempt at personal contact until Crass had said what was on his mind. John understood that he had an issue and the right to express it. That the forum was wrong was not important, because Crass was not going to listen to issues of social convention. Mr. Crass clearly wanted to express his anger and contempt to someone and John recognized that he was going to be that someone. It was not a pleasant administrative task, but it was one of the roles for which he had been hired.

John approached Mr. Crass gently, rather than retorting in anger. He not only could hear Crass's anger, but also could see it. This was someone who was willing to go beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior. John posited that Mr. Crass would not really go beyond yelling, so he decided to assuage Mr. Crass's anger by accepting it.

People like Mr. Crass frequently do not recognize the intensity of their emotions, and need others to identify it. Once they recognize it in themselves, they may decide that it is not the way they want or intend to act. By speaking softly and using such phrases as "I hear you" and "I see you are very angry and upset," John told Mr. Crass that he was angry. Why? For two reasons: first, to let Mr. Crass know that he understood and recognized that he was upset; second, and most important, to identify to Mr. Crass how angry he was.

When John said that he recognized how important this confrontation was to Mr. Crass, he co-opted his issue. He made it his issue as well. This was disarming, and Mr. Crass lost his reason to be angry. By acknowledging the anger and co-opting the issue, John was able to begin negotiations to reconcile the difference between Mr. Crass and himself.

HOW WELL DID THE VICE PRINCIPAL HANDLE THE RANTING PARENT?

A Practitioner's View

John Cooke's behavior during this incident is commendable. Throughout the entire event, John remained calm, maintained his wits, and successfully defused the situation. Vice Principal Cooke did an excellent job of regulating his voice: He controlled both his volume and speed. A low, slow, and calm delivery is nonthreatening. It has a soothing effect on the listener.

John was very careful in choosing his words. His remarks showed concern and professionalism. He neither threatened nor showed signs of intimidation. Regardless of Mr. Crass's ravings, John established the most needed elements for closure. He was able to identify with Mr. Crass and address his grievance. John shifted the emphasis during the exchange from *I'll get the authority figure* to *we'll work together to help our daughter/student*. John's creative use of the phrases "... we are both upset right now ..." and "... we can sit down together and do what's best for Carrie," was superb. These comments accomplished two things. John made Mr. Crass an ally in the common purpose of helping a child, and he arranged for a problem-solving meeting at a time when Mr. Crass would most probably be calmed down. Mr. Cooke's words and delivery gave him more control of the situation.

John Cooke was able to depersonalize the situation. By recognizing that he was witnessing an adult temper tantrum, he was better able to control his own feelings and behavior. This gave him an enormous advantage during the confrontation.

Finally, whether by accident or design, John did the prudent thing by keeping the counter between Mr. Crass and himself during the tirade. Although it is rare for shouters to resort to physical violence, it is always a genuine possibility. Personal safety during any screaming encounter must be a priority.

A Clinical View

John handled this situation with the equanimity and aplomb to which we all aspire. For many of us, our major failing is that when someone becomes angry with us, we want to respond in

self-defense. Sometimes this manifests itself as anger. To illustrate, suppose you are driving down the freeway and someone cuts you off. You respond with a few choice words and angry gestures. Is the other person going to remain civil? Most likely he, too, is going to respond angrily. You threw down the gauntlet when you vocalized and physically expressed your anger. The other driver is simply picking up the gauntlet. You now get to have a chance at dueling cars, a.k.a. road rage. You are advised to take John's approach and not respond. Life is too short and need not end on the freeway or in the school office because you are tempted to engage in a duel of unbridled emotions.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS: WHAT ELSE COULD AND SHOULD YOU DO IN SIMILAR SITUATIONS?

1. John Cooke did a good job of remaining calm throughout this entire incident. Sometimes this is not easily accomplished. How does one calm oneself? Several proven tactics will help you attain this goal. Take a deep breath before speaking. This gives you a few seconds to gather yourself and provides at least a small measure of personal control. Then, throughout the encounter, focus on your breathing. Are you taking short, shallow breaths or barely taking any breaths at all? Force yourself to breathe slowly and deeply. This provides a mechanism for both physical and emotional control, which, in turn, results in an increased level of calmness. Another method to help you remain calm is to create emotional distance for yourself (Felder, 1994). It is very useful to repeat silently such statements as "His anger has really nothing to do with me," "I'm watching an adult temper tantrum," and "This is not personal." Jeffrey Kottler (1997) refers to emotional distancing as detachment. He explains that this practice allows you to step back and disengage from the personal aspects of a conflict so you can effectively respond without being distracted by feelings or anger. Detachment allows you to avoid "getting sucked into the vortex of his (the yeller's) anger" (p. 26).

2. Prepare appropriate and effective retorts before you encounter the next screamer. Individuals deal more effectively

8 MANAGING DIFFICULT, FRUSTRATING, AND HOSTILE CONVERSATIONS

with familiar situations. Successful practitioners stated that they developed a personal collection of comebacks that they rehearsed and then used successfully. These school administrators drew from their memory banks when a situation called for an effective line. They had practiced, and now felt more familiar in a given situation. This preparation eliminates the need to try to develop a creative response during the heat of battle. In essence, this practice is a form of self-training. Training is necessary for school personnel in this, as well as in a myriad of other communication areas (Rubin, 1998). A few useful rejoinders might include, "Hold on! I want to be able to hear you correctly, so you'll have to slow down a little." Or perhaps, "I won't interrupt you. Just take your time and tell me the whole thing. I will speak only when you're finished." A third possibility might be, "Go ahead. I'm listening. Why don't you start at the beginning and tell me all about it." You will notice that these examples, like the ones you will soon develop, are positive statements rather than criticisms. They attempt to be nonthreatening and nondefensive. Each places you in the position of being a facilitator who respects the other individual. Finally, they all maintain a high degree of professionalism (Felder, 1994).

3. Although this vignette does not highlight the need to be a good active listener, active listening is a most useful skill when dealing with a person who is ranting and raving. Remember to use facial and body language, posture, and gestures that convey your genuine interest and concern. Small things such as eye contact, nodding, and leaning in will have a large impact on the final outcome.

4. Good timing is central to positive communication with the yeller. Sometimes the person is in such a rage that it is impossible for him or her to calm down enough to have a productive exchange of ideas. In this scenario, the wise administrator knows discussion is best delayed until the person has his or her anger under control—until he or she has cooled off. The wait time, however, should not last so long as to become fuel for additional anger. Usually, postponing a meeting for 24 hours is a good rule of thumb.

5. Finally, taking safety precautions when you are verbally attacked by a yeller is essential. Prevention is always preferable to

treatment (Phillips, 1997; Queen, 2004). If at all possible, make sure you have an available avenue of retreat. Use self-reflection or brainstorming to determine possible safety actions before a confrontation occurs.

IN WHAT OTHER CASES DO THE LEARNED TECHNIQUES APPLY?

Unfortunately, people who rant and rave come in all shapes, sizes, and ages. Both men and women are capable of yelling fits. Screamers live in all neighborhoods, belong to all cultures and ethnicities, and come from every socioeconomic group. Bosses and dependent children are equally capable of throwing a tantrum. They can lose self-control and revert to negative behavior. Therefore, practicing school administrators will inevitably find themselves confronted from time to time by angry screamers. There is no documented evidence that demonstrates that certain administrators are less susceptible than others (Lewis & Carifio, 1997).

The suggestions provided regarding Mr. Crass are effective and valid with any individual. Calmness, active listening, practice, and good timing are the keys to handling these individuals successfully (Berman, 1998; Gordon, 1998; McEwan, 2004).

SUMMARY

- Understand that screamers belong to every group of people and that you will inevitably confront them during your tenure as a school administrator.
- When faced with a person who is ranting and raving, control both your voice and your choice of words, so as to be neither threatening nor intimidating.
- Depersonalize the tirade in your own mind. The yelling is not about you.
- Determine the particulars of the events that triggered the behavior. Who's complaining and why? What are the related circumstances and concerns? What outcome is the individual seeking?

10 MANAGING DIFFICULT, FRUSTRATING, AND HOSTILE CONVERSATIONS

- Be cautious when dealing with an angry screamer. Such individuals can lose physical control. Take safety precautions for yourself and bystanders.
- Learn and practice techniques that will aid you in remaining calm and in personal control. Some techniques worth developing are breathing properly, distancing, and pre-determining a collection of appropriate comebacks.
- Sharpen your active listening skills. Use facial expressions and body language, posture, and gestures that convey genuine interest and concern. These are great assets during these encounters.
- Remember, some confrontations are better postponed until the yeller has more control of himself or herself. Wait until the person cools off to resolve the situation.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- McEwan, E. K. (2004). *How to deal with parents who are angry, afraid, or just plain crazy* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Ramsey, R. D. (2004). *What matters most for school leaders: 25 reminders of what is really important*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.