

Respectful Intervention

setting limits without starting fights

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Many years ago I developed a set of policies and procedures that I've implemented at the various programs I've operated. Minor changes have been made from program to program, but, as the policies are intended to govern staff behavior toward young people, they've remained remarkably consistent over the years. The Number One policy -- located in the Number One position to emphasize its importance -- has always been:

1. Participants are to be treated with *respect* at *all* times. The burden of respect is yours, and is *not* dependent on participants respecting you. *Dealing with participants in a disrespectful manner, regardless of the provocation, can result in termination.* Respect is the philosophical underpinning of this program. There is *no* excuse for being disrespectful to our participants. This also applies to your dealings with the community.

Sounds good on paper, eh? It doesn't sound so good when you have a drug-affected kid all up in your face calling you an asshole for doing your job. And what if your job at the moment is to deny service or ask them to leave due to their behavior? How does respect fit into that scenario?

The short answer is that it remains my Number One policy. Remember, the policy clearly states that *showing* respect is not dependent on *receiving* respect. I believe that respect needs to be earned, and it will be given *when* it has been earned. If you attempt to demand respect from youth you're going to be disappointed, but if you focus on *earning* respect, your efforts will be rewarded.

Note that earning respect does not mean giving in and doing whatever a young person wants. Quite the opposite, young people need and appreciate structure. The quickest way to lose respect in their eyes is to be someone they can manipulate. But structure and boundaries can be provided respectfully. You don't have to get into a power struggle to stand your ground.

One of the biggest barriers to responding from a place of respect is the fact that we are all human beings. When some angry out-of-control adolescent is yelling at you in front of other youth and your colleagues, it is unnatural to react from a place of respect. Far more 'human' reactions are embarrassment, shame, anger, and fear. These reactions prompt responses such as control, authority, sarcasm, and hostility -- all of which generally serve to escalate, rather than de-escalate, a conflict. But such is the nature of the work we have chosen to do. We have *voluntarily* decided that we *want* to be professionals working with a population of drug-affected, abused adolescents who are angry to the point of rage with poor impulse control. That's a decision *we've* made, and the mark of a professional is to teach yourself to appropriately *respond*, regardless of how you may personally *react*. Here are a few ideas to help you develop a professional response grounded in respect:

1. Remember that people -- particularly young people acculturated to street life -- often need a 'face saving' time lag to comply with requests. Do not present interventions in a 'rapid fire' confrontational manner. Focus on *cooperation*, rather than immediate *compliance*. Escalate your intervention only after allowing a reasonable time for a young person to offer cooperation rather than accept capitulation.
2. Whether your intervention is a simple request, or a consequence such as denying service or asking a young person to leave your program, it should be presented in a neutral, respectful, and consistent manner. Remember, your request is professional, not personal, and it should be presented as such. If a young person elects to behave in a way which results in your having to enforce a boundary or apply a consequence, then that is what you will do. You will always appreciate and respect them, but you will also always do your job.
3. Your ultimate goal is to create a culture where you do not have to intervene, enforce boundaries, or apply consequences at all. This is something you do if necessary, but it is not a desired outcome or the way you wish to spend your time. While it may be unrealistic to assume that you

will ever completely achieve that Shangri-La, it should always be the direction in which you are heading.

4. Always talk openly with youth about your expectations. Never change your behavior without discussing it. Let youth know what you are doing, and why you are doing it (to create a safe and respectful environment for all, and to live up to our responsibility as staff, etc.).

The Power of Apology

One thing that cannot be overstated is the power of apology in creating a respectful intervention. Making this power work for you does not depend on having something to apologize for -- it can simply be a useful approach in the intervention. Here are two real-life examples from my own experience:

I was preparing for a youth forum within a shelter program, and had set an easel out on the floor. As I went to get other supplies, I saw one young man start to remove the easel I had just set up. I told him that I had placed the easel there for use in the youth forum, and asked if he would please leave it where it is. I then went about my other business, but returned just in time to see that he had taken it again and was trying to hide it between the washers. I went up to him, retrieved the easel and said:

"Please leave the easel where it is. Take it again and you'll have to leave the forum."

He responded loudly with; "Geez, why do you have to be such an *asshole* about it?!?"

I responded with an *apology*; "I'm sorry if I'm coming across as an asshole, that's not my intent. But you will have to leave if you take it again."

That was the end of it, and the youth did not take the easel again, nor did we have any further dealings that night. However, as I was leaving a friend of his gave me a note that he had asked her to pass on to me. The note said:

What up yo. I'm sorry 4 calling you an asshole. I was out of line. I reacted badly. I will try to refrain from reacting so harsh next time. Sorry again.

The next example:

A youth came storming into a drop in center where I was working the floor. He appears extremely angry and agitated. Pointing to me from across the room he loudly shouts; "YOU! We need to talk!"

He rapidly approached shouting; "*Your goon [staff] told me I wasn't who I am! Some other youth used my name to get in here, and [staff] told me that I was using a fake name, but I have ID (the ID is now being held defiantly in my face) so he's wrong!*"

I knew nothing of this situation, but I could assume that the youth was denied entry earlier based on some confusion over identity. It might have been his fault; it might have been staff's fault. At this point, it doesn't matter. The identity issue has obviously been resolved and the youth is accessing the center. The only thing left to resolve is the issue of a pissed-off youth in my face.

I first responded with a clarification; "We don't have any 'goon's' working here. Are you referring to one of our floor staff?"

"Yeah."

"Thank you," I said, responding with another respect-based approach. It never hurts to thank people, even for the smallest concession. He had at least acknowledged that he was referring to a staff person, not a 'goon' -- and I thanked him for that. I then gave him an apology.

"It sounds like we may have made a mistake earlier. If we made a mistake, please accept our apology."

He looked at me for a moment, and then said "OK."

That was the end of it. Done. Over. *Never* underestimate the power of apology.

As an aside, please note that in the above example I did not admit to a mistake. I had no way of knowing whether *we* had made a mistake or *he* had. I simply clarified that if the mistake was ours, we're sorry. Note also that I did not place the blame on the individual staff person in question. I intentionally said that *we* may have made a mistake. Staff should always operate as a consistent team. Everything you do, *we* do.

The more you are able to let respect govern your interventions, the more effective -- and brief -- your interventions are likely to be.