



School leaders can help reduce negativity and conflict in their schools

Rebecca Coda and Rick Jetter

We talk about student discipline and misbehavior at great lengths within our schools. We craft appropriate code of conduct documents and set policies to ensure the safety of our children. After speaking with school board members and school leaders across the nation, we feel we must address another factor: adult misbehavior. No one is immune to having to deal with adults behaving badly on any level of the system, with any type of staff member. When adult misbehavior exists in our school systems, student achievement suffers. Time and energy are wasted on dealing with conduct, and it can sometimes cripple or stifle an organization. The culture of your school or district can suffer dramatically when adult misbehavior exists. Misconduct can become highly political and, if situations reach a high proportion, the school system can become chaotic.

Schools or districts that do not address misconduct in a thoughtful and proactive manner are prone to having more episodes of workplace bullying or levels of unproductivity within the system. Misbehavior

shouldn't be ignored, but there is a way to prepare the system to understand and deal with it.

It is the responsibility of school board members and school leaders to set the tone, establish policies, and seek training in order to increase the capacity and capabilities of the entire system, at large. Think of it like this: Acknowledging and proactively creating a system that trains others about adult misconduct raises the emotional intelligence of your school or district.

RUNNING TO MOM AND DAD

As children, fights with siblings resulted in some running to mom and dad to tattle. It sounds childish, but organizational misbehavior works in the same way. It's not unusual in a school system for school board members and school leaders who sit at the top of the hierarchical chain to have to get involved in an issue just as parents do when things aren't working well or go wrong in their family.

Sometimes, school board members and superintendents are even involved in the political adversity of dealing with a colleague or someone they supervise.

However, we believe that most school board members and superintendents mean well, do well, and have the best interest of students and staff in mind. But, even the most amazing school board member or leader, from time to time, will see the heat rise to the top of their duties and responsibilities—something that they will choose to ignore or address.

EMOTIONAL FORCES

What kind of negative behavior are we talking about? While researching adversity in our schools for over two years, we found that there were emotional driving forces, human responses to, and reasons for adult misbehavior within school districts.

These human emotional driving forces don't always have to happen within an organization, but our work with educators found that the emotions outlined below can fuel negative situations in a private, humanistic manner or on a more organized level within our schools.

Here is what we found to be the most compelling forms of emotional driving forces that establish adverse effects within our schools.

1. Jealousy (e.g., I work harder than you. Your leadership skills are weak. Why did you get the staff appreciation award?)
2. Connectivity and association (e.g., You will never get a promotion in this district because you are friends with him.)
3. Skepticism and validity (e.g., I have my doctorate and you don't.)
4. Discrimination and racism (e.g., You don't belong here.)
5. Accountability (e.g., How can you evaluate me? You were never a school counselor before.)
6. Entitlement (e.g., I have been friends with the superintendent for years. I have seniority.)
7. Ego and power (e.g., I am not going to let you rise to the top.)
8. Fear (e.g., I'm worried about you looking better than me.)

It is through these lenses that we can begin to understand the complexities of our schools, the feelings or emotions that our staff may go through, and how we can help

to construct a strong discourse to better salvage the ship during tough waters of any adverse situation.

ADVERSARIAL TACTICS

As there are emotional driving forces that fuel adult negativity, there are also specific tactics or strategies that adversaries use against their colleagues within organizational structures. These tactics can cause minor or severe damage to both the reputations of the adults who lead our students and the organization itself.

As there are emotional driving forces that fuel a spark of potential adversity, these are the actual actions that stoke the fire:

1. Creating rumors (e.g., Did you know that she is an alcoholic?).
2. Slowing down the organization with increased tasks or responsibilities (on purpose) that do not lead to anything valuable.
3. Bending the truth or slanting information.
4. Creating paranoia within the organization (e.g., Did you hear that the school board is coming after you?).
5. Creating silos where we are not working together, but are isolated from one another.
6. Intentionally omitting others from a task or from receiving vital information.
7. Working from the inside against one another or behind the back of a supervisor.
8. Bending professional courtesy (e.g., Using favoritism for one person or a select group of people).

TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

If we do not train our school boards and superintendents about the tenets of negativity training, we will never eradicate or decrease the political unfairness that exists in school systems everywhere. All it takes is for one incident to get out of hand and the school culture that you have worked so hard to establish will be at the mercy of adult misbehavior that was unanticipated or unaddressed.

Rebecca Coda (rebeccacoda1@gmail.com) is the director of K-6 curriculum and instruction in Arkansas' Cabot Public Schools. Rick Jetter (drjetter1@gmail.com) is a national education consultant, author, speaker, and trainer.