

Conflict Management

Recognizing a conflict situation

A conflict situation can take a tutor by surprise because learners often do not verbalize that they are feeling frustrated, fearful or disappointed (“Managing Conflict”, 2009). It is important to be aware of when a learner may be experiencing these feelings. Look out for the following signs:

- Lack of focus.
- Heavy breathing.
- Verbal sign-posts such as “I can’t do this! I don’t get this”.
- Closed body language, fidgeting.
- Glossed over eyes (this could be tears), hard swallows.
- A physical gesture such as pushing the book away, throwing down a pen.

If you see these signs, do not push the student to continue with the lesson. The first thing to do is to diffuse the learner’s negative feelings. Call a break time. Do not offer or ask if something is wrong because the response might be, “No I’m fine”. Let the learner clear his or her mind. When you come back after the break do not begin right away. Take a moment to:

- Give the student positive feedback and encouragement.
- Ask the student if there is a particular area they are struggling with, how you can help and create an action plan together.

Listening past the outburst and managing the conflict

If a student has an angry moment or outburst and insults you or the work recognize that, (a) that behaviour is not acceptable, and (b) it is not about you. When a learner makes an outburst it is usually his or her way of saying “I don’t get this and I’m feeling insecure”.

Follow these steps if an outburst occurs:

- Do not take the comment personally and do not engage in the negative conversation. Diffuse the conflict as soon as you can and then get to the root of the issue.
- Diffuse the student's anger by acknowledging his or her concerns and then addressing your needs. Example: "I see that this is frustrating for you and I am happy and willing to support you, but I can only do so once we can talk about it clearly and calmly." Avoid phrases like "don't yell at me," or "calm down," or "who do you think you are?" These phrases are confrontational and will not help.
- Take a break if needed.
- Follow the steps listed in the previous section and continue the lesson.
- Let the coordinator know about this incident and any continuing behaviour.
- In another session, when both of you are fully removed from the conflict situation you can address with the learner how you would prefer to be told if he is having a difficult time with the work. Work with the learner to establish a plan of communication that works for both of you.

The overall idea is to look for the signs of a conflict, understand that the learner's feelings and experiences are informing his or her response, disengage from the conflict, diffuse the anger and follow-up by creating a better way to communicate that works for both parties.