Workplace Violence at Schools – Clear Communication to Prevent Escalation Meeting Kit



WHAT'S AT STAKE

Let's talk about something really important: keeping our school a safe and positive place. We all know that preventing physical violence is crucial, but sometimes we overlook the power of communication. How we communicate with students, colleagues, and even parents can either diffuse tense situations or make them much worse.

WHAT'S THE DANGER

When we think about violence in schools, we often jump straight to physical altercations. But before things turn physical, there's usually a buildup—a series of interactions, often involving miscommunication or a lack of clear communication, that can escalate a situation. It's like a snowball rolling downhill; it starts small but can quickly become a big problem.

Types of Communication Breakdowns:

- **Vague or Unclear Language:** When we use vague or unclear language, it can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. For example, telling a student "Behave yourself" is much less effective than saying "Please keep your voice down and stay in your assigned area."
- **Aggressive or Hostile Tone:** The way we say something is just as important as what we say. A hostile or sarcastic tone can escalate a situation even if the words themselves aren't overtly offensive. For example, saying "Are you serious?" in a condescending tone can be much more inflammatory than simply asking for clarification.
- **Ignoring or Dismissing Concerns:** When we ignore or dismiss someone's concerns, it can make them feel unheard and disrespected, which can fuel frustration and anger.
- **Lack of Active Listening:** Active listening means truly paying attention to what someone is saying, both verbally and nonverbally. When we don't actively listen, we can miss important cues and fail to address the underlying issue.
- **Failure to Set Clear Boundaries:** Not clearly communicating expectations for behaviour can lead to boundary violations and misunderstandings.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

How can we use clear communication to prevent situations from escalating? It’s not about having all the answers or never encountering conflict. It’s about having the tools to navigate those challenging moments effectively.

Proactive Communication – Setting the Stage for Positive Interactions

The best way to prevent communication breakdowns is to be proactive in our communication style. This means using clear and specific language so there’s less room for misunderstandings. Instead of saying something vague like “Clean up your area,” try saying “Please put your books back on the shelf and your papers in your binder.” It’s also about maintaining a calm and respectful tone, even when things get tense.

Practicing active listening is another key skill. This means really paying attention to what the other person is saying, both verbally and nonverbally. Show them you’re listening by making eye contact or nodding.

Setting clear expectations and boundaries from the start is also essential. This includes clear rules about how we communicate with each other, what kind of language is acceptable, and what constitutes respectful behaviour. For example, if you have a classroom rule about raising hands before speaking, consistently enforcing that rule can prevent students from interrupting each other and escalating into arguments.

Finally, try to validate the other person’s feelings, even if you don’t agree with their perspective. A simple “I understand you’re feeling frustrated” can go a long way in de-escalating a situation. Imagine a student is upset about a grade. Instead of getting defensive or dismissive, you could say, “I understand you’re disappointed with your grade. Let’s talk about what we can do to improve it.”

Responding in the Moment – De-escalating Tense Situations

If a situation does start to escalate:

- **Create Physical Distance (If Safe):** If possible, create some physical distance between yourself and the other person. This can help to de-escalate the situation and give everyone some space to calm down.
- **Focus on Listening and Understanding:** Prioritize listening and understanding the other person’s perspective. Ask clarifying questions and try to understand their concerns.
- **Use “I” Statements:** Express your own feelings and needs using “I” statements. For example, “I feel uncomfortable when you raise your voice.”
- **Offer Options and Solutions: I**f possible, offer options or solutions that address the other person’s concerns. This can help to find a mutually agreeable resolution.
- **Know When to Seek Support:** If you feel unsafe or unable to de-escalate the situation on your own, don’t hesitate to seek support from other staff members, administrators, or school security.

Post-Incident Actions – Reflection and Follow-Up:

After a tense situation has been resolved, take some time to reflect on what happened. What communication strategies were effective? What could have been done differently? Reporting the incident to the appropriate personnel is crucial for tracking patterns and implementing preventative measures.

FINAL WORD

Remember, how we say something is just as important as what we say. By communicating with empathy and understanding, we can build bridges instead of walls. When we take the time to truly listen to others and validate their feelings, even if we don’t agree with them, we can prevent misunderstandings in potentially volatile situations.