

# Difficult conversations

## Contents

Managing difficult conversations with your colleagues .....	3
Building happy, harmonious teams.....	5
Challenging underperformance: practical strategies .....	12
Fostering positive relationships with parents: 5 top tips.....	15

# Managing difficult conversations with your colleagues

Dealing with difficult colleagues can be challenging. School leadership consultant Edward Gildea talks about the common issues that you may face and how best to approach with them

They call it ‘the hedgehog’. You might recognise some ‘hedgehog’ behaviour in your staff: defensive, aggressive (‘prickly’) or closed-off body language (metaphorically rolling into a ball). Other common behaviour traits that senior leaders may come across include: resentment, negativity, bullying and laziness. There can be any number of reasons for this: perhaps they are feeling demoralised, antagonistic or burned out.

So what do you do when a member of your staff shows any of these behaviour traits? ‘Consider the conflict as an opportunity to find a deeper solution,’ says Edward Gildea. ‘Both sides have to talk – there is no alternative.’

## **Sharing data, seeking truth**

During a difficult conversation, one of your first goals is to reach a ‘shared understanding of the reality’. Edward recommends using data. ‘Get them to explore the story behind the data and use this as a source of intelligent questions.’ He suggests that you ‘triangulate’ the analysis: three pieces of data pointing in the same direction might offer an area of truth.’

## **The question trick**

During this conversation, we often stop listening because we’re trying to think of the next brilliant question. ‘That brilliant question doesn’t exist!’ says Edward. Instead, he recommends that you echo what they’ve just said, and then explore the key word or phrase. ‘Use that [word or phrase] as the kernel of your next question and steer it to where you want to go,’ he says. ‘It shows you are listening carefully and being empathetic towards them.’

## **Emotional**

Often, such conversations can get highly emotional. ‘This is often because there’s something deeper going on, like issues of power or self-esteem,’ Edward explains. ‘Use your position of power to be supportive, dig down to the deeper issues and try and build a shared value. It will take time but until those issues are resolved, they can blow up disproportionately.’

In moments of high emotion, people often go into attack-mode and the recipient can take it personally. ‘Don’t!’ Edward urges. ‘Any of those attacks are not attacks on you but on your position of authority. Don’t feel that you have to defend when attacked – they’ll just attack harder! Rather than giving in to the temptation to compromise, try and collaborate. However, there may be times when you have to do something controlling, ‘something that makes them realise that there is a boundary; that you’re serious’ such as telling them that you’re ready to take formal procedures.

## **The awkward silence**

Awkward silences are very common. ‘Holding silence is perhaps the key coaching skill because it puts them under tremendous pressure and it also gives you thinking time,’ says Edward.

While there is a temptation to offer your own suggestions for improvement, it is more effective to get them to generate their own answers because:

1. you don't know the answer for them because you are a different person
2. you want to lead them to a moment of insight
3. it's likely they'll just say: 'We tried that: it didn't work', or: 'That's not going to work', or they'll give it a go but they'll have a vested interest in it being a disaster.

But what do you do if they're genuinely struggling to come up with their own suggestions or solutions? Edward recommends trying to generate options by using the technique of saying: 'That's good! What else?' Use that 'what else?' phrase up to 20 times. This means their solutions are moving them out of their entrenched comfort zone. Once they've got past 12 they're in creative mode.

### **Denial**

In very difficult situations, you might face a brick wall of denial every time. On these occasions, Edward recommends you make the transition from coacher (who avoids making judgments and suggestions) to line manager (making judgments and being critical if necessary). At this point, Edward recommends that you say to them: 'I'd really like to solve this problem with you informally, but maybe the time has come to take formal procedures.'

If you are going to take this step, you've demonstrated that you've given the employee reasonable opportunity to improve or comply. Hopefully at this point you get the bounce back because they think: 'Wow, you are serious.'

*Edward Gildea is a dynamic facilitator and coach with extensive experience in educational consultancy. A former headteacher with 25 years' teaching experience, he has been a highly successful freelance educational consultant for seven years, specialising in aspects of leadership, change and conflict management. He was a School Improvement Partner in Worcestershire and a senior education consultant for BSF, Academies and Free Schools for Cambridge Education. He runs courses and consultancy for ASCL and CE, all focussed on improving school effectiveness.*

# Building happy, harmonious teams

Dealing with conflict from staff can be a difficult issue for SBMs to face – but it doesn't have to be. Nickii Messer shares strategies to build happy teams and action to take when things do go wrong

One of the most difficult situations that any line manager is likely to face will be conflict and challenges from staff. With the large and often disparate number of support staff roles in schools, many SBMs will hold responsibility for the efficient running of a variety of teams within their school. Add to the mix the many different personalities involved, and conflict and grievances are almost inevitable.

So, what strategies can you use to help teams work happily, harmoniously and cohesively, and what can you do when things do, inevitably, go wrong?

## **Put pupils at the centre**

Where possible, the starting point should be a whole-school acknowledgement that all staff need to get on and work well together. While human nature decrees there will be differences of opinions and clashes of personality at times, staff must be clear that while at school they are expected to work and conduct themselves in a professional manner. Allowing conflict to fester between colleagues and within teams can lead to disgruntled, disaffected staff, inevitably impacting on performance.

Consistently and coherently reminding all colleagues that the students are at the centre of everything they do provides an invaluable framework for difficult conversations. Build these conversations into performance management too. Treat the pupils as a lightning conductor – when storms look likely, remind everyone why they are there and be determined that potentially destructive lightning bolts will be swiftly sent to ground.

## **Communicate, communicate, communicate**

A key tool to keep staff on board is effective communication. When faced with important conversations, there are three routes we can take, according to Patterson et al (See note 1):

- we can avoid them
- we can face them and handle them poorly
- we can face them and handle them well.

There are a few simple strategies that, when consistently applied, will help school leaders engage with their staff and ensure successful conversations – see the box below.

### **Strategies for effective engagement**

- Keep staff informed of events and activities. Knowing why you are doing something helps engagement and motivation.
- If you don't tell staff what is going on, you create potential for them to jump to inaccurate, even damaging, conclusions. 'The void created by the failure to communicate is soon filled with poison, drivel and misrepresentation.' (See note 2).

- Communication is a two-way process so listen – as well as talk – to your colleagues. They have a significant stake in what goes on in school, so involve them.
- Make sure that you don't overcomplicate important messages. If colleagues need to understand something, say/write it in clear, no-nonsense language uncluttered by other, irrelevant, matters.

Because effective communication is essentially a two-way process, colleagues who refuse to participate in meaningful and positive dialogue can become destructive blockers to school improvement. Don't ignore this. Treat such colleagues in the same professional manner that you expect from them, and make your expectations clear. If there is conflict, you will need to reach a resolution. The trick is to make sure that you are prepared so you can deal with it calmly and positively. Try to find out how this conflict has occurred and decide what resolution you can accept. Strong communication and interpersonal skills will contribute to your success. If a colleague persists in their intransigence, then you will probably need to tackle this through a more formal route, such as performance management, or even disciplinary procedures.

### **Managing difficult staff**

Recognising difficult or disruptive behaviour is the first step towards dealing with it. This may be colleagues being insensitive or disrespectful towards one another or their superiors, or being more overtly unpleasant, aggressive, bullying or abusive. Claiming others' work as their own or criticising what others do are all symptoms of bad behaviour. Difficult behaviour may also manifest itself in colleagues refusing to do even basic tasks without a fuss or having to be asked more than once.

When checking for signs of trouble, remember that what might appear as a group of staff or team being difficult might be just one person rubbing the others up the wrong way. Some individuals are so adept at this! It is important to deal with this promptly to mitigate potential damage to others in the team. Talk to the individual concerned on their own. Calmly explain what you have witnessed and ask them to explain why it has happened – and listen to their response before reaching conclusions. Reiterate to them your expectations of professional practice and the importance to the whole school that the team works effectively together for the benefit of the students. Moving forwards, regular team meetings based on carefully set agendas should help engender better team cohesion.

### **Investigating the cause**

Once you acknowledge that there is bad behaviour within the workforce, your next step should be to investigate the cause. There may be any number of reasons so try starting by being introspective. What have you or the school done – or failed to do? Providing all staff with effective and consistently applied induction and performance management sets down your expectations from the start and helps nip any problems in the bud.

So, also, does a clear set of person specifications included with job descriptions. Communicating key information to staff (including inviting them to meetings where appropriate) helps motivate them and give them a sense of belonging. Emails can be a cause of dissent, not only because messages can be misinterpreted, but because sending an email instead of speaking to your colleague face to face may give the impression that you are not interested in them or their work. Sometimes we just turn a blind eye to challenges from staff because we are too busy or reluctant to deal with them, leaving them to escalate unchecked.

A useful, and simple-to-use tool to drill down to the real cause of a problem is '5 whys'. This investigates the cause and effect of a problem, allowing you to deal with the root cause rather than something that appears on the surface. When given a response to a question simply keep asking 'why?' until you reach the root cause (generally five whys). The box below gives an example.

#### Example of using 5-whys tool

Yet again, one of your colleagues has let you down by leaving important data off the management information system (MIS). This has resulted in reports being incomplete and staff complaining to you. You meet with the administrator and ask why she has failed, again, to complete this essential task:

1. Why haven't you entered that data on the system? *Because I am too busy*
2. Why? *Because I always have so much work to do*
3. Why? *Because it takes me so long to enter the different types of information*
4. Why? *Because I don't know how to do it quickly*
5. Why? *Because no one has trained me on the system*

**Cause:** Proper training wasn't given to a new member of staff

**Effect:** Deadlines are being missed for important reports

**Impact:** The SBM must rigorously apply a bespoke induction and training programme for all staff starting in new positions.

As many challenges come from staff unhappy with change, forcefield analysis is a useful tool when contemplating change – see the box below. Use this to analyse the forces for and against proposed change to then determine whether the change is viable or not. By analysing forces for and against, you can work to strengthen those in favour and decide how to mitigate those that are against.

#### Example of using forcefield analysis

You need a blank sheet of paper. Turn it to landscape and divide into three columns. In the central column write a brief description of the change proposal. In the left column draw up a list of forces for change. In the right column, list forces against. These forces might be individual (or groups of) staff. They may be financial or health and safety considerations; governors; local authority; other stakeholders and so on.

To take this a step further, highlight the strongest forces (for and against) in bold, red or underlined – whatever makes them stand out clearly.

Now decide whether, on balance, this is a viable proposal. If the change must go ahead, this analysis will warn you of forces likely to be against it and prepare you for action. By highlighting the strongest forces you can prioritise these actions.

FORCES <i>FOR</i> CHANGE	DESCRIPTION OF CHANGE PROPOSAL	FORCES <i>AGAINST</i> CHANGE

### **Building positive teams**

As prevention is invariably better than cure, SBMs will benefit from investing time working with their teams. Focus particularly on agreeing a common set of values, aims and objectives so that everyone understands their role, their commitment to the team and their contribution to the whole school. Investing time in your teams helps to create better understanding and cohesion.

Keep the team informed of any new strategies happening in the school, even if they don't obviously impact on the team. Especially, keep team members informed of anything happening within the team and facilitate discussion about how tasks are progressing. When projects and/or tasks are completed, encourage reflection on the lessons learned. Striving for, and celebrating, improvement helps team members to enjoy a more continual sense of success, professional development and team cohesion.

### **Eliminating unhealthy challenge**

It is *unhealthy* challenge that you need to try to eliminate, not challenge itself. A good leader will feel sufficiently secure to accept challenge and healthy debate. We like to be right, but an important skill is to be able to let go of the need to always be right.

If others challenge your thinking or deeds, listen to their argument and be prepared to accept an alternative or consensus approach if appropriate. Your colleagues may know better than you, so it is important to acknowledge this. At the very least, find something in their argument that you can agree with – people like to be listened to (and it takes the wind out of the sails of an angry challenge): 'When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but creatures of emotion.' (See note 3).

Teams that work openly and collaboratively – challenging each other, sharing ideas and solutions, encouraging review and improvement – are the healthy, high-morale, high-performing teams. The box below sums up key aspects of effective team development. The case study below offers an example of how this can work well in practice.

### **Effective team development**

**Objectives** The objectives of the team should be clearly understood by all members

**Procedure** All team members should be involved in making important decisions

**Process** All team members should be clear about what has to be done, by whom, by when, with what resources

**Review** The team should review its work regularly as part of the development process. (See note 4).

### **Case study – middle leadership team**

As SBM in a large secondary school, I wanted to introduce support-staff performance management. Because of their numbers and diversity of roles, this represented a considerable commitment and one that I recognised I was ill-equipped for. Not only did I not have the time, but I certainly didn't have the range of expertise to effectively performance manage this variety of specialist roles. If it went wrong, I could disaffect a considerable workforce.

I conducted a strategic analysis of the support-staff structure, and developed a middle-leadership framework, with discrete support-staff team leaders providing knowledgeable and targeted

leadership. An unexpected benefit was that the middle leaders used this framework to work together (initially through regular support-staff middle leadership meetings). Soon colleagues who had previously misunderstood, even resented, each other were working harmoniously within a whole-school context.

### **New to leadership**

Taking on a new role as team leader can bring its own challenges, especially if this is a newly-created position or internal promotion. If you are new to the school, take your time to get to know your colleagues – and for them to know you. From the outset, assume your leadership role – colleagues need to see you as their leader from the start.

Don't make sweeping decisions or changes too soon, unless absolutely necessary. Instead, investigate with an open mind, and don't assume everything you hear is true! Try not to take resistance personally, but do consider whether you have done everything possible to avoid it. It is natural to fear change and, as their new leader, you represent a significant change to those you line manage. So, give them time to get used to you. You cannot please everyone and, as a leader, you cannot be friends with everyone either.

If yours is an internal promotion then you will have the benefit that you all know each other. However, some staff may challenge your new authority. This is their problem – don't make it yours. Your job is to lead the team to be the best it can be. Assume your new role and walk the walk. If colleagues challenge this, then you will have to talk to them, individually, and reiterate that this is your leadership role and with that comes responsibility. As you take your role seriously, you act professionally and expect the same from them.

The box below gives a case example of handling challenge when taking on a leadership role in a new school, while the case example in the box after gives one strategy for dealing with challenge when promoted to leader within your existing team.

### **Case study – introducing a new team leader**

I was asked to work with a recently restructured school workforce. The school had introduced a new teaching-assistant team leader, to provide leadership and support for the teaching assistants. The rationale had been clearly shared with all involved.

So it was disappointing that once the newly-appointed team leader was in post, she encountered significant, escalating, challenge to her authority from team members. Superficially, the whole team was against her.

It was important to deal with this swiftly, as the team was under tension and performing less effectively as a result. We agreed the team leader would meet with each teaching assistant individually. The reason given was so the team leader could get to know them better. But what came out of it was that most of the individuals, away from the team, disclosed deep unhappiness with the friction within their ranks. Their leader didn't ask them where this friction came from. That became very clear once she had met with them all.

Her next step was to establish regular team meetings and work with the team to agree shared values, aims and objectives. These meetings helped her to establish a more visible team leadership role as well as clearly stating (and agreeing) her expectations for the team moving forwards. The 'challengers' recognised their positions were marginalised and soon found other jobs. The team is now much happier and performing as it should.

**Case study – ‘Not my job’!**

An office manager I know has recently been internally promoted to a new leadership position. Although her team appeared to work well, they hadn't completely accepted her as their leader. The challenge to her authority largely manifested itself by persistent complaints that tasks the team were given were 'not my job'.

The persistent and petty nature of this was wearing her down, so she introduced a 'not-my-job' box. She used an old cardboard box, covered it with smart wallpaper, and labelled it 'not my job'. Without a word, she put this in the office. She didn't say what she would do with anything put in the box. That was three months ago. Since then, no-one has complained about tasks not being theirs, nor has anything appeared in the box!

**Disciplinary and grievance procedures**

All schools have policies and procedures in place to support formal disciplinary and grievance actions, and all staff should be made aware of these. These procedures will normally be viewed as a 'last resort', as it is generally better to resolve disaffection, challenge or conflict informally. The fallout from formal proceedings can act as a ripple effect, impacting on otherwise innocent staff. But sometimes things do go wrong and it is to these policies that you will need to turn. Where these policies come unstuck is generally where those using them, including SBMs, have no prior understanding of their framework until they have recourse to them. So make yourself familiar with them now.

The grievance procedure should allow for, and encourage, staff to vent any grievance at an early stage, in a way that is safe and non-confrontational. This gives you the opportunity to nip it in the bud thus avoiding things getting out of hand. Fostering an open-door policy also helps, but does not mean allowing regular, unnecessary interruptions. Colleagues should make an appointment to discuss important (non-urgent) issues with you. An open-door policy should also allow staff to come and see you when they have something troubling them, but which they don't feel warrants a formal conversation. As Colin Powell (Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff 1989-93) observed: 'The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them or concluded that you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.' (See note 5).

**Policies and procedures**

If a member of staff decides to take a formal grievance against another colleague, then the school will need to work strictly within the grievance policy framework, adhering precisely to prescribed timescales and actions.

Where a member of staff acts in a way sufficiently outside the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, you will need recourse to the disciplinary policy. The disciplinary procedure is concerned with handling allegations of misconduct and gross misconduct. Where disciplinary allegations appear to be linked to sickness (including work-related stress), the ill-health procedure may be appropriate. Where there is concern about competence or poor performance, the capability procedure should be used. Again, you must adhere to prescribed timescales and actions to protect the integrity of the process.

**Confident to manage challenge**

Feeling confident in your leadership role will help you to accept challenge when it is appropriate, and recognise when it is not. Disrespectful and disruptive challenge is never acceptable and potential damage must be mitigated promptly. Difficulties with staff can have a negative impact on the whole team, indeed, the whole school, derailing what others work so hard to achieve. Some

colleagues just seem to have that uncanny knack of rubbing others up the wrong way, causing disruption at every turn. An important part of line management is not only recognising that this is happening, but dealing with it appropriately with little, or no, collateral damage. To do this successfully, you need to understand the root cause of any conflict, take time to prepare for action, then take the action most appropriate for the situation. The box below gives outlines action to take, and what to avoid, when managing difficult staff.

Dealing with conflict is never easy, but colleagues will respect you less if you don't try. Reflect on what works well – and what less so – and look forward to learning from these experiences. Most importantly, remember that when you get it right, the students will benefit from happier, more harmonious and high-performing staff working together to achieve the very best for them.

### Action to take and avoid when dealing with challenging staff

DO	DON'T:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• remind staff that the students are at the centre of everything they do</li> <li>• set out expectations in person specifications, induction, performance management</li> <li>• take time to think before dealing with challenge</li> <li>• listen to find out why a difficulty has occurred</li> <li>• get to the root-cause of any difficulty before dealing with it</li> <li>• reflect on what you could do differently next time to avoid it happening again</li> <li>• set out your professional expectations</li> <li>• arrange Inset sessions to help all staff to work well together.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• procrastinate – if it needs dealing with, deal with it before it festers</li> <li>• jump to conclusions – listen first</li> <li>• overcomplicate important messages</li> <li>• be complacent – because all seems well now doesn't mean it will continue to be so</li> <li>• jump into disciplinary or grievance procedures until you have tried less formal approaches</li> <li>• take things personally – you should focus on what's best for the school</li> <li>• blame the whole team for the difficulties caused by one member</li> <li>• allow factions within the staff team – use meetings and training sessions to engender cohesion.</li> </ul>

### References

- <sup>1</sup> *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, McGraw-Hill, 2002
- <sup>2</sup> *In-laws and Outlaws* by C. Northcote Parkinson, Houghton Mifflin Co, 1962
- <sup>3</sup> *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie, Simon & Schuster, 1937
- <sup>4</sup> *Managing Teams in Secondary Schools* by Les Bell, Routledge, 1992
- <sup>5</sup> *My American Journey* by Colin L. Powell, Ballantine Books, 2003

*Nickii Messer was a school business manager for many years in three school phases, including seven years on the SLT. She now works as a consultant and, in recognition of her strategic leadership experience, is Anglia Ruskin's operational lead for their SBM programmes. Nickii is passionate about the training and development of school and academy support staff; her support staff middle leadership course has been particularly successful.*

# Challenging underperformance: practical strategies

How can school leaders challenge and support underperforming staff? Josephine Smith sets out a positive approach

Most of us want to recognise staff members' successes and support them in their continued development. But at the same time we want to challenge the performance of those who are underperforming.

## **What is underperformance?**

For the purposes of this article, let's make it clear that we aren't talking about those staff going through a temporary tough time. We all know that sometime life gets in the way of being the most creative, energetic, team member. Nor are we talking about early entrants to the profession finding their legs.

A strong school leader will use the powers they have in a fair, transparent and professional way to challenge and support underperforming staff to improve. They will also monitor that improvement and draw a clear line when improvement is too slow or unlikely.

## **A multi-faceted approach**

Challenging the underperformance of any staff member is never going to be a positive experience. An effective school leader needs to have several strategies in place to identify underperformance, support improvement and raise standards; all within time and budget constraints. Having systems and staff in place to do this is key. No doubt your school will already have many intervention processes, developed over time and a result of some of the key staffing appointments you have made. Coaching pairs and triads, peer observation, self-evaluation processes and CPD programmes will all contribute to your ambitious plans to raise achievement across the school.

## **Performance management policy**

There is a sense amongst school leaders, however, that there is an additional onus on streamlining these processes, consulting staff on them and incorporating them into your appraisal and capability policy. If you genuinely expect all staff members to be outstanding, the starting point has to be establishing a clear and supportive revised appraisal and capability or performance management policy. This needs to define a process that is supportive and fair but makes clear further action will be taken with individuals when these supportive practices fail to make a difference. Map out what these supportive practices are and what a capability process involves at your school.

At the start of every PM cycle you have a golden opportunity to set appropriate targets and you need to have a review and target setting system in place that ensures that this is done in a helpful and professional way for all staff but particularly those whose performance you may have any concerns about.

Make a careful decision about who such staff member's reviewer is. Will the reviewer be experienced and well prepared to have a robust discussion? Will they be able to distil that discussion into clear SMART targets? If the answer is 'no', then an alternative reviewer is imperative. A member of the senior team or even the headteacher themselves may be best placed.

Most schools need to carefully consider the way that objectives are phrased: too narrow and specific and they will be pointless. Think ahead to how awkward it may be to challenge the performance of a member of staff who can demonstrate they are meeting their performance management objectives with flying colours. Finally make it clear in your policy and to staff where an appraisal process stops and a capability process starts.

### **Observation controversy**

Your revised policy needs to carefully address the issue of observation frequency. If you haven't got an observation protocol in place draft one and consult on it with staff. Separate out observation for PM review's sake and any other kind of observation, e.g. peer, subject review, 'drop-in'.

Consultation doesn't mean meeting staff's every demand; it simply means listening, discussing and arriving at a decision that has kept other views in mind.

### **Peer support**

Many schools have worked hard to develop peer support systems. These might include staff 'buddy' systems for new or struggling staff, or coaching teams. A lot of schools, over time, have refined the schemes to involve carefully targeted staff rather than simply offering the scheme to eager staff looking to take part in a new initiative.

Be sure to make the support available to a member of staff whose capability is being challenged. This prevents a later allegation from the member of staff whose capability is in question that they haven't been supported in their efforts to improve.

What must be avoided is any delay in raising concerns regarding underperformance. Having a multi-faceted approach will enable a school leader to conduct formal conversations about performance with dignity and professionalism both in their conversations with the member of staff and ultimately in front of that member of staff's representative. That is far easier to do if the process for identifying and challenging underperformance is clear, fair and professional for all involved and focused in the first place on supportive measures. This professionalism is not a shield against challenging conversations but lends them a structure and an expectation of high standards without resorting to tones of accusation or recrimination.

### **Support plans**

Naturally a coaching or buddy system could be just one aspect of support on offer. In the event of your taking a staff member out of the appraisal process and placing them into your school capability process, you are well advised to document every single way the school has been supportive.

A support plan (a document with agreed actions and deadlines formed in consultation with the relevant member of staff) is often a good intermediate way of alerting them to the seriousness of their underperformance, providing them with an opportunity to make positive changes and informing them, with deadlines of the possibility of the more formalised steps of capability. At the same time as offering this support, staff need to be keeping evidence of any successes or shortcomings in the practice of the member of staff concerned. These notes will be important later on.

*Josephine Smith is currently headteacher of a secondary school in Lincolnshire and formerly vice principal and head of English and director of Key Stage 4 in schools in Leicestershire and Rutland. Josephine holds NPQH, is a Research Associate for the National College and has presented at several national conferences on partnership working, promoting parental engagement, cost effective CPD and performance management.*

# Fostering positive relationships with parents: 5 top tips

The SEND Code of Practice emphasises the importance of working collaboratively with parents. Gemma Dexter, lead practitioner at William Law CE Primary School, outlines her top tips to foster positive relationships with parents

1. **Avoid using negative language as it immediately creates hostility.** Suggest, don't demand and emphasise that you are working in partnership and not simply giving them orders. For example: 'Why don't we try this' rather than: 'You need to do this'.
2. **Think carefully about how you construct a difficult conversation.** Start by discussing the child's strengths and how well they are doing, and then move on to the areas of concern. This creates a softer and calmer base that you can work from, enabling you to have a really productive discussion.
3. **Keep on top of any communication you've had with parents about their child.** Having no missing links is the key to producing good outcomes and ensuring your own professionalism isn't called into question. Make sure you note down all decisions that are made and the dates they are made on.
4. **It is essential to be proactive.** By spotting the indications of poor behaviour patterns at an early stage, or the signs of a language difficulty will give you a better chance to intervene successfully. It will also reassure the parent that you are doing all you can to look after their child, creating trust and making future conversations easier.
5. **Base the conversation on your empathy for the parent's situation.** Think about the point of view of the parent and ask yourself 'how would I respond to this' however, don't sacrifice your professional integrity. Usually, both sides have valid points and ideas.

*Gemma Dexter is lead practitioner at William Law CE Primary School*

More practical resources and templates are available for members from the Optimus Education Knowledge Centre

<http://my.optimus-education.com>

Our performance management and capability model policy can be accessed at <http://my.optimus-education.com/performance-management-and-capability-policy>