

27.

TEACHERS USE TOXIC LANGUAGE OR BEHAVIOR

Lindsay was taking notes in the back of the room during a workshop. At first the conversation centered around learning targets, but then a veteran teacher raised her hand and said to the presenter, “What do we do when kids come to school not ready to learn?” Lindsay paused and looked up as the teacher continued, “What I mean is, African-American kids are louder than everyone else.” Lindsay’s mouth dropped open and her body froze as she waited for someone in the group to contradict the racist statement. Instead, another teacher emphatically nodded, saying, “I have that problem in my class. And they interrupt the learning of others.” Then a first year teacher echoed, “Yes, I have that problem, too!” Something in Lindsay snapped. She threw her hands in the air and exclaimed, “Am I the only one who thinks that one culture isn’t louder than another?!” Other teachers hung their heads in awkward silence, including the Assistant Principal. This moment set up an explosive tension for the next two months of school. Lindsay knew that her role as a coach would be tested like no other time before.

A coach is often the eyes and ears of a school. They often have a larger scope and context for how to approach conversations with teachers about instruction and professional learning, but this also means that there can be moments when a coach hears comments that are rooted in the oppression and degradation of others. Because coaches not only serve as the springboards of instructional learning, they must also serve as professional and cultural role models for the school. Coaches must build skills to confront and redirect toxic language in the moment, and manage their emotions during difficult conversations. Being prepared to disrupt toxic conversations or behaviors is one of the hardest and yet most important responsibilities of being a change agent.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

What topics do you believe should never be tolerated in conversation? Why?

What behaviors do you believe perpetuate toxic culture?

What are your own emotional triggers or “hot buttons”? Why?

What strategies have you used in the past to successfully manage difficult conversations?

PLAN A: IT'S ONE PERSON

The first step in addressing toxic language is to be clear about what topics you won't tolerate (whether it's in a private meeting or at happy hour).

When you find yourself in the presence of a colleague who says something that you believe is harmful, you have two options:

Flee the Scene: Do not engage, and walk away. On your way out, utilize a responsive turn (see the "Tactics Table" p. 133): "This conversation is something I don't want to be involved in so I'm going to leave."

Call it Out: Acknowledge that what you heard was not okay: "What you just said is hurtful, not just to the person you're speaking about, but to me because I respect them / don't want to work in an environment where people speak that way."



PLAN B: IT'S MULTIPLE PEOPLE

A group-think mentality most likely can't be changed by one person, and certainly not in a short period of time. If you are experiencing a toxic school culture, schedule a meeting right away with your principal (and/or leadership team) about professional learning opportunities to build empathy, and identify the ways in which toxic language affects student learning.

This planning must be intentional, long-range, and not done in isolation. Reading recommendations include:

Transforming School Culture by Anthony Muhammad (2009)

Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students by Zaretta Hammond (2014)

Courageous Conversations by Glenn Singleton (2005)

Collective Efficacy: How Educators' Beliefs Impact Student Learning by Jenni Donohoo (2016)

At the same time, continue to utilize Plan A for case-by-case situations.

PLAN C: UTILIZE RESPONSIVE TURNS

It might not be possible to push back against destructive conversations every time they occur. While it's important that a coach confront toxic language when it's appropriate, they must choose their opportunities wisely or they will develop a reputation as the "Conversation Police".

By practicing responsive turns ahead of time, a coach will be prepared to interrupt or divert situations that arise in their day-to-day practice. After reviewing the Tactics Table below, pull out a note card and write down your own responsive turns. Practice saying them, and reflect: When might you need these? How will they be helpful?

Keep this note card handy, such as in the pocket of your planner or calendar.

PLAN D: REPORT TO HUMAN RESOURCES

There is no way to sugarcoat this one. If you hear language that falls under racial/ethnic, sexual, religious, or homophobic harassment, you will need to report this immediately to your supervisor or Human Resources in writing. If you feel uncomfortable, remember that you are speaking up for someone that might be silenced by workplace bullying.

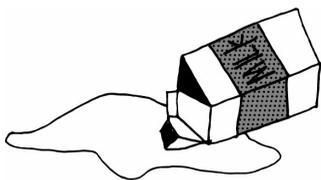


Tactics Table

TACTIC	WHAT IS IT?	EXAMPLE
Interrupt	Cutting off the negative conversation before it begins	"Oh crap; I'm late, I've gotta go."
Name	Describing what's going on so everyone can see it	"I just feel that if we keep complaining about kids, we're never going to come up with anything useful."
Correct	Clarifying a statement that is not true	"I was at the meeting, and Mr. Smith was actually opposed to the plan."
Divert	Moving the conversation in a different direction	"Speaking of Tom, when does the basketball season start this year?"

Jim Knight, *Better Conversations* (2015, p. 174)

WORST CASE SCENARIO



Leaving Well

Sometimes the hard truth is that when a toxic culture is deeply embedded, a coach's effectiveness can be almost nonexistent until the bigger picture of staff culture, equity and efficacy are addressed. Rather than consider your leaving a failure, consider it a learning experience that has allowed you to gain insight for future opportunities. Honestly, we wouldn't be writing this book if we hadn't experienced toxic school cultures that eventually pushed us to move on to new, more rewarding paths.

- 1) **Develop a Transition Plan** and share it with your supervisor. It's likely that they can help facilitate other opportunities (even if your relationship is strained).
- 2) **Invest in your final interactions** with staff. Few people want to be remembered badly by former colleagues, so make each interaction a positive and professional one.
- 3) **Control your emotions** and leave on a high note.

FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

- ☆ Practice key phrases ahead of time
- ☆ Set the tone
- ☆ Educate and build empathy
- ☆ Create space for productive conversations

PITFALLS

- ✘ Making excuses for toxic behaviors
- ✘ Blaming or chastising
- ✘ Allowing toxic language to go unchallenged

YOU GOT THIS!

Coaches often have little direct power over individual or systemic decision-making, but they have the potential for great influence. Those who are most influential know how to get things done while also building relationships through mastering the art of difficult conversations and personal courage. Take a breath – you got this!



READ THIS

Glenn E. Singleton, *More Courageous Conversations on Race* (2012).

Jim Knight, *Better Conversations: Coaching Ourselves and Each Other to Be More Credible, Caring, and Connected* (2016), chapter 8.

Kikanza Nuri-Robbins and Lewis Bundy, *Fish Out of Water* (2016), chapter 11.

WATCH THIS

Jim Knight, “Courage” on Youtube (Nov. 28, 2016).

APPENDIX TOOLS

Stress Relief and Self-Care

SEE ALSO

#26 TEACHERS REGULARLY ENGAGE IN GOSSIP

