Interpersonal Skills and Advising

Communicating with students and parents is an important part of the advisor role. As a representative of the university, you are often called upon to answer tough questions and deliver news that is not expected. Personal opinion will shape what you think, but you must remember the context from which you speak—as an employee of the university. As such, the utmost professionalism is required—even when your gut is screaming something totally different!

Most of your interactions will be pleasant—don’t expect that every encounter will require full battle armor. There will be occasions, however, when things will become tense for a variety of reasons. You will be in the position to either defuse someone else’s anger, or keep your own frustration in check before it leads to anger. Following are some tips on listening skills and responding to a confrontational student (or parent) that might help you in those situations.

Remember that listening and hearing are not the same. You hear sounds. When you listen, you must focus, pay attention to the story and how it is told, language used, tone of voice and other messages sent in the telling.

If you follow the Golden Rule, it is easy to become an effective, active listener. Just think about how you want someone to listen to you. Here are some skills/reminders.

1. Face the speaker and show attentiveness with body language. Put the student at ease with your expressions.
2. Maintain comfortable eye contact— that middle ground of just enough to engage without staring holes through the student.
3. Minimize external distractions—turn down your radio, silence email reminders, put cell phone on vibrate if it’s on your desk. Let voice mail pick up calls that come in during appointments. The person across the desk from you needs to be priority one—unless you are waiting for a call, and then explain that situation.
4. Respond appropriately to indicate that you are tracking with the conversation.
5. Don’t doodle or shuffle papers— but make notes if you need to remember things or have questions you want to ask, and tell the student what you are doing.
6. Focus on the speaker first, not on your answer. You’ll miss something. Try to see the situation from the student’s perspective.
7. Keep an open mind before deciding if you disagree. It will be tempting to interrupt when a student is explaining some destined-to-fail scheme, but don’t.
8. Keep personal bias/prejudice in check. Sometimes a person will have a habit or speaking style that makes you nuts. Don’t miss the message because the messenger struggles with delivery. Some students are VERY nervous about meeting with an advisor and they need some practice to know that it’s not scary.
9. You don’t always need to respond with advice. Wait to be asked. Sometimes students just need to talk through something and how you responded in a similar experience may have no relevance to them.
10. Don’t get defensive if the student is complaining about you or another advisor. Let them make their point before you respond. Apologize if you need to for something that has happened. It goes a long way and so does clarifying why you did something. If the complaint is against another advisor, offer to be the mediator in a meeting with the student and advisor. They need to learn how to address conflict and that can be a teachable moment.

11. Engage yourself by asking questions for clarification, once the student is through talking. Paraphrase points to be sure that you understand what s/he said. Sometimes students don’t say what they mean and it helps them to hear it back. And sometimes, advisors don’t really hear what the student said.

12. Be patient – don’t finish a sentence or interrupt. You will know when the student is done. If there is a long pause, it’s OK to ask if there is more before you start to answer but recognize when the student is trying to formulate what to say next.

13. Keep Kleenex visible on your desk. Students rarely have them and you’ll see tears more than you might expect. They’re young and life is hard sometimes.

Now – about the angry student. If a student comes in the door frustrated and angry, your first move is to remain calm. Acknowledge the anger, and recognize that it is likely borne out of frustration and perhaps a feeling of powerlessness. Your goal is to prevent a full blown explosion while still getting at the issues. Don’t try to reason with the student at first – but do try to lead the conversation into a non-threatening discussion that can lead to come problem-solving.

Six elements of defusing anger –

1. Communicate respect – acknowledge the importance of the issue and your willingness to resolve or in some other way meet the needs/concern. Refrain from openly judging the behavior being demonstrated.

2. Cooperate – unless you could harm yourself or others. Refrain from saying things like “this isn’t enough to be angry about” because that will make it worse. You don’t have to agree, but you need to show some empathy.

3. Effective listening – See above because they all apply. Additionally, use open-ended questions such as “What would you like to see happen?” Recognize that you, too, would feel some frustration in the same situation.

4. Reframe – this is a good way to change directions. It reflects that you understand, but changes the emphasis from differences to common ground, and from the negative to the positive. If it is clear what the person values, you might start with “I can see that honesty and fairness are very important to you and they are to me as well...” Then you can begin to redirect the conversation to the point of a resolution of some kind.

5. Asserting – Sometimes you need to help the student place boundaries on his/her anger in order for you to be effective. It’s OK to expect appropriate behavior and to say so. Be hard on the issues but soft on the person. Use “I” statements (instead of “you”) to lower the tension. (“I feel anxious when you pound on the desk and it makes it hard for me to listen to you effectively.”) Use ‘and’ rather
than ‘but’ – ‘but’ is known as the verbal eraser because it tends to erase everything that precedes it in a statement. Using ‘and’ to connect your thoughts keeps the acknowledgement that the issue is real to the student and there are ways to deal with it.

6. Disengaging – if the situation is becoming dangerous to the point of physical harm, remove yourself or the student from the situation. If you become angry, step out and acknowledge that you are doing so for a break. Offer to bring the student a drink if that is appropriate. Bring in someone else for assistance – supervisor, a co-worker or university police if necessary. Debrief with someone you trust.

If you see signs that the student is losing control, be proactive.

1. Get help before trouble starts. Have a prearranged warning signal with colleagues.
2. Stay calm. That helps the other person stay calm.
3. Talk slowly and calmly in a firm, confident tone.
4. Don’t threaten, but inform of consequences of inappropriate behavior.
5. Try to have an escape route – this isn’t possible in a lot of offices, but think about what you would do.
6. Seek safety at your first opportunity.
7. Debrief with colleagues/supervisors and don’t hesitate to call the Counseling Center if you need more help. They will do a good job talking through your emotions following an encounter like this.

Sources

Above information was compiled from the following websites:

http://access.ewu.edu/caps/facultystaffres/defusinganger.xml

http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/listening-skills.html

http://powertochange.com/students/people/listen/

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