

7. Moving beyond a stalemate

The following steps will help you recognise and address a stalemate.

Step 1: Recognise a situation that is not reaching resolution

Ask yourself the following questions about the situation. This will help you form a view on whether the situation is likely to be resolved in the short term.

Time

- Has the situation continued for longer than anyone would have reasonably expected?
- Are meetings becoming long-winded and not leading to clear conclusions?

Blaming and secrets

- Is the focus on people's wrongdoings rather than on the problem?
- Is information being withheld from any of the parties involved in the complaint?
- Are sub-groups forming against others?
- Is gossip increasing?

Intense or uncomfortable emotions

- Is the situation dominating your thoughts, time and energy?
- Are feelings more intense or uncomfortable than you would normally expect from any of the parties involved in the complaint?
- Are behaviours out-of-character?

Resistance and motivation

- Is there a marked lack of motivation on the part of particular stakeholders to reach goals or try anything different?
- Does the complainant appear to persistently reject, ignore or oppose suggested remedies over a long period of time?
- Does their advocate argue at length or dissuade them from accepting suggestions?

Contradictory information

- Do any of the parties involved in the complaint repeatedly suggest information or give opinions which are contrary to the suggested goals?

Same solution tried repeatedly

- Are the solutions asked for by the complainant repetitious?
- Has the same kind of solution been tried more than once?

Step 2: Evaluate your part in the conflict

If the situation is moving towards a stalemate, the following questions will help you honestly examine whether you are doing your utmost to resolve it.

- Are you using your power appropriately? For example, does the situation require 'power over' the person (by enforcing Departmental requirements) or 'power with' the person (by helping them have more of a say, and by listening to what they say)?
- Have you tried building empathy with the complainant? For example, have you tried seeing the situation from the complainant's point of view?
- Have you communicated your perspective, needs and concerns clearly? For example, are you talking in generalities or are you providing specific and objective information?
- Are you dictating solutions? Or are you exploring the person's needs, using words such as 'could' rather than 'should', and together arriving at solutions?

- Have you considered your language and how the person might be interpreting it? For example, do you start your sentences with 'You should' or 'I feel'? One is demanding behaviour change, the other is offering a preferred action and explaining its impact on you and others. Do you say what you can't do, rather than focusing on what you can do?
- Are you adding to options by using words like 'and' or are you appearing to dismiss possibilities by using words like 'but'?
- Do you hold beliefs that lead to a brick wall or to a resolution? For example, do you say to yourself:
 - 'I just can't get anywhere with some people' or 'I can get somewhere with almost anyone'?
 - 'This is just the way it is' or 'There are other ways'?
 - 'Life and its difficulties are just too complex to solve' or 'It's possible to solve problems. We can handle the complexities of life'?
 - 'Things don't work out' or 'Many things do work'?

Step 3: Explore barriers to further discussion

Consider whether the complainant has been backed into a corner. Is there something you can do to help them save face?

Identify areas of misinterpretation (for example, objectives, motives, points of view, values, feelings, requirements, outcomes, needs and concerns). How can these be clarified and any misinterpretation overcome?

Consider your relationship with the complainant. Can you develop a relationship of greater trust independent of solving the problem?

Step 4: Address emotions to move towards resolution

In some cases, the best solution for a persistently complaining parent might be no solution.

Their personal and psychological needs might be better met by persistent complaining than by resolution. A need for power, for attention, for revenge, for belonging or for achievement might motivate a person to keep complaining. They might have a high investment in being right, in having the final say or in financial compensation. If this is the case, there has to be greater benefit for the person in changing than in not changing.

Despite your best efforts you may be powerless to make a difference without addressing what is motivating such a person to keep complaining.

A counsellor, senior staff member from the regional office or a peer could help you to identify their motivations and to resolve the situation. Or you might consider stepping back both physically and emotionally. You might ask a senior staff member from the regional office to chair meetings or act as a mediator. Or you might choose to use an external (outside the school system) and impartial review or mediation process to develop a way forward that both parties see as having no vested interest in the result.