



# Newly Qualified Teachers Project

## Managing relationships

HANDLING CONFLICT

WORKING TOGETHER

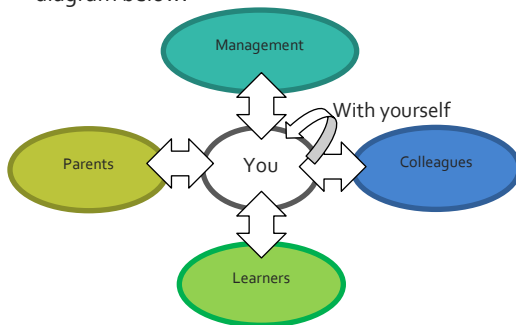
## Getting along

With all the focus on curriculum, lesson planning, classroom layout, exams and results, it is easy to lose sight of an incredibly important core tenant of working in a school:

**Schooling is fundamentally about relationships.**

Education is a human practice, and a social practice, which means it's something we do together, face-to-face, over time, learning and growing from each other. This means that if relationships are not ok in a school, it is incredibly hard to effect meaningful teaching and learning.

The relationships you need to maintain and nurture in a school are encapsulated in the diagram below:



Good relationship growth requires each party to know their own needs, strengths and weaknesses, and to establish reasonable boundaries for themselves and respect others' boundaries. Above all, sound relationships require clear and care-full communication.

**This is all easier to say than do.**



**DO:**

- Listen to your gut. If something doesn't seem right, it probably isn't.
- Try to resolve conflicts as soon as they arise.
- Take space to think through a problem.
- Get to know the people you work with.
- Appreciate your colleagues/students when they get it right.
- **Be kind to yourself.** This is the first step to being kind to others.

### Listen to your heart...

Notice your emotional responses to people and situations. Emotions are an integral part of being human. Rather than seeing feelings as impediments, they can be extremely helpful early warning signals. Feeling anxious, angry, frustrated, relaxed, excited, calm... tells us whether this situation is supportive or stressful. And then we can begin to interrogate **why** and what (if anything) can be done about negative situations.



**DON'T:**

- Treat your colleagues as your therapist
- Gossip or bad mouth.
- Let an issue fester
- Respond reactively or impulsively
- Miss deadlines or duties unless there are extenuating circumstances.
- Lower your own behaviour to that of someone who is not behaving well.



The Newly Qualified Teachers Project  
School of Education | University of Cape Town



# What to try...

If a relationship at school is not healthy

I have a relationship issue with...

- A line manager
- A colleague
- A parent
- A student
- ...me?

You won't get relationships with others right if you can't relate to yourself well. This includes:

- Knowing yourself
- Forgiving yourself
- Believing in yourself
- Being kind to yourself
- Backing yourself
- Taking care of yourself

These are not easy in practice and like most skills develop over time with habituated repetition.

Try the **Wellness Thermometer** if you suspect you are not at your best.

## Trouble in the classroom...

Consider using the **Classroom Management Tool** provided in this NQT Pack. What is often called "Discipline", "Behaviour Management" or "Classroom Management" (depending on who you ask) is about growing healthy relationships with your students that foster learning.

## Parental friction...

Difficulty with parents is unfortunately becoming more and more common in teaching. For schools serving wealthier communities, there is often a 'service provider | customer' dynamic that rides rough shod over a teacher's professional opinion. In schools with learners from poorer homes parents often struggle to engage with the school for various reasons.

As an NQT you should reach out for the support of your HoD, a member of SMT or your principal to help you with difficult parental relations. This is their responsibility and it is appropriate to ask their support.

Unfortunately you can't control other people, or their reactions. Many people avoid conflict instead of trying to resolve it. Remember:

- document tense conversations
- keep calm
- seek help



### Preparing for a difficult conversation

Any time you find yourself needing to have a tough talk with someone, prepare yourself by working through the following points:

1. List three words that describe your emotional response to the situation (e.g. ignored, frustrated, undermined, under-appreciated, patronized etc.)
2. Ask yourself *why* you feel this way. What happened to create these sensations?
3. What would you have preferred to have happened instead?
4. Suspend your own position if you can and try to see the situation from the other person's perspective. Is there anything you might have done to exacerbate the tension?
5. Given the existing conflict, describe your **ideal resolution**. Then 2<sup>nd</sup> prize. Then 3<sup>rd</sup> prize.
6. What compromises are you absolutely **NOT** willing to make in attempting to resolve this?

### Colleague conundrums

Try to set up a time to talk to your colleague. Preferably when both of you are not distracted, can relax and avoid disturbance or an audience. Ask them politely (preferably in person) if you can chat to them about something that is bothering you.

If they keep deferring or unavailing themselves, begin to send your polite (continued) requests via email.

If they agree to a chat time, go in as calm as you can (even if you feel super shaky inside). Breathe deeply if you've just come out of a tough class. Thank them for coming.

Use "I" statements to raise your concern e.g.

- I am concerned about a misunderstanding regarding submission deadlines
- I am not feeling great about how we are working together right now and I want to put it right
- I am unsure about certain expectations you might have of me and would like to clarify things

If the colleague is mature and reasonable, hopefully this will start a difficult but constructive conversation. Try not to focus on blame, but rather on how to avoid a repeat of the situation.

### Managing the Manager

If your conflict is with your line manager, start the same as for a colleague, but document conversations very thoroughly. If you cannot resolve it, escalate to their manager if possible, after chatting to your mentor, someone at NQT or your union rep.

#### REMEMBER

Your integrity is critical to maintaining the respect of your colleagues. Whatever you do, try to think of how you will feel when you look in the mirror later. You want to be proud of how you conducted yourself, even if the outcome is not what you hoped for.

#### Don't lose your cool.

- Don't tolerate abusive behaviour, including:
- being sworn at or called names
  - being sabotaged or undermined
  - any form of assault
  - any form of intimidation or bullying

#### WHAT IF THERE'S NO SUPPORT?

That's what we're here for. There may be times when it feels like none of these suggestions are viable.

Contact someone at the NQT Project if you need to talk a conflict situation through with a safe person who is not involved with your school.



Original versions by Sara Black, for NQT Project, UCT, 2018.

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