

## ask the experts...

# CALM DOWN, CALM DOWN

JOHN CRAWLEY, one of the most experienced conflict management professionals in the UK and founder and chair of CMP Resolutions, offers club managers some helpful advice on how best to handle disputes with members

Club members like getting together, chatting, playing, drinking, eating, entertaining one another and being entertained. A club is a bit of territory where you hope you can be yourself and be with other like-minded people. Sometimes, of course, members disagree and this article gives you a few tips about how to handle difficult conversations.

## 1. It's down to you – influence not control

Although as humans we like to think we can control the world, my advice is to relinquish the idea that we can control everyone and everything when conflicts happen. You have most control over yourself. Recognise who and what presses your buttons, look back at those conversations which have disappointingly familiar negative outcomes and learn from them. Look back at your successes and aim to repeat them.

## 2. Stay calm – don't take it personally

People sometimes need a good shout, and occasionally you might be in the way, or called in to help. Take a deep breath and don't get into the two most common human responses – fight or flight. (By the way I'm talking about verbal sparring in this article – not punch-ups. That's a different level altogether.)

## 3. Build Rapport

Rapport helps us communicate, share goals and work together even when we have different values and lifestyles. If you're running a club, or working with members, people need to trust you and you to trust them. Listening, acknowledging and appreciating generally work well. If people get out of order, leading firmly but with tact and understanding are rapport builders. Bullying and overreacting destroy rapport.

## 4. Show empathy – understand where other people are coming from

Our ability to quickly weigh people up protects us from danger and helps us relate to people, but this sometimes means we make snap judgements and perceive people and their behaviour in a very one-sided way. Be interested in your members; try to understand them even when they are out of order. Get to know where they are coming from, how they are feeling what they want.

## 5. Don't get shocked, get listening

When people say surprising things, make inappropriate

comments, claim they have never heard what you've been telling them for the last three months, it's very tempting to react, fight back, or even run away. Just listening can help you step out of shock and into understanding. A moment's silence will invite the other person to reflect and they may fill the space by giving you information about why something is being said and how someone is feeling.

## 6. Clarify before you negotiate

If you're receiving some difficult feedback, or a member's behaving awkwardly don't rush in with responses and solutions. Why not ask a question "What do you mean when you say you think I'm slacking?" Reflect back what they've said in neutral language "So you think the club's not done what it said it would?"

## 7. Say what you want, not what you think of the other person

If you are in a conflict it is easy to blame the other person. Our language can take on the edge of a critical parent or the tone of a superior. Do your best to say what you need from the other person rather than what you think of them. If they are doing something you don't like reflect it back "When you move so close like that" and explain the effect on you "I can't concentrate, and I feel intimidated". Suggest an alternative which will work for them and you "I'd like a bit of space, then I'll be able to listen and give you more attention. You'll also get a better response from me."

## 8. Problem-solve

Try problem-solving too early and you'll not get far. Once people are calmer and in a position to listen as well as speak you can at least identify what their issues are (if they have any) and what they want. If it's not possible, they need to know why, and if their ideal is not possible what is?

## 9. Learn to say no politely but firmly

It may be that what members are asking for is not possible, in which case anyone who works with club members needs to learn the art of saying 'no'. Be consistent with this and don't say no to some people and yes to others on the same issues. That will breed discontent.

## 10. Admit and acknowledge mistakes and learn from them

We live in a society when an apology is often seen as a sign of weakness, or a sign of liability. Humility is an invaluable attribute, and colleagues appreciate conciliatory gestures



John Crawley is one of the most experienced conflict management professionals in the UK, having founded CMP Resolutions (originally as Conflict Management Plus Ltd) in 1989. He is now chair of the organisation and is in demand as a public speaker, trainer, consultant, coach, mediator and facilitator with private and public organisations. He is committed to helping working communities find constructive ways of managing conflict, and balancing diverse opinions and cultures.

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like "I'm sorry," "Yes I got that wrong," particularly when they are accompanied by assurances that you will learn and do things differently next time. ■

