

Reducing Conflict 79 Document Behaviors

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At the start of all my leadership classes, I test for agreement and document behaviors for the class. The exercise is not that profound, but it does help to document behaviors expected at the start of every class.

Here is how I document behaviors for all my classes

I have a slide with six icons and a short phrase associated with each one. I ask the class if we are all willing to abide by the behaviors. I call these behaviors the “ground rules” for the class.

A positive attitude

Everyone in the class is investing something in this training. It makes sense to have all participants fully invested in getting the most out of the experience. I always ask what each person expects to gain from the course. I want to know why they are here.

If someone says “I am here because my boss told me to come,” that is cause for a side conversation.

Psychological Safety

This behavior is that I expect each person in the class to share their true feelings without having to worry about any retribution. In some groups, that principle is easy to adopt. In others, people are fearful that when they say something that seems contrary, they will pay for it.

Since psychological safety is a precursor for real trust, this behavior is key to all my leadership training.

No jokes at the expense of others

This principle is very important, and it is often left out of standard documented behaviors. It seems simple enough; no person likes to be the butt of jokes. However, in the flow of conversation, sometimes the temptation is so strong people forget the rule.

Let’s share an example from an online class to illustrate. Margaret has just shared an insightful comment about the benefits program in her organization. Instead of hearing praise for her point, Margaret hears a different message from Jake. “Good point, Margaret, too bad we always get the message first from your cat.”

The barb was meant in jest, and Jake can apologize later, but the damage has been done.

Keep confidential information protected

If people feel their remarks are going to get back to superiors, they will clam up. It is like the old Las Vegas Rule; what happens in the classroom stays in the classroom.

People can say they agree with the rule. Unless the facilitator reinforces the behavior appropriately, people will doubt it is actually true.

Be punctual

This is a difficult behavior to reinforce unless you have made a specific point about it. Time spent in the classroom is an investment. If some people do not respect the time of others, then the value of the invested time decreases.

I always remind the group a couple of times along the way that they have committed to punctuality. That is generally enough reinforcement to discourage people from abusing time.

I do not chastise people for arriving late from a break or something. That practice would violate the prior behavior of no jokes. Life happens for all of us, and you need to support people. If there is flagrant abuse, then a side discussion may help. People are people, and they are not exempt from personal emergencies just because they are in a class.

Remain alert

This behavior is a shared responsibility. As the facilitator, I need to keep the program lively and engaging. I try to have my content interspersed with experiential activities so people do not check out. My goal is to have something engaging and experiential at least every 15 minutes.

I use a number of techniques to keep people alert. Here are a few of the ones that I use most often.

1. **Role plays** - where people work in small groups on a problem where they are put in a difficult situation.
2. **Videos** – some humorous, but all insightful that break up the time.
3. **Polls** – where people vote on how they think about an issue.
4. **Magic illusions** – that reflect the content we are reviewing, but that engage the mind in a very different way. People often comment that they just cannot figure out how I am doing that.
5. **Tug of wars** – where one group argues for one side of the issue and the other argues for the opposite view. I often reverse the roles, mid-stream, to make things more fun.

The key to these experiential activities is to have some brief time to reflect on any observations or learning that occurred. Then, people are alert and ready to go back to the content.

Summary

This paper described the process I use to keep my leadership classes fun and light. It also optimizes the learning experience for each participant.

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