

The Phone Call

Smart Strategies for Diffusing Emotional Bombs

Case Study #1: Monday Morning Meltdown

Cup of coffee in hand, you sit down at your desk, grab a pen, and log into your voicemail to check messages. After the system greeting you hear, "Message One. Received at 1:33am. Two minutes." You swallow hard.

"Dan, it's Sam Tucker, Reese's father. What the hell kind of a carnival are you people running up there? I just got off the phone with Ellen and she's beside herself. Apparently, one of your new history teachers has taken it upon herself to assign a 10-page paper due on the same day as the final exam?"

I don't know about you, Danny Boy, but that's a &^%load of work in my book. Are you trying to educate kids or crush their &^#sing spirits? I don't know whether to call the Health Center and get Ellen what she needs to fall asleep or call the Headmaster and get that teacher's ass in a sling. My poor kid was crying so hard I could barely understand what she was saying. Good thing, I care, Dan because one of these days, you're gonna have a parent who doesn't give a flying #@!*& and some kid is gonna take her own life cuz of the stress. You want that on your resume, buddy? I sure don't. Call me back in the morning."

- What are the next three things Dan should do?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- Describe a general approach that might be effective in the return call.

Case Study #1: Friday Night Fights

You are the faculty member on duty Friday night. Some of the students are studying for SATs the next day; others are supposed to be checked into their rooms and doing some quiet activity. Your mobile phone rings and you recognize the number as one of your colleagues from the neighboring dorm.

"Pat, it's Robin. Are you busy?" asks your colleague, a slight edge to her voice.

"No. I mean, well, I'm on duty. I was just about to check the seniors in. But I have a minute. What's up?"

"I don't know where to start. Have you even read the newspaper? I mean the *school* paper? The one for which you are the *supposed* adviser? The one that has just slandered me?! I thought you had some integrity, Pat."

- What are the next three things you should do?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- Describe a general approach that might be effective in your conversation.



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Six Secrets of Effective Communication

Listening Skills

1. Disarming

You find some truth in what the other person is saying, even if what they are saying seems totally unreasonable or unfair.

Other person: "My daughter is in all the wrong classes! She got nothing she asked for!"

You: "Her schedule definitely did not work how you or she had hoped."

2. Empathy

You put yourself in the other person's shoes and try to see the world through his or her eyes.

- Thought empathy: You paraphrase the other person's words

Other person: "I can't believe you're having me fill out this health form again this year!"

You: "You were thinking that collecting this data each year was a waste of time."

- Feeling empathy: You acknowledge how he or she is probably feeling

Other person: "Either you find my son a single room or I'm calling the headmaster."

You: "I understand you're upset we haven't yet found a living space that suits your son's needs."

3. Inquiry

You ask gentle, probing questions to learn more about what the other person is thinking and feeling.

Other person: "It's impossible that my daughter is failing chemistry! It's her best subject!"

You: "Prior to coming to boarding school, how did she typically do in her science classes?"

Self-Expression Skills

4. Pure "I" statements

You use "I" statements, such as "I feel upset," rather than "you" statements, such as "You're wrong!" or "You're making me furious!"

Other person: "You should have completed these recommendations days ago. What do you I all day?"

You: "I have to tell you: I feel attacked right now." or "At times, I feel overwhelmed with so many advisees."

5. Pure factual statements

You simply state, in a calm tone and without judgment, what the facts are.

Other person: "I'm outraged that my son wasn't selected for the Washington Intern Program!"

You: "Indeed. There are many more applicants for that program than there are spaces available."

6. Genuine Praise

You find something genuinely positive to say to the other person, even in the heat of battle. You convey an attitude of respect, even though you may feel very angry with the other person.

Other person: "Why aren't parents informed of this sooner? The whole system doesn't make sense!"

You: (calmly) "I appreciate your wanting a better system. We're doing our best to keep parents in the loop and I appreciate your candor. Perhaps a parent with your experience has some ideas about how the school could enhance its communication."

Some of this material is adapted from David Burns, MD, author of *Intimate Connections* and *The Feeling Good Handbook*.



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