

# Quality Education News

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## Dear Supporter of Quality Education

For many South African school and tertiary institution leaders, these are traumatic times. There have been protest marches across the country. Education leaders have been verbally trashed on radio and TV. Negative articles have appeared in the print media condemning their leadership and management decisions. Further fuel has been thrown on the flames of dissent with the torching of buildings, buses, cars and classrooms. Staff and students have been assaulted and hospitalised. In one instance - in an act reminiscent of the Nazis in the 1930s - a university law library was gutted.

Reasons given for the conflict are numerous but there's a commonality to all of them. Every opposing side has a degree of validity to its viewpoint. The truth and thereby the hopeful resolution of the conflict, needs nuanced Solomon-depths of wisdom.

Poor students who have the academic potential to benefit from a tertiary education should not be denied that opportunity. The challenge, though, is to find the necessary funding without bankrupting the economy.

Conflict is a reality of being a human being. No day is totally immune from moments of conflict with others. When you ask a person to think of words that they associate with the word "Conflict", they're likely to focus on negative words such as: aggression, argument, clash, fury and rage.

Yet could the word "Conflict" be linked to positive words such as: benefit, care, improvement, kindness and thoughtfulness? Iconic leaders such as Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, John Kennedy and Nelson Mandela had huge parts of their lives filled with turmoil. Yet look at the positive end results for millions of their citizens because of their courage in facing up to conflict.

Robert Frost, the American poet, observed that the best way out of conflict is always through.

When a school deals with conflict ethically and openly, many positive results follow. Three familiar ones are:

1. **Teamwork:** Every quality school has good teamwork. Everyone works together for the good of each other and the good of the school. Teamwork brings out the talent in others.
2. **Social relationships:** Folk get on better with each other. When conflicts occur, there's a determination to deal with them. They're not allowed to fester; they're faced, resolved and lives moves on. Happy work environments are created.
3. **Lower absenteeism:** We see it with the children. When a class likes their teacher and they get on well with each other, attendance level is high. The same applies to teachers. Teachers who enjoy their days in the classroom result in lower absenteeism.

This newsletter focuses on North American research findings on dealing with conflict. In the 2007 edition of their book, *Becoming a conflict competent leader - how you and your organisation can manage conflict effectively* (San Francisco: John Wiley), C Rundle and T Flanagan show the way.

Whether we're a Grade 1 teacher or the principal of a university - or anywhere in between - we shall experience conflict. As leaders, we need to skilfully manage that conflict. We need to ensure that others are able to assertively but not hatefully express their grievances. Their voices and possible solutions deserve to be respectfully listened to but equally, so should ours. The starting point is mutual respect.

Sincerely

Richard Hayward



This newsletter is edited by SAQI and distributed to those schools benefiting from their participation in the MySchool programme. MySchool acts as a conduit which raises and delivers essential funding for education and social development on a sustainable basis. This enables members of the community to participate in the future development of our nation.



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EVERY SWIPE COUNTS

# Dealing with conflict: the negative process



Destructive  
behaviour

Person-focussed  
(emotional)

Conflict  
escalates

There are two broad approaches to dealing with conflict: negatively or positively. The negative approach indicated in the diagram above is characterised by destructive behaviour. That behaviour can be either active or passive in nature. In the conflict, there's a focus on the person rather than the problem. During the 2016 South African parliamentary sessions, Julius Malema and Jacob Zuma have spat verbal venomous personal remarks at each other. As a direct result, the conflict between them has ratcheted up.

Active destructive behaviour shows itself in these staffroom situations:

1. **Demeaning others:** In a staffroom the teacher might display such behaviour by unfairly criticising or ridiculing a fellow staff member. There could be non-verbal displays such as often looking out the window or one's watch while the other person is talking.
2. **Displaying anger:** The same teacher could raise her voice, get flushed in the face and even start waving hands.
3. **Retaliating:** Here the destructive teacher inflicts physical or emotional pain on the person who has allegedly wronged them. The "eye for an eye" principle is used.
4. **Winning at all costs:** This happens when a teacher refuses to budge or change from a standpoint even when there are better options.

Passive destructive behaviour seen in a staffroom could include:

1. **Avoiding:** This could occur when a person deliberately tries to avoid interaction with someone with whom they are in conflict. In a staffroom that person might be reluctant to sit next to the other.
2. **Hiding emotions:** Here the person's facial expressions hide their true feelings. This makes it difficult for others to know how to interact with that person. Sometimes a teacher might hide their feelings because they are too scared to express a differing viewpoint.
3. **Self-criticising:** Rather than accept that their viewpoint might be the right one, this person blames themselves for the conflict situation. Stress-induced consequences could be depression, insomnia and even a sense of worthlessness.
4. **Yielding:** This passive behaviour results in the person deciding to simply "give up" on what they believe is the right thing to do or say. The attitude towards the other person is, "Do what you like." Such action reflects that there's a desire to avoid conflict at all costs.

# Dealing with conflict: **the positive process**



Positive  
behaviour

Task-faced conflict  
(cognitive)

Conflict  
reduces

The positive approach to dealing with conflict is to focus on the problem rather than the person. As Rundle & Flanagan state (2007: 128):

*Separate the people from the problem. Conflict competent leaders never fixate on parties in a conflict. By defining and analysing the problem rather than the people involved, leaders begin embracing the conflict while protecting relationships.*

Active constructive behaviour that reduce classroom conflict include:

1. **Creating solutions:** Here the people in conflict discuss a possible solution. The children, for example, are not doing their homework or doing it in a rushed manner. The teacher and children agree that less homework will be given so that it can be done in a more conscientious manner.
2. **Expressing emotions:** Both the teacher and the child have the right to express their emotions. If a teacher believes that a child has spoken in a rude manner, that teacher is entitled to express her feelings but not rudely too!
3. **Perspective taking:** Walking in the other person's shoes gives perspective. The child who submits poorly done

project work might come from a single-parent home in an informal settlement where the parent is illiterate.

4. **Reaching out:** Simply saying that one is sorry and giving a warm hug or handshake solves many mini-moments of classroom conflict.

Passive constructive behaviour to help reduce classroom conflict include the following:

1. **Adapting:** At times teachers need to, "go with the flow." School hair and uniform codes might need to adapt to what is happening in a more relaxed dress code in the wider society. Maintain expected standards of cleanliness and neatness but avoid being uncompromising in changing times.
2. **Delay responding:** So often people react instantly in a conflict situation: there's uncontrolled physical and verbal reactions. On page 4 we look at how to avoid "Trigger" reactions in moments of conflict.
3. **Reflective thinking:** A competent conflict management teacher gives himself time for reflection. Pros and cons are considered. Maybe there's a need to literally sleep on it. Only then are decisions taken as to the best way forward.



# Triggers that set off conflict

During a normal (if there's such a thing!) school day, teachers interact with many children and adults. There's a strong likelihood of incidents where there could be conflict. As professionals

we're expected to "keep our cool" no matter how provocative the other person might be. Others might emotionally derail themselves but we're expected to stay emotionally on track.

Triggers that cause conflict can be either "hot buttons" or precipitating events. A person's hot button is often pressed in a flash or a moment. Typical classroom hot buttons in the classroom is the disruptive child or the one who - without being asked - shouts out answers to the teacher's question. Other hot buttons include the colleague who is abrasive, aloof or arrives late for a meeting.

Precipitating events that trigger conflict could be an overcrowded classroom or an unpleasant work environment. Especially in South African schools, two other precipitating triggers are the huge amounts of paperwork and the volume of school work that has to be done at night and over weekends.

## Tips to "keep your cool" during conflict trigger moments

- Make a list of your personal triggers and ask yourself, "How can I manage them?"
- Count to ten and back again
- Breathe gently in and out
- Be mindful/centre yourself
- Focus on the facts first; afterwards deal with the person's emotional responses
- Keep your voice at a reasonable level
- Keep calm and remember your good manners

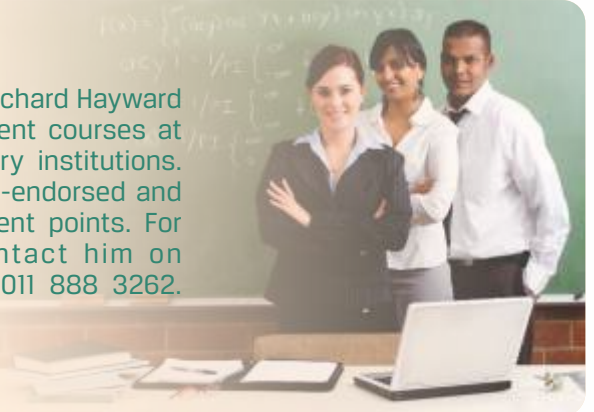


# SACE

South African Council for Educators

*Towards Excellence in Education*

Under the aegis of SAQI, Dr Richard Hayward does professional development courses at schools, colleges and tertiary institutions. Ten of the courses are SACE-endorsed and earn Professional Development points. For more details, please contact him on [rdhayward@yahoo.com](mailto:rdhayward@yahoo.com) or 011 888 3262. Poor schools are sponsored.



This year marks the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the QEN newsletter. The quarterly publication has grown hugely in its readership. The first issue was directed at educators in Gauteng, South Africa. Today it has regular readers - thousands of whom are not educators themselves - on four continents. Thanks for your encouraging comments and input through the decade. Many thanks go to all those who distribute QEN further to colleagues, friends and teacher union members.

Damian Kelly and Woolworths kindly put QEN on their company website. Aubrey Jansen is the graphic designer for each issue where his creative flair is always a delight to the eye. At the SAQI head office is calm and cheerful Vanessa du Toit. Much administrative work is done by her with great efficiency and professionalism.

There's one person who is directly responsible for making this publication possible. That's Paul Harding, the Executive Director of SAQI. He gives exceptional support to QEN as a Social Responsibility project. There are millions of folk who talk about Quality. Far fewer folk do much more than simply talk. They actually walk the talk of Quality. Immense thanks, Paul for all that walking through the years!