



Intimidation ... Why it Works and How to Overcome It!

by CLAUDETTE COOMBS

Threats of professional evaluation, divorce or social exclusion can be enough to change behaviour. Sarcastic comments, criticism, innuendo and ridicule are typical ways that adults create that edge. We may also unjustly feel inferior based on education level, income or family background. At work “insubordination” and “Code of Ethics” are two anxiety causing expressions which can be used inappropriately to silence teachers and suppress opposition. When exposed to such emotional taunting, we minimize the impact by escaping the situation, conceding to the intent or resolving to eliminate the coercion. In each case, we make a decision.

However, not all intimidation is intentionally harmful. Taking on extra tasks because someone asks and we feel obligated still doesn't make it right! Although others benefit, we still feel pressured to give more, in our world of dwindling time and energy.

Why is intimidation used?

Intimidation is a method of controlling behaviour. You do something that you would not otherwise choose to do. Quite simply, it is used because it works!

Why does it work?

Usually there is a power imbalance, real or perceived, which creates a potential for undesirable consequences. Sometimes intimidation is effective because of our character traits. If we prefer to deal with conflict in the most popular way, by avoidance, we can easily be manipulated by someone who uses conflict, anger or superiority. If we are embarrassed by a public scene, we might comply if others are watching. Children asking to have a friend stay for dinner, while the friend is standing there, might thereby ensure a dinner guest. We quickly learn what works!

How can intimidation be overcome?

Explore your own role in the situation. Understand vulnerabilities and take steps to reduce them by strengthening skills and boosting self confidence.

Confirm the intent of the intimidator. At times, physical size, voice and behaviours appear intimidating to

others but that may surprise the intimidator. Clarify how you feel and what triggers those feelings.

Know your rights! Get the facts before conceding or challenging. Engage support. Check with someone before responding. If you have concerns about insubordination, call the NLTA for information or advice. The Code of Ethics for Teachers requires you to confront a colleague before going to a superior about issues, yet it is unreasonable to expect a teacher to confront someone who is already a personal threat. Therefore, written concerns can be delivered to the colleague explaining that a personal confrontation would be counterproductive and these concerns will go to another level for consideration and intervention.

Set rules or limits. Be sure to know where your line is drawn. We sometimes feel that it isn't worth reacting to simple things but, as with stressors, the culmination of little things can affect us more than one big event. Perhaps that is because the injustice and appropriate response are obvious in the big event.

Remove the audience. Set another time to privately meet and discuss potentially volatile or controversial issues and options. If you are uncomfortable speaking alone, have someone with you.

Promote a “Respectful Workplace” policy. Many work environments realize the benefits of policies which deal with conflict, interpersonal interactions and diversities in values and expectations. Encourage your School Development Team to initiate similar policies.

If you live or work in an environment contaminated by intimidation, use the summer to reflect on changing your role in the situation. Gather your supports, then enjoy the holiday knowing that you will return to school with new skills, a positive outlook and resources to create positive change.

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