

# **Supervising in the Time of COVID19**

## **Promoting a Positive Workplace Environment and Navigating Conflict**

Points shared by Laura Smythe, University of Idaho Ombuds  
lsmythe@uidaho.edu

### **Navigating Difficult Conversations:**

- Complaints are value statements. Listen for what a complaining is telling you they want and don't have. Try to steer the conversation toward a positive bent and what they value.
- Stay focused on the present and listen carefully. Try not to let your thoughts get hijacked by your memories and/or past experiences with a particular person or others who remind you of the person in front of you (*I don't think I said this specifically but I touched on it peripherally – feel free not to include this if you'd rather not.*)
- Validate both emotional and factual content – validating the emotional experience of another person is not the same as agreeing with it.
- Let the person who is venting share what they need to without interrupting them. It is very powerful to listen non-defensively and non-judgmentally and then respond to what you have heard. It can also be a very powerful diffuser to allow the other person to run out of steam through their own venting. Venting their own experience is not the same as speaking in a way or behaving in a way that makes you feel safe. You always have the right to ask them to speak to you in a respectful manner so that you can best hear them and because it is your expectation that each of you respect the other.
- All emotions are contagious – when we are weary and stressed – it is easy for others' negativity to overwhelm us. Try not to adopt their discomfort as your own. It is often possible to overwhelm another person, or a room, with your own positivity and hopefulness.
- Be honest about what you can and cannot do. It is often tempting to over-promise in the face of anger or accusations in order to get rid of the person in front of you. This can come back to haunt you because when you over-promise you create a situation in which they may experience additional disappointment and/or distrust.
- Create opportunities to demonstrate that you can be trusted. It is very important to respond to people – even when you don't yet have an answer for them. A lack of response is experienced as disrespectful, hurtful and unsafe.
- Approach anger and hostility with curiosity rather than judgment. There is something in the person's past that explains their response to stress.
- Watch the recipient of your communication! If you see something in their face or in their body language or you hear a surprising tone to their voice, ask about it non-judgmentally so that you can address any misunderstanding that may have occurred in that moment without giving it an opportunity to fester.

## **Building a Cohesive Climate:**

- Practice direct communication with the person with whom you have a misunderstanding. Use a respectful tone of voice and demeanor. Explain what works for you and what doesn't.
- If you feel you have been treated unfairly – recognize that this may not be an intentional act or an indication of how somebody feels about you. Sometimes life plays out unfairly and it is not necessarily a punishment.
- If you feel you have been treated unfairly or disrespectfully, communicate your disappointment and clearly express what you expected (with positive language) as opposed to communicating your disappointment about what you didn't get. Speak only for yourself without alluding to verbiage that suggests something like "all of us agree that...".
- Clarify with your supervisor or supervisee your mutual understanding of priorities and obligations and the scope of authority each of you has so that each employee can rely on the other and can best meet expectations.
- As a supervisor, please be transparent and consistent with your expectations and values so that all who report to you understand how best to meet your expectations – a guide book to you.
- As a supervisor, PLEASE assume the credibility and validity of a concern expressed to you even if it is about something that does not concern you and/or if it is something with which you have no experience. Most supervisees are very reluctant to share concerns with their supervisor. If they do – they usually have a concern that it has taken them some considerable energy to decide to bring to you and they need to know that you care about the fact that they have a concern. Consider how the two of you can address what they are asking for.