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De-escalation skills in student complaint handling

Empowering students, ensuring fairness



Monday, 22 June 2026

2:00pm – 3:30pm (AEST)

STARTING POINT

A simple definition

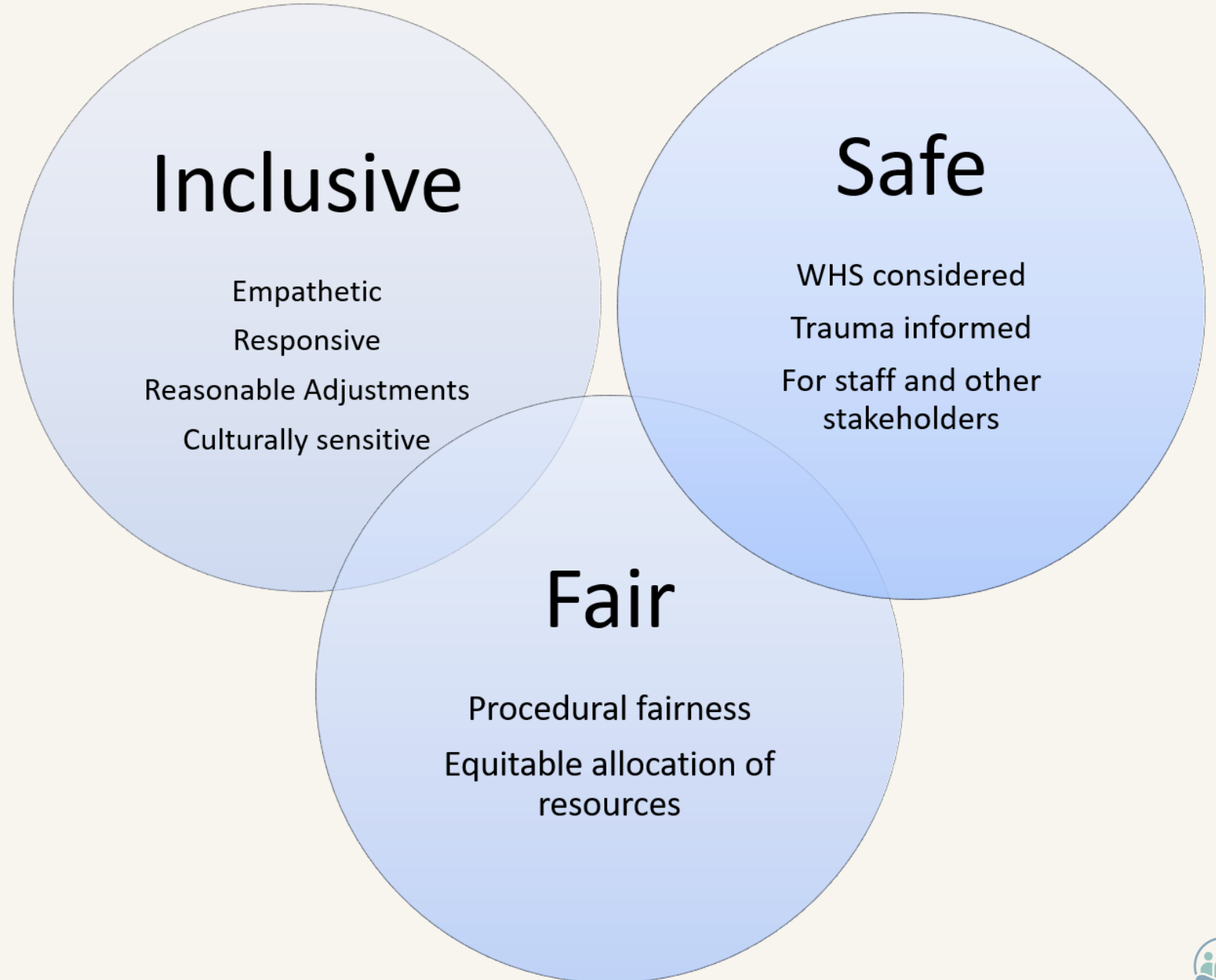
De-escalation is the work of moving an interaction from threat and heat towards safety, clarity and choice.

- × **Not compliance.**
- × **Not giving in.**
- × **Not fixing everything.**



My principles for engaging

When deciding what approach to take, use these principles as a guide.



Check your oxygen first – we don't have to carry it all, all of the time.



- Am I already heightened?
- Can I stay unhooked?
- Do I have the bandwidth now?

We cannot steady someone else if we are already outside our own window of capacity.

Can you share the load of the conversation?



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Creating the conditions for progress. *Not progressing yet.*

Fight/ Flight/ Freeze

Overcome by strong emotions/ Impulsive

Sometimes physically unable to communicate

Unable to process large amounts of information

Memory inaccessible

External focus of blame

Rushed decision making

Rigid responses (black and white thinking)

Seeking in the moment safety

De-escalation

Calm and Considered state

Emotional regulation

Considered action

Self reflection

Open to changing direction

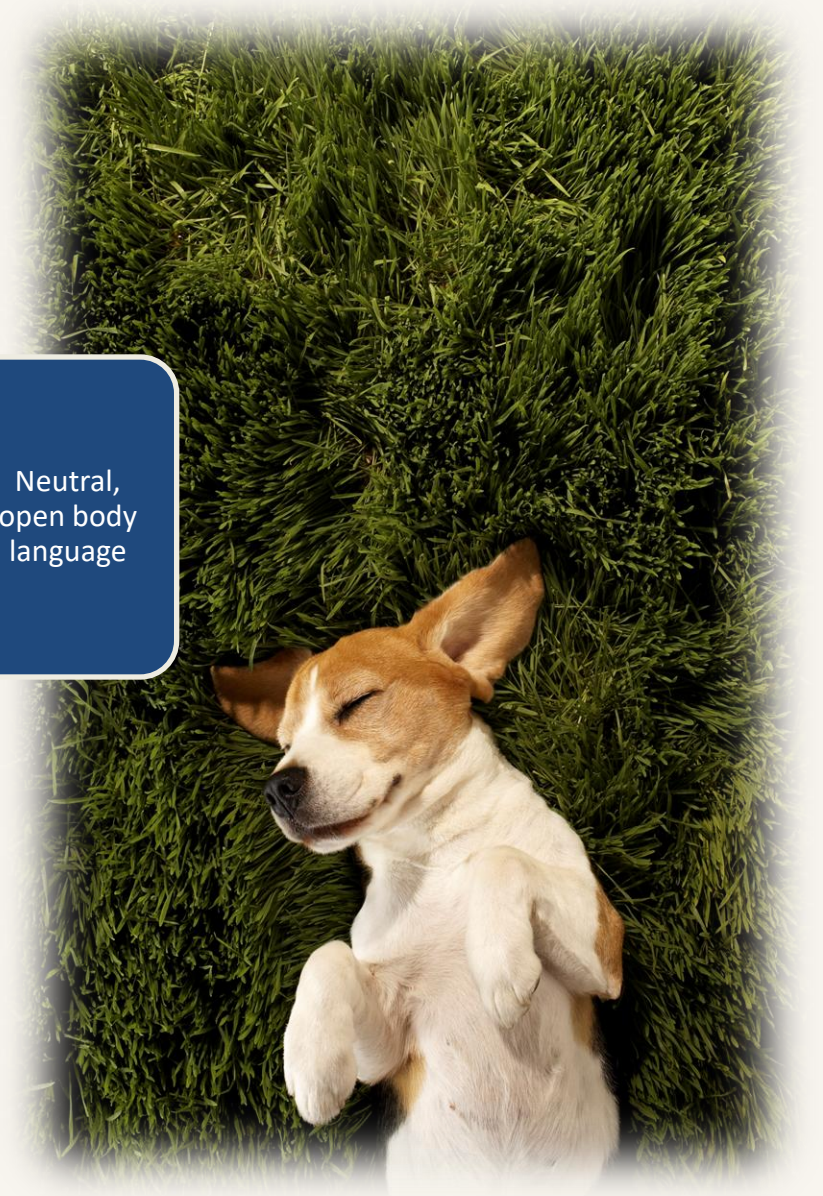
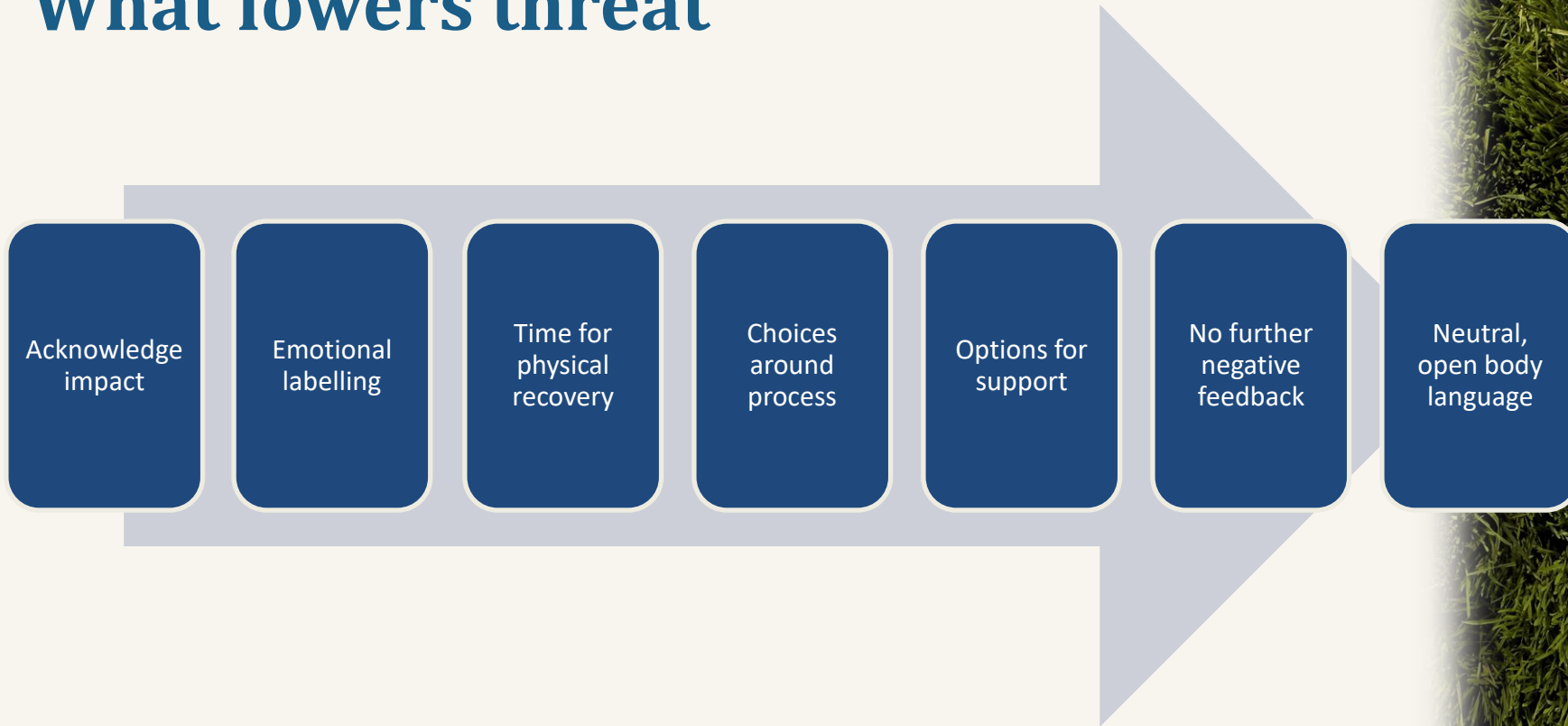
Better memory recall and consideration of relevant facts

Ability to listen and empathise

Future focused decision-making



What lowers threat



Remember

The goal is not to win the moment, It is to create a better environment for conversation.



Validation is not agreement

You can acknowledge the impact and still hold the decision, process or timeframe.

“I can see how much this matters to you.”

“This decision has a significant impact on you”

“I’m here to understand what’s happened”

“It must be disappointing when you don’t have your work recognised.”

“Thank you for talking me through your concerns so openly”.



Empathy

Attention

Respect



Speaking to our five core concerns

Appreciation

Affiliation

Autonomy

Status

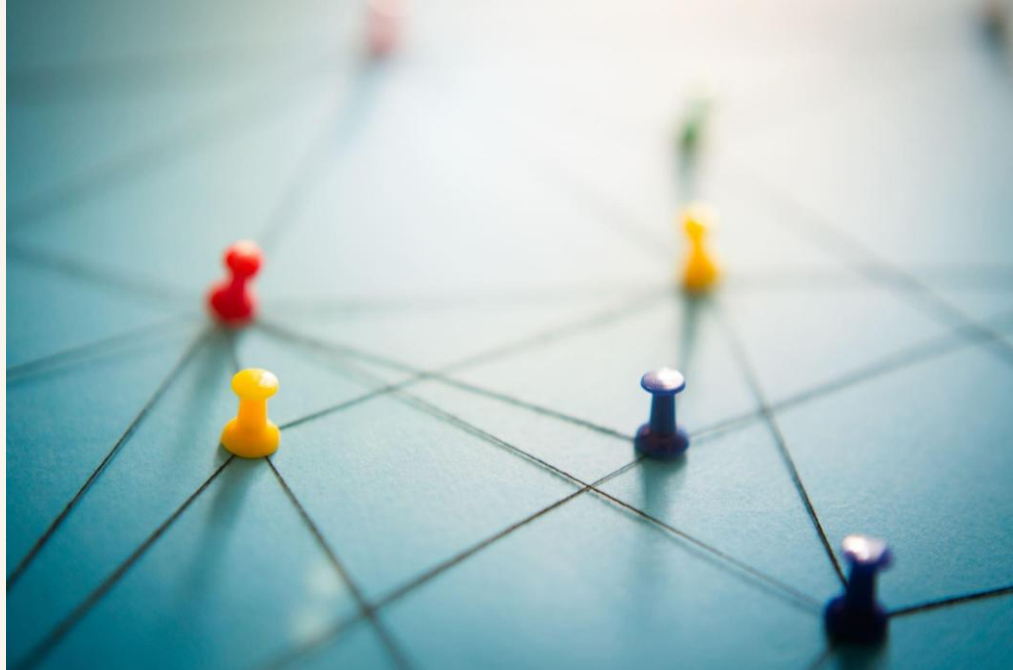
Role

Using our language to ensure that other feels like they have the above emotional needs met.

Fisher, R., & Shapiro, D. (2005). Beyond reason: Using emotions as you negotiate. Viking Press.



Independent and supportive



I can help you understand the process. **While I cannot advocate for you, I'm happy to connect you with some services that can.**

The line is narrow. Make it explicit.



A boundary script that helps

Acknowledge impact

Name your role or limit

Offer a pathway

Clear limits reduce false hope and later disappointment.

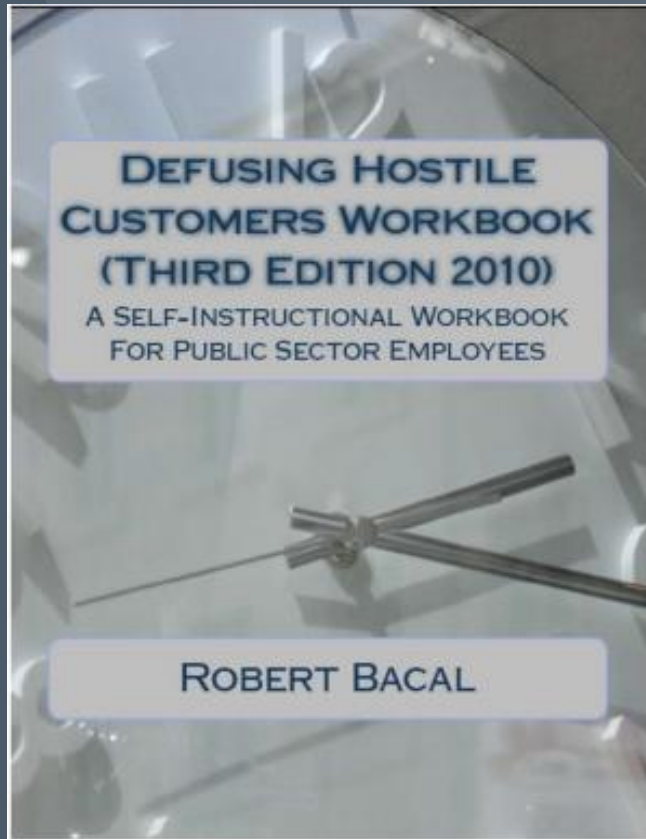


Avoiding the Hook - A sequence to fall back on



Robert Bacal's CARP framework keeps the conversation focused and within limits.





CARP Model – Robert Bacal

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CARP method developed by Canadian psychologist and workplace consultant Robert Bacal. CARP stands for:

- Control – taking control of your response and the situation and not getting drawn into arguments
- Acknowledge – allowing the person to speak and acknowledging their feelings
- Refocus – shifting the focus from the way the person feels to the issues
- Problem solve – moving on to discussing and addressing the issues.

The CARP model is designed to deal with angry and hostile behaviour, but it can be useful for addressing other types of emotional behaviour too.

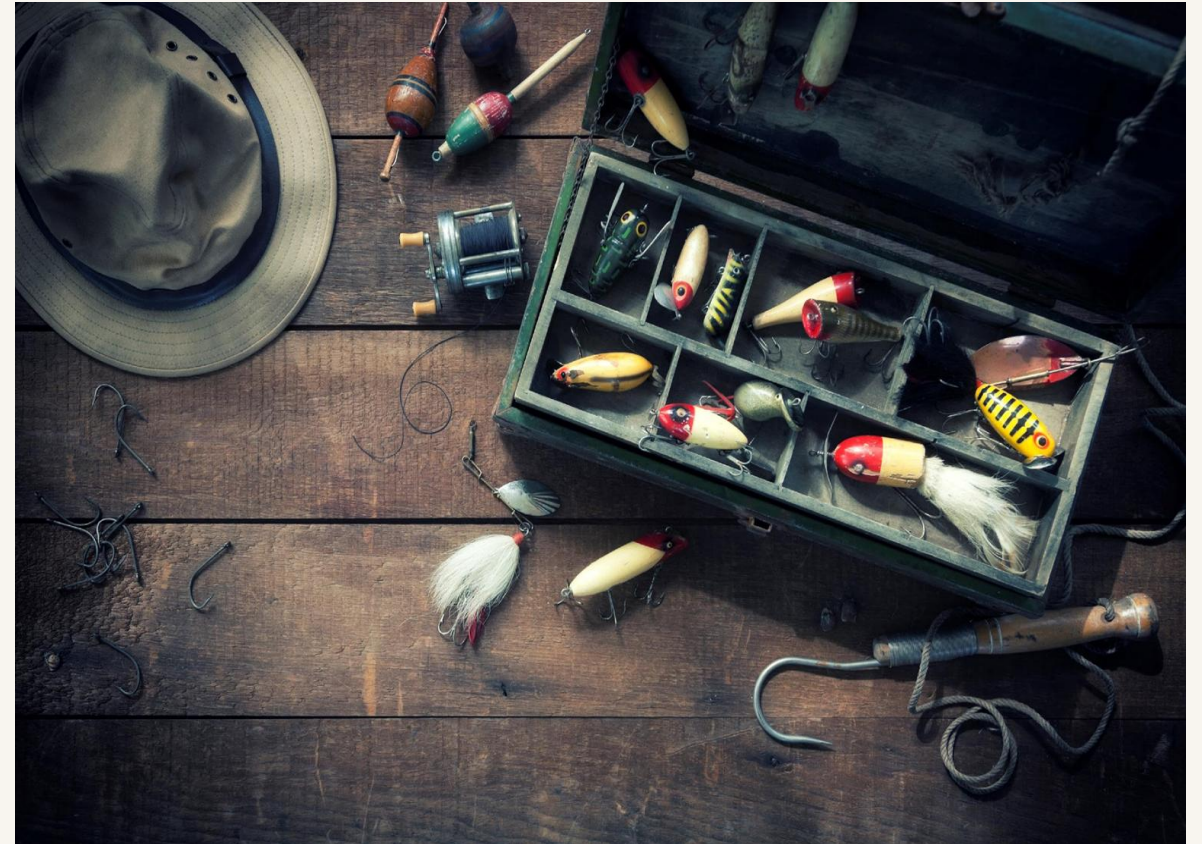
Responding to anger due to prior negative experiences.

1. Listen
2. Don't engage in an argument (don't take the bait)
3. Acknowledge that their feelings (some people feel that way)
4. Express that you will be putting in effort and that you're there to help
5. Focus on what can be done by you next – here's how I can help.

When the bait appears

- Pause and control yourself.
- Acknowledge the concern underneath.
- Refocus on what you can do.

I've been here before. You guys take forever and you basically have no powers. I mean you don't even know what you are doing most of the time. Every time I call there's someone new in the role. How long have you been doing this anyway?



You do not have to answer the question designed to hook you.



I-STATEMENTS

Set limits without threat language – I statement

I notice...

I am concerned...

I need...

Here is what we can do...

An I-statement keeps the focus on the work you need to do, not the person.



I-STATEMENTS

How to Construct an “I” Statement:

- Start with “I” to own your perspective: “I notice...” or “I feel...”
- Name the specific situation or behavior: “I notice that the conversation is getting off-track...”
- Describe the impact or effect: “...and I’m concerned that we may not get to your main issues.”
- State what you need or prefer: “...I’d like to focus on understanding what outcome you’re hoping for today.”
- Refer to policies, procedures and external influences as needed.

An I-statement keeps the focus on the work you need to do, not the person.



Limits with care

Time

Scope

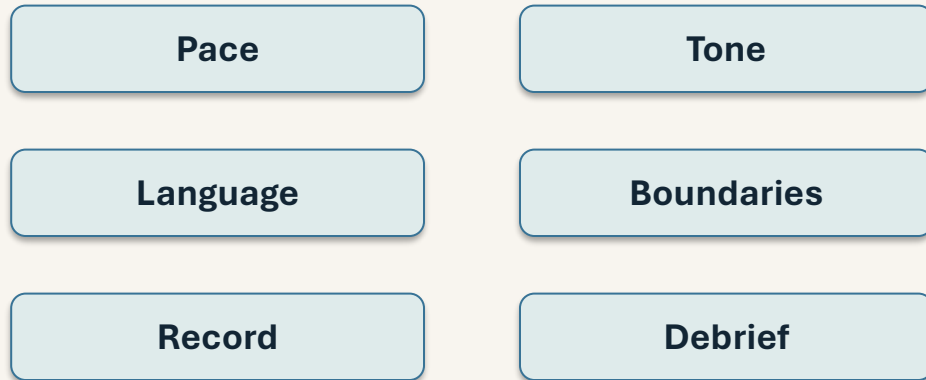
Conduct

Boundaries are not the opposite of de-escalation. They are part of it. They provide structure and focus and ensure that the relationship stays on track.



AFTER THE INTERACTION

Circle of control



We can do the right things and still not control the outcome.



“By focusing on what we can control, we can develop a sense of inner calm and resilience that helps us to cope with the challenges of life.” Donald Robertson (2013, p. 59)



Take with you

Calm before content

Set and reinforce boundaries

Check your oxygen first

Tools not rules, use the core principles to decide next steps.



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