

Crucial Conversations: How do you spell R-E-S-P-E-C-T?

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On Saturdays I teach primary-aged children English. I almost quit this job because each week, the school Headmaster would storm into my class, scream at the kids and disrupt my lesson. This behavior bothered me; I was angry and upset, as were the kids. However, I was scared to say anything because he was my boss. I was a new teacher and I figured he had the right—after all, he was the Headmaster.

Still, his actions continued to bother me. I had put in time and effort to develop trust within my class and as a result, students were learning and engaging with the material. His behavior was upsetting them and me and undermining my hard work. So, I decided to try to address the situation. Initially I thought, “Well, I will march into the Headmaster’s office and let him know exactly how I feel and he will see the error of his ways.” Problem solved.

Fortunately, I had the insight that villainizing him was probably only going to inflame an already volatile situation. So, I picked up my *Crucial Conversations* notes for guidance. I had experienced both silence – wanting to quit and feeling powerless to say anything – and violence – thinking that telling him exactly what his errors were would resolve the issue. I realized I needed to explore a mature way to deal with the situation.

I asked myself, “Why would a decent, rational human being act this way?” Maybe he believes intimidating children and generating fear is the way a teacher is supposed to behave. Or perhaps he is stressed and does not realize the implications of his behavior.

I realized he had employed me as a qualified teacher and should respect me for my time and efforts. I also realized it was my responsibility to create and protect an environment where kids feel safe in order to carry out the purpose for which he hired me. I liked my job and I deserved respect and autonomy.

So, I positioned myself near the door and when he came in ready to do his thing I stopped him and said, “I realize you want to speak with the children, please wait until the end of the lesson.” I was firm, clear, and respectful. He said “Ah, sure” and left without further ado! When he returned to give his announcement he did so with a soft and respectful voice. There was an instant change.

In the last six months, I have continued to hold my position respectfully and firmly. He appreciates the control I have of my environment and he understands I respect him but I do not want him to interrupt my class. I did not fight him or try to convince him, I simply and clearly asked for respect.

Last Saturday, he entered my classroom. I saw no animosity or anger in him toward the students or me. One of the students asked for his help and he was kind, gentle, and welcoming toward the child. He played with him! The Headmaster laughed! This turnaround is far more than I could have hoped for and is truly worth celebrating.

