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Manage Hot Moments

Hot moments can be defined as the instances in class, cocurricular settings, or department meetings when reactions are strong and emotions are high (Faculty Focus, 2016), usually in response to something that was said or done by one of the participants. These moments of conflict can occur in any environment, even when the instructor or facilitator is not expecting the reaction based on the discussion content.

When conflict arises, we may feel an urge to ignore it and quickly move on. However, it is important that we avoid doing so because this can leave students, staff, faculty, and leaders feeling like they have not been heard or that the transgression is acceptable behavior. It is also important that we are not dismissive of team members, even if we do not agree with them. If you do not feel comfortable addressing the conflict or tension in the moment, share that you will revisit it at the next class or meeting and then be sure that you do (Warren, 2016).

Begin by Asking Questions

One way to effectively handle hot moments is to begin by asking questions to clarify. For example, “What I hear you saying is _____. Is that correct? Can you provide us with some information on how you came to that conclusion?”

Remind Team Members of Community Agreements

It is important to collaborate with members on setting up community agreements at the start of each course. See our implementation guide in this module, Create Community Agreements. When a hot moment arises, ask questions to clarify and invite participants to respond. Then remind everyone of the community agreements that were set up at the start of the semester. For example, you may say, “Let’s review our community agreements, which state _____. I’d like you to keep that in mind as we continue the conversation.”

Depersonalize Remarks

Invite the group to respond to the content of the comment or action, not the commenter specifically. Ask for members to share alternate experiences or to offer similar opinions in different words (Brookfield, 2015). Consider modeling responses, such as the following:

- “My reaction was _____, because . . .”
- “I wanted to respond _____.” (Brookfield, 2015)

When Emotions Are Strong

A common response to strong emotions or hot moments is to ignore them and move on. If it does not feel comfortable to continue the discussion by reminding members of community agreements and depersonalizing the remarks, consider a few moments of silence. This can



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allow for a cooling-off period before revisiting the discussion. In the quiet time, consider asking members to write out their thoughts, emotions, and reactions (Faculty Focus, 2016).

If members of the group get into a disagreement or someone says something that is potentially inflammatory and you do not feel comfortable addressing the conflict or tension in the moment, consider taking one or more of the following steps:

- First, take a moment to decide whether to address the issue with the whole group at once, address it with the person(s) after the class or meeting, or raise it the next time you meet.
- Acknowledge the disagreement and let members know the steps you will take. For example, “It sounds like you both have some passionate thoughts about this topic. Let’s schedule time after class or the meeting to discuss them.” Or “It seems like there are diverse viewpoints about this topic. Let’s plan to discuss it in more detail during our next meeting” (Warren, 2016). Before the next meeting, think through your own thoughts and feelings about the interaction and the topic. Then plan how to best address the situation with the members of your group. Your institution may have a diversity officer, diversity office, or department chair who may be able to help you in planning the best course of action before the next session.
- Interrupt the action and ask members to reflect on their thoughts and emotions for a set period before discussing as a group (Faculty Focus, 2016). Consider asking them to write out their thoughts or feelings as they reflect on the situation. For example, “It sounds like there are some different opinions on this topic. Let’s take a minute to gather our thoughts and to reflect on what has just been shared.”
- Look to clarify everyone’s points. Often people say things that may be misunderstood because they are struggling with understanding a new perspective or are feeling that their viewpoints are being challenged. Try saying, “What do you mean by ___?” or “I heard you saying ___. Is that what you meant to say?” Ask with genuine curiosity and look to understand by using a conversational not confrontational tone.

Further Tips for De-Escalating a Situation

There may be times when you encounter hot moments that require additional strategies or assistance. You can find a document with additional resources on the Implementation Resources page, taken from a variety of sources that you might find informative—but it is always best to refer to your leadership and institution’s policies and procedures on how to handle conflict on your campus.



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References

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Warren, L. (2016). *Managing hot moments in the classroom*. Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University.
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