

Listening for Emotions & Acknowledging Feelings

We are all emotional beings and no-one can take away what another person feels – even if we don't believe they are justified in their feelings, they are still feeling them, and these feelings can be very powerful. So in a conflict situation, if we want to try and calm it, we need to acknowledge the power of these feelings. Acknowledging feelings does not mean that we have to accept the behaviours that those feelings generate, but it is the first step towards having a calmer, more rational conversation. So how do we do this in a possibly fraught situation?

We need to start by acknowledging the power of emotions rather than confronting the difficult behaviour head-on. We can do this by following the steps below:

- If someone is exhibiting angry behaviour, don't try to shut this down instantly. Allow them to vent for a few seconds (obviously as long as you are in no physical danger). Try not to act defensively, as this is likely to escalate the situation. Try to listen for and focus on the emotions they are exhibiting, rather than the words they are saying.
- Let the person know that they have successfully communicated their feelings to you. E.g. "You are clearly very angry/upset about this " or "You sound really frustrated about it all"
- Use open questions to help them explore why they're feeling like that e.g. "What's led up to you feeling like this?" or "How did all this start?"
- Try reflecting back some of what they've said to help them feel understood e.g. "It sounds like you've had a really hard time of it, and I can understand why you're feeling really angry".
- Once the person is calmer restate the issue as you have understood it. E.g. "So it feels to you like everyone's trying to stop you doing what you want to?"
- You may need to go through these steps more than once, particularly if the person is not in a good state to listen. Be firm but supportive. Acknowledgment is not the same as ignoring what needs to be done and/or changed.
- Once the person has felt acknowledged and listened to they are far more likely to be receptive to an explanation of why they may not be able to do what they want to e.g. gain access to a particular piece of grazing or force someone to mend a fence.

The key to de-escalating conflict is not to insist on challenging the other person's "truth" but to accept that this may very well be the way they see things. This is not the same as agreeing with them, rather accepting that they may see a situation very differently from yourself.

If you challenge someone whilst they are really angry or experiencing that 'red mist' moment, they are likely to experience this as a personal attack and respond defensively, by attacking back. The drive not to back down and therefore lose face is a very strong one, and the chances of them being able to see your point of view when they are feeling like this are extremely slim. Far better, to listen and try to understand, until such time as they have become calmer. Then explain what your issues are. Don't say 'you're wrong' but focus on what you feel and think about the situation.