

CATHOLIC TEACHERS' **SAFER SPACES SERIES**

Intent vs. Impact

It is not uncommon for people to do or say something with the most honest and best of intentions, only to have those words and actions be received by others in an unanticipated way. Our praise or compliment of someone may be construed as sarcastic or not genuine. A simple oversight in not including someone on an email may be taken as a slight or attempt at exclusion. Our offers of assistance to someone may be seen as patronizing. It is the difference between the intent behind our words and actions, and the impact they have on another person.

Although we may have good intentions in our conversations, we cannot know or assume that the individual(s) we are communicating with are receiving our message(s) as intended. Our communications are filtered by the receiver's past experiences, colouring how they interpret what we are saying and doing. This can make having conversations on complex or polarizing topics even more difficult.

In this context, often what we say is not as important as how our words and actions make other people feel. In fact, when a school board or the Ontario College of Teachers investigates a complaint against a teacher, the intent of the action is often less important than the impact.

Navigating Difficult Conversations

In **Intent vs. Impact (When Communication Goes Awry)**, Ed Batista points out, "It is through a genuine and sincere willingness to listen, clarify, and learn that individuals involved in discussions about serious topics, such as building safer spaces, can successfully create such an environment."

Batista provides the following reflection points on the difficulty of navigating potentially difficult conversations:

When Delivering a Message

- The intent behind our message is unknown to the other person unless we make it explicit and verify that it is understood.
- When speaking in person, the content of our message includes not only what we say, but also the entirety of our behaviour throughout the exchange (e.g., facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, speech patterns, eye contact, etc.). All of these factors contribute to our impact on the other person.
- When communicating through any other channel – whether synchronously via phone or text, or asynchronously via email – the absence of this additional data will also contribute to our impact on the other person.
- If the exchange goes awry, explaining our positive intentions after the fact will not undo the negative impact on the other person. At that point, stop explaining and start empathizing.

When Receiving a Message

- The intent behind the message is unknown unless it has been made explicit – and until then we may automatically make up an explanation, and it is likely to be self-protective.
- When speaking in person, we generally examine the other person's behavior for clues to help us better understand the full meaning of their words – and again, we will automatically make up explanations for their behavior that are likely to be self-protective.
- When communicating through any other channel, synchronously or asynchronously, we often actively invent behaviors that do not exist to make our explanations more coherent. For example, we read emails or texts in a "tone of voice," or we envision the facial expressions of the other party on a phone call.
- If the exchange goes awry, remind ourselves that this was *not* the other person's intent.

What Should I Do If Someone Says That My Words or Actions Have Caused Harm?

If a student or a colleague shares with you that your words have had the impact of causing harm, listen first. In the resource, [CLA\(I\)M: How to respond when you've caused harm](#), School Mental Health Ontario acknowledges that:

“It can be difficult to find out as an educator, student, or school staff member that you caused harm if you did not intend to... Having your attention called into a situation that has had a negative impact can help you discover why your behaviour is harmful and how to change it. It is an opportunity to set aside your understanding of the situation and reflect and act on the feedback you have received and will help you avoid causing further harm in the future.”

The following are sample responses if someone says that you have caused harm:

- “I’m going to take some time to sit with this and really try to take in what’s being said.”
- “Thank you for sharing that with me. I appreciate you trusting me enough to share this feedback.”
- “Whether I meant to or not, I hurt [impacted person/group] by [what’s being raised as hurtful].”
- “Thank you for helping me learn and grow.”

Safer spaces require *intention* and *attention*. They also require a commitment to growth and for each person to exercise restraint and regulate themselves when they speak. This requires ongoing professional and personal reflection about the impact of the words we choose.



>> Additional Resources

See other resources in the Catholic Teachers' Safer Spaces Series, including:

- [Safer Spaces? Braver Spaces? - Our Collective Responsibility](#)
- [Understanding Trauma](#)
- [Allyship & Beyond](#)

See other resources in the Catholic Teachers' Mental Health and Wellness Series, including:

- [Understanding Anxiety and Depression](#)
- [Strategies to Promote Mental Health and Wellness](#)
- [Additional Resources - Mental Health and Wellness](#)