



ISSUE SPOTTING – 5 QUICK TIPS

1. Don't take it personally

People coming to you with problems and complaints may often be upset or agitated. Their distress may well have nothing to do with you as an administrator, but is simply a byproduct of their familiarity and proximity to the issue in question. To the maximum extent possible, try not to get defensive when they complain and do not jump to conclusions about their causes or solutions. Thank the person for reporting the problem – better you know about it than not, especially if it turns out to be a misunderstanding – and then set about collecting the facts.

2. Never act on a complaint without hearing all sides of the story

Many complaints and problems stem from people perceiving the same set of facts in different ways. Get as full a picture of any situation as possible by telling all involved that the issue has been brought to your attention and that you need to collect more information on it. Avoid accusations while gathering information, simply inform people in a low-key manner that an issue has been brought to your attention and you are attempting to collect basic information about it.

3. Follow up!

Just as problems can arise from a difference in perspective, a meeting with someone bringing a complaint to you can be remembered differently by different parties. If you have concerns that your advice was not clearly heard, send a short note or email about your meeting summarizing what was said and what subsequent actions were discussed. Good news can be put in writing, but bad news should be delivered in person.

4. Never attribute to malice that which incompetence will explain

The person bringing a complaint to you may have concerns or biases which are deeply rooted and possibly irrelevant to the actual issue. Their own opinions of another individual or group may color their interpretation of what happened. Sometimes what seems like intentionally bad behavior is actually the result of inattention, inaction, miscommunication or ineptitude. These may require dealing with in their own right, but do not assume malicious intent without clarifying the situation. Ask questions and repeat back answers to confirm your understanding.

5. Say what you'll do and do what you say

Once you have decided on a course of action, no matter what it is, follow through on it when you say you will. Nothing will compromise your credibility more than to make commitments you do not fulfill or to declare boundaries you do not ultimately enforce. Stick to your plan or people may end up doubting you in future situations, making your job more difficult in the long run. Follow up on your actions as you do them, keeping each party apprised of developments. Leaving distraught or anxious people hanging can make matters worse – what they imagine might be happening during that time is often worse than the reality.

