Chapter 11

Creating Safe Meetings:
A Practical Guide to Facilitating Safe, Positive and Productive Meetings

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ABSTRACT

Professionals entering the fields of education and human services will spend much of their career engaged in meetings. The vast majority of these meetings will be in small group or private sessions. It is in these environments that sexual misconduct or other crimes of opportunity can easily occur if a professional does not take proactive steps to create a positive meeting environment. This chapter will discuss the vital importance of creating safe meetings so a professional can oversee not only a safe meeting for all those in attendance but also a productive and positive meeting designed to meet the needs of their students and clients.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of what many would describe as a decrease in basic civility combined with an increase in the pace of life in North America has had a profound impact on culture. The combination of decreased civility and increased pace can make meetings with clients, students, family members and even co-workers more tumultuous and, at times, unsafe. In this chapter the strategies for creating a safe meeting space, specifically in the education and human service sectors, will be explored. For the purposes of this chapter, a person working in either of these fields will simply be referred to as a professional for no other reason that the simple economy of words.

The author has 28 years of experience in the safety and security field and has spent countless hours helping people prepare for potentially high risk meetings. This practical life experience is combined with methods described in other related fields to create these recommendations. During the course of this chapter, the reader will develop a clearer understanding of the importance of situational awareness, knowing meeting attendees, determining meeting locations and learning how to create a meeting space.

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that supports positive behaviors. With this knowledge, professionals will be better equipped to facilitate both positive and productive meetings to enhance not only their own personal safety but also the safety of all those in attendance.

While much work has been done in the fields of ethical behaviors for educators and human service professionals in the science of environmental design and its impact on human emotions and behaviors, little published work can be found to act as a practical guide for professionals seeking to conduct safe meetings. Those already working in the educational and human services fields apply many of these principles after acquiring some professional training or adopting methods through trial and error. This chapter aims to affirm strategies already adopted and hopefully bring a few new considerations to light.

Additionally, there is much to be learned by applying the strategies and concepts developed in other fields of study. Many of the strategies discussed here have been well-vetted and embraced by a broad range of both Federal and State agencies across the United States as well as fields of study such as Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) and the Code of Ethics that governs the American Psychological Association (APA).

Many of the principles applied to the creation of safer meeting spaces come from a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of environmental factors called CPTED, Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design. While CPTED’s origin is in crime prevention, the CPTED concepts readily extended beyond that. Today CPTED is known as a set of principles that are used to develop environments which support positive human behavior in all types of settings such as parks, communities, public buildings, homes and places of business. CPTED’s core is founded in the understanding of human behavior and how the human mind responds to different environments. One of CPTED’s goals is to create environments that support positive human behavior and deter negative or inappropriate behaviors (Cozens, Saville & Hillier, 2005).

KEEPING MEETINGS FREE OF MISCONDUCT

People moving into the fields of education and human services are by nature those who love to meet with people and help them maximize their potential. These are the very hands-on professions that demand frequent meetings with students, clients, family members and professional peers. While the focus of this book is on sexual misconduct, the concepts discussed in this chapter will not only apply to creating positive meeting space to avoid sexual misconduct or assault but equally apply to all types of scenarios that may turn a meeting from a positive meeting to an unsafe meeting.

Professionals often find themselves in a one-one or small group meetings, the very heart of a professional’s work. These smaller more intimate settings are also ideal for unprofessional sexual misconduct to occur. Like many unprofessional behaviors, sexual misconduct often occurs in settings that permit the behavior to go unchecked (Cornish & Clark, 2003). A professional meeting with a coworker or client in private, behind closed doors with one of them having sexual feelings for the other, can rapidly deteriorate into inappropriate behavior. These unsafe behaviors are generally ones that exploit the opportunity. By consistently applying safe and proven meeting practices, the opportunity for the professional to be sexually harassed or act upon their own inappropriate sexual feelings can be significantly reduced. In addition, the application of safe meeting practices can reduce the chances of other types of inappropriate behavior from occurring such as verbal abuse, physical assault, terroristic threats or inappropriate touching.