

Target Denial by Finding the Door to Safety

By Erika Leonard, Manager of California Services

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"He's really upset about his tax return. He's yelling about how incompetent I am, and he's calling me all kinds of names. He somehow thinks that I'm responsible because I'm the CPA who prepared his forms. He's really lost control. He's threatening me."

A woman in one of our Fullpower Introductory workshops was explaining a situation she had experienced on the job that had felt dangerous and had involved verbal attack.

In the context of practicing skills for keeping ourselves safe in the face of verbal attack, we give participants the opportunity to set up scenarios that, in the real world, could become dangerous. These scenarios are relevant to their own life situations. Practicing methods of coping with challenges in a place where we feel safe and successful can increase our confidence and competence when facing a similar situation on our own.

In this case, the woman had dealt successfully with the real-life challenge but wanted to explore other options for dealing with a similar situation because the experience had left her with a heightened sense of isolation and vulnerability in her office.

The instructors asked the woman to explain more about the environment: Where in the room is she? Where is the angry man? Who else is around, and how far away are they? How far away is the nearest phone? Our goal is to get to safety as quickly as possible, and thinking clearly about questions like these can help us achieve that goal.

When the woman pointed out the location of the office door in her scenario, the door which led out of the building into a public area, one of the instructors asked, "Is there anything that would keep you from walking out the door if you felt like that was the safest choice?"

The woman looked surprised. She considered the question and replied thoughtfully, "Well, no, I guess not. I wouldn't want to leave my office -- after all, it's **my** office. But if I felt like I had to leave in order to stay

safe... I guess I could...of **course** I would." She had not previously considered the option of leaving, but just a moment of consideration established it as a valid option that she would feel confident in choosing. Many of us have pictures in our minds about situations that could feel frightening or dangerous. Forgetting to include the door or other exits in that picture is a common oversight, perhaps because we are so frequently told throughout our lives either that we **cannot** leave or that we **deserve** to be able to stay.

For example, schoolchildren for generations have been told that they cannot get up and leave the classroom. This obviously makes a great deal of sense the vast majority of the time; the well-being of the students and the effective running of the classroom both demand that movements in and out of the room be carefully controlled. At the same time, this means that children spend years dealing with conflicts large and small without giving much consideration to the option of leaving the room or assessing when leaving might be the safest option.

Alternatively, we may be resistant to leave a space because we have a sense of ownership over it -- we **deserve** to stay! Why should we have to leave our own office? Our own home? Our own car? When our sense of entitlement is so strong that it overshadows our awareness that the safest choice is to leave, this feeling is working against our best interests.

In a variety of situations, walking away from a problem does not make it better. However, in situations that feel dangerous, leaving and getting help can be an excellent option. We can reacquaint ourselves with this power by noticing the doors in our lives -- doors from the home, doors from the office, doors from the car, doors from destructive relationships -- and acknowledging that we have the power to use them if we feel like we have to in order to stay safe. We can imagine different scenarios in which we take care of ourselves by leaving and getting help.

For the children in our lives, we can acknowledge the power to leave in our conversations about dealing with conflicts, and we can help them understand the role that school rules play in their decisions. For example, if a child is dealing with chronic, low-level bullying in the classroom, the child deserves support in methods of dealing with the problem that don't involve leaving the room. At the same time, the supporting adult can say, "Let's say you were having this problem with a group of kids at a park, not in a classroom. Would you have different choices there?" Clearly, the child would, because the school rules are not a factor at the park. Conversations like this, including role-playing of options, help children explore methods of making safe and appropriate choices for themselves.

Finally, though we never recommend planting scary ideas in the minds of children, young people often hear of school shootings and other upsetting situations. In many cases of school violence, quickly and quietly leaving has proven to be an option that has kept many people safe. As a child's awareness of school violence grows, he or she can benefit from being told, "It's important to follow the school rules about staying in your seat or in the room. But, if you ever felt like you **had** to leave the room in order to stay safe and to get help, you can do that as long as you go directly to a grown-up and tell them what's happening." As always, we recommend following up this kind of conversation with the opportunity to practice -- in this case, simply standing up, walking away, going to a grown-up and saying, "I need help."