

# If it's important to you, it's important to me

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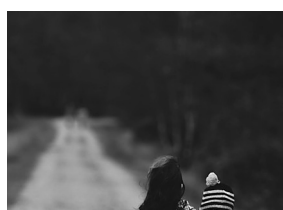
*"Emotional invalidation is when a person's thoughts and feelings are rejected, ignored, or judged. Invalidation is emotionally upsetting for anyone, but particularly hurtful for someone who is emotionally sensitive. Invalidation disrupts relationships and creates emotional distance. When people invalidate themselves, they create alienation from the self and make building their identity very challenging."*  
(Hall 2012)

I've written previously about [validating resistance](#) and the importance of taking time to listen to colleagues with differing viewpoints. All too often, in the busy world of leadership, it's easier to use personal experience to inform, connect, and make decisions, rather than take the time to unpack challenges thoroughly. But, what if the personal experience is at odds with the emotions being displayed by a colleague? What if they're reacting to something in a way you wouldn't because you have a much different experience? There were many times throughout my teaching career in schools where I was called upon to support a colleague. Often, displays of emotion were heightened and irrational thinking had taken over as the cortisol levels rose, forcing my colleague into a stress response. In this situation, a good leader could be said to be one that listens, analyses, and offers support in order to move the colleague forward. However, I wonder how many times leaders have found themselves in the position where they are judging a colleague's reaction to a situation, rather than stepping back in order to connect and problem solve collaboratively. Here's a scenario:



Teacher A (a Beginning Teacher) is upset about the behaviour of the students she teaches. There has been a notable decline since the beginning of the week, due to lack of outdoor time and disruption of the calendar because of inclement weather. Her students are making choices that seem to show they do not value the learning or the learning environment. Teacher A is visibly upset and harbouring a growing feeling of failure. She turns to Teacher B (a senior teacher with many years' experience) for support.

Pause and take a moment to ask, what you would do in this situation. How can you reassure your colleague without over-sheltering her from some of the hard truths she has yet to learn? As an experienced professional, it certainly crossed my mind that it was not something that Teacher A needed to be or should have been particularly upset about. It is common for student behaviour to decline when outdoor time is limited. One of the first expressions I found myself thinking was, 'stir-crazy.' But is that okay? Is it right for me to dismiss the feeling of my colleague because she is disappointed in the choices being made by her students, when my experience tells me it's common? Of course not.



Whether I, as a leader, would be upset by the same scenario is not particularly relevant. The fact remains, she is, and has turned to me for support — not to be told it's 'one of those things' and to 'brush it off.' Furthermore, other issues the teacher may be experiencing are not being taken into account. For example, it's the middle of the second term and she is a Beginning Teacher in her first year at a new school. She has also just finished writing reports for the first time in her career, and feels like she has had to rewrite them all after peer review. Everything is new, each inquiry, each topic, each success and failure. She is well within her rights to be utterly overwhelmed.

Although we choose to lead in different ways and by using different leadership models to inform our practice, there are many simple strategies we can draw from.

Listen — Let them vent and let them speak freely. Sometimes our colleagues just need to let off steam and share their frustration. Offer nothing but your thanks for their honesty.

Ask yourself what they are saying and whether it's what has really upset them — Often, we begin to share our frustration with a situation, but it is merely the 'straw that broke the camel's back', masking several other issues that, given time, may rise to the surface.

Do not invalidate — You may have been through a similar experience and survived, but dismissing their emotions as unnecessary, or, offering an 'it'll-be-fine' response could be detrimental to the moving forward process.

Wait — Do they need you to actively help them in this situation or simply listen? Instead of leading in with, 'Well, this is what I'd do...' ask 'Would you like some advice or help with this?' Allow them to make the decision to take the next stage of help.

Phrases like, 'In my experience,' and, 'Well, I would do it like this,' are sometimes fantastic in helping a colleague or friend move forward. But just how easily we forget we were there once, too. For some, it was many years ago; for others just a couple, but all of us have felt the overwhelming feelings associated with unfamiliar experiences in a high-stress environment. Pause, listen, validate, and wait...

## References and Further Reading

Hall, Karyn. "Understanding Invalidation". Psych Central.com. N.p., 2012. [Web](#) source.

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## **James Hopkins**

[James Hopkins](#)'s passion lies in Modern Learning Practice. He helped in the development and planning of N4L's Pond, being invited to participate in thinking and learning with other Pioneer Educators, as well as writing several pieces for N4L about Pond. James developed Learning Network New Zealand's app for both iOS and Android, incorporating interactivity and communication within the app to compliment the business model used by the company. He also developed the online community associated with #primedchatnz on Twitter. As a result, he has interviewed and worked with Tony Ryan, Graham Watts, and several others, connecting them to the Twitter community, and organising an online chat directly associated to 45min interviews broadcast via YouTube/Google Plus.