

Helping Make Behaviour Better

katherine kerr, August 2020

Being an attempt to provide some specific suggestions on how to approach tricky topics and individuals, nudging people towards more acceptable behaviour.

This assumes you have the ability to stay polite and cheerful when tackling such, and have sufficient knowledge of the person/s involved that you feel confident the approach you've chosen has a chance of working. Good luck!

Major Things to Remember

Never attribute to malice what may well be miscommunication or a mistake. Treat the latest rumour as just that, and actively seek out information - not just confirmation!

I understand that you think X, but I think it's possible it may be Y. Have you considered that?

If you've written a quick response to a challenging email or post, *never* hit the send button without re-reading it, reading it again as if it was coming in to you, or having someone else you trust read it and provide feedback. Or go make a drink and come back to it – even if it seems urgent, 15-30 minutes could make the difference between pouring oil on a fire and putting a fire out.

Generic Handling – preparing the ground, debriefing major events

It helps a lot to take opportunities that arise to discuss what behaviour/s we'd like to see in general as standard within the SCA – remembering that foundational principle of treating others with courtesy.

We have those discussions sometimes at vigils, but it can also be a general discussion/round circle in a Collegium or some such, at event debriefs or other meetings. And even better if we can model that ideal.....well, at least some of the time!

Post-event debriefs are best done in a group so everyone gets the message, and no one person is singled out. To start, try taking a specific issue and run them through some problem-solving steps for it, rather than begin with open-ended questions about the event, such as “what went wrong?” That way, you'll get people thinking along solution-focused lines, which is likely to lead to more positive outcomes. More general discussion can follow.

- Identify a problem
- Make a possible suggestion to address it; phrased as a question, not a statement
- Ask for ideas
- Make notes for follow-up
- Implement!

For example:

I know it was hard to get volunteers to help with cooking, what can we do to make that easier next time?

Do you think it could help to have a set of prepared recipes people could follow?

Perhaps we can build up a collection of scaled recipes that people can use to make up a meal -- anyone got a favourite they can contribute or would like to suggest?

What's a good way to encourage people to help out with feast and hall clean-up?

If we can't get enough people to help clean up, can we do things to reduce the amount of work involved -- those cheap single-use roasting trays can really be a godsend at the end of an evening. What else would make things easier?

Dealing with Specific Problems

Most people find it difficult to bring up the failings of others face-to-face, but it tends to lead to a better conclusion than exchanging increasingly snarky FB posts or emails or, worse, sounding off about someone behind their back. See if you can arrange a chat in a neutral space, preferably long before things get to the stage of requiring mediation.

- Be prepared to listen, listen and listen before you jump in.
- Try to define the problem in as neutral a fashion as possible.
- Take a genuine interest in what's happening in their lives – has there been behind-the-scenes issues creating stress; do they need help in dealing with others; can you identify strengths as well as weaknesses?

Possible opener:

You're really good at this, but you seem to have a problem with that. Any idea why?

Which bit of the job/role do you enjoy doing? What do you find hard?

Get them thinking about the consequences of their actions (or inactions) - *when you do X, Y happens* -- and identify possible solutions.

e.g.

You need to get your reports in on time dude, cos otherwise it creates added stress for the Seneschal and your Kingdom counterpart. What do you reckon would help you do that?

OK, so you're not a paperwork mavin - how about you find someone who likes to do that sort of stuff and work with them. That way you get to do the stewardly stuff you do so well and you have back-up for the paperwork, and all the T's get crossed. How about working with X?

Was there any particular reason that the budget blew out that much? Is it something that could be part of a checklist next time, so you've got it covered? Or would you be better off handling X rather than Y?

Make it clear that there's no freight in someone acknowledging they reacted badly or got flustered or overwhelmed -- concentrate on identifying where the weak spots were in the action, not the person, and see if you can find a solution:

It looked like you were having a hard time getting the lists sorted. Was that because you weren't sure how to set out the next round or were the heralds slow in getting you the results? How about we have a lists workshop before the next big tourney so things are a bit more familiar and we can have more help next time? Do you think it would help if we had some designated lists runners available? Have a chat with X -- they've got a great set of resources to help figure out round robins which you might find handy.

So rather than calling them unorganised/ill-prepared or pointing out they keep volunteering for jobs they can't handle, find ways of getting them the help they need -- even better if they figure out themselves what those ways may be.

Praise and Postive Feedback

Most important point: be sincere, praise something that is praiseworthy. If the outcome isn't wonderful, at least express gratitude for anything that involved actual effort!

People often have difficulty in handling praise and feel the need to discount such; some individuals may take a well-meant *well done* as a personal slight. In those cases it can help to concentrate on the outcome of their actions:

e.g.

What a brilliant event

That was a great result

That was a lovely [thing]

That must have taken a lot of work.

Praise specifics, or give them something tangible to remember the positivity.

e.g.

That white pie was so nice. I'd like to give you this blank journal to put your recipes in, to say thanks. Any chance you could give me the white pie recipe?

Other Ways of Supporting Improvements

Social psychology says that you get better buy-in from people if you ask them for a favour, rather than do something for them. Counter-intuitive, but that's humans for you.

It also helps to praise in a timely fashion – a remark in passing, a post the day after the event. If the latter, make sure you get the circumstance and the names of those involved correct! (It's handy to have a notebook at events to jot down this sort of information). Use titles too, where applicable (<http://canon.lochac.sca.org> is your friend!) – so many of them are not acknowledged once awarded, in spite of the time, effort and praiseworthy actions that may have led to them being awarded.

For groups to run smoothly and effectively, people need to know what's going on. How can you help that happen? What do you think is the best way to communicate your ideas/plans?

If you had to delegate, who would you turn to. Why?

I'd really like to see you do X (especially if talking to someone you're formally mentoring or supervising). X should be a tangible thing like: get your next report in three days before it's due; compare your event budget to the actual event spend and identify where the overrun happened; identify two people who handle things the way you would like to and talk to them about how they do it; think about how you respond to someone who disagrees with you and what you could do to reduce that defensive reaction so you've got a better chance of hearing their concerns, and them listening to you.

*Help me understand what happened
And be sure to actually listen!*

Describe something that didn't go so well for you. How did you handle it?

When you did/said X, what did you think was going to happen?

Gee, that sounded a bit harsh. What's behind that? Anything in particular that makes you think that?

Negative Behaviours/Situations

Coping with snarkiness/rumour-mongering:

You may not realise it, but your comments carry a lot of weight, so it can be a real worry if you raise a concern that's not based on first-hand experience. Having an example would help a lot if there is an issue with X that we should know about.

When someone makes unsubstantiated comments or raises problems you haven't encountered personally, ask for more information or context.

e.g.

Wow, I'm surprised to hear that, as I've always highly regarded his kindness to animals from what I've seen over the past few years. Is this based on something recent? Was it

something you saw or just heard about? It's certainly a puzzle, so I'd really appreciate more information if you have it.

That's likely to elicit a more useful response than *whaddya mean he kicks dogs?*

See if they can be nudged to think about how they are behaving. Sometimes people are honestly unaware of how they come across and a direct comment can help them rethink.

e.g.

Are you aware that some people find you quite sarcastic, and that challenges them?

Or you can try making it a little more personal if you're sure you've got a handle on what might be the problem - better yet if you have a way to help them out:

You know, I used to think that you were really stand-offish, but I think it might just be that you're not comfortable with talking to people you don't know. Is that right? Would it help if I introduced you to that lot over there?

Dealing with Incipient Burn-Out

Often the first time we know someone is having problems is when the proverbial hits the spinning thing; that's too late and potentially damaging in many ways. The SCA has plenty of people willing to help others, but we all need to understand that:

- it's perfectly reasonable to say that Real Life is getting in the way
- asking for help is a sign of maturity, not weakness
- it's always a good idea to raise a hand for help **early**

It can be useful, if you know someone starting to look a little crispy, to ask how they are doing, get them thinking about how they can reduce the stress levels and/or workload. Officer change-overs and student relationships also provide managed spaces for mentoring in this area.

e.g.

Have a think about what you'd do if you have to go into hospital/get that job/change towns. How would you handle it? Who would you ask for help? What sort of timing would you need to make the best of it?

There are lots of different ways of playing in the SCA and lots of different ways of doing things. How would you do X differently? Tell me about a time when you changed your mind about how to do X, and why.

Asking someone to help with a third-party in difficulties:

X has been such a great contributor to the SCA for so many years but we're a bit worried she might burn out/is going through difficult times. Can you think of any way we can help her to Y?

Dealing with Conflict

The SCA has a grievance/dispute resolution procedure which no-one seems overly happy with, especially when it gets to the more formal levels. The simple fact is, it's extremely hard to mediate or arbitrate problems once they become deep-rooted. Where-ever possible, we need to try and resolve conflicts when they are small, local and tractable.

We all have our own shorthand ways of dealing with conflict, whether avoidance, aggression or somewhere in between – alas, they're often not that effective, even if they kick the can down the road. Here are some suggestions for more constructive approaches that might work well for you.

Dealing with a challenging view/opinion:

That's interesting -- I hadn't come across that approach before. I'll certainly think about it. Can you tell me more?

Dealing with someone who has stuffed up:

A mistake doesn't make a person worthless, but it helps a lot if you can figure out how to avoid it next time. So what could you do, do you think?

Dealing with perceived conflict:

I'm not sure, but I think I may have offended/annoyed you when I did X. If that's so, I'm sorry for that. How could I handle it better next time?

Dealing with multiple points of view:

What's your ultimate goal here, how would you like to see this resolved? Is it attainable and reasonable? How do you think you can achieve that while allowing for others to have a say or play a role? What is the best alternative you can think of?