Leading with Purpose & Compassion

Supporting Teams through Challenges of Dispute Resolution

blazer works

About Your Presenters

Ramona Lee, M.Ed. | Retired Director of Special Education

Ramona was Special Education Director for the West Ada School District for 11 years, and she serves as the Professional Development chair for CASE. She is passionate about how professional development activities can assist administrators in supporting school teams.

Kindel Mason, Ed.S. | Special Education Advisor/Administrator

Kindel has worked in the field of Special Education since 1991 as a special education teacher, consultant, with the Idaho Department of Ed., and as a special education director. He also served as the President of CASE from 2022 to 2024

Learner Objectives

1. Identify key emotional and procedural challenges that arise during special education dispute resolution and their impact on staff dynamics.
2. Apply strategies that promote calm, confident, and compassionate leadership when navigating conflict situations.
3. Create an action plan to strengthen a positive team culture that prioritizes student-centered solutions and collective growth.

Setting the Tone

Leadership Beyond Compliance

Address Our Own Emotions & Emotions of Others

Emotionally Hard Work

Reframing Disputes

Welcome to Holland!

What is the first word that comes to mind when you learn you are headed to special education conflict?

State Data

- Complaints
  - 2023 - 2024: 53
  - 2025 – 2025: 53
  - 2025 – 2026: 73
- Mediation
  - 2023 - 2024: 27
  - 2025 – 2025: 44
  - 2025 – 2026: 47
- Due Process Hearings
  - 2023 - 2024: 13
  - 2025 – 2025: 14
  - 2025 – 2026: 21
- Facilitation
  - 2023 - 2024: 187
  - 2025 – 2025: 170
  - 2025 –2026: 204

Impact of Conflict on Educators

•Research has documented that school personnel regard the special education litigation as expensive, time-consuming, and a threat to their professionalism (Gilsbach, 2015; Decker, 2014; Mueller & Pantoni, 2013; Mueller et al., 2008).

•Educators are significantly affected by the stress of due process hearings. Legal proceedings contribute to burnout and reduced effectiveness in the classroom (Zagata et al.,2024).

Staff Responses

1. Anxiety
2. Defensiveness
3. Failure
4. Fear
5. Burnout

"I Didn't Sign Up for This!" Considering The Impact of Due Process On Teachers

CADRE (Zagata, Reese, Sinclair, 2024)

“Preparing for this process and testifying were extremely stressful. Not knowing what might be asked while testifying increased my stress level tremendously.”

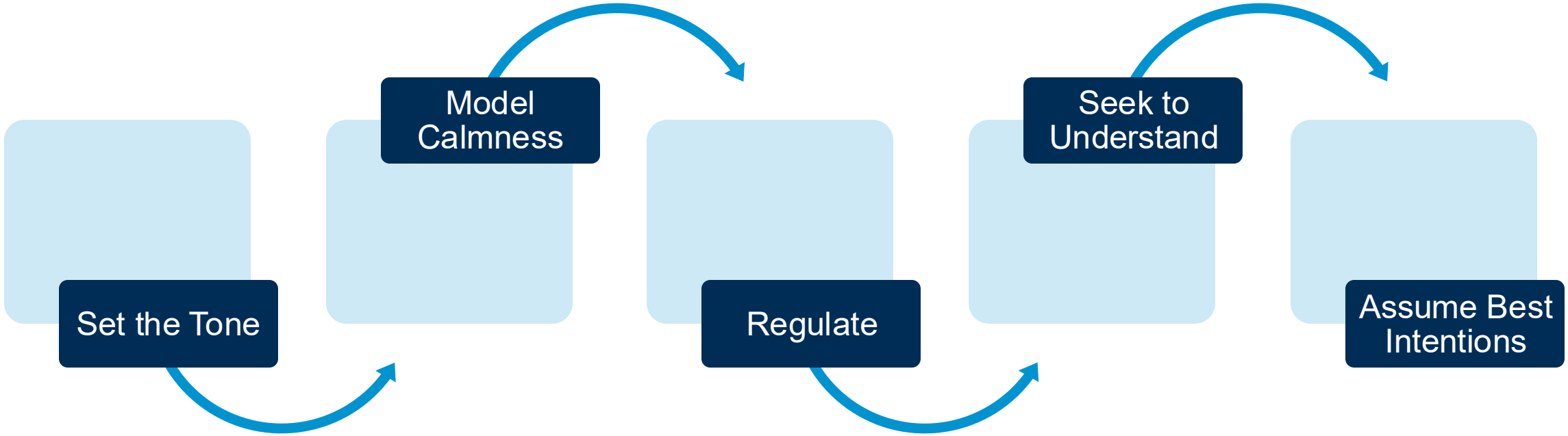
“The preparation for the (case) did not allow me to complete my regular duties and I had to work weekends to catch up on my paperwork and special education responsibilities.”

I was unable to focus on my new students and prepare adequately what I wanted to because I was reviewing hundreds of emails and other documents instead.”

I wasn't able to sleep, and my anxiety still hasn't recovered.”

“I almost left the field of special education due to this experience. I had to leave the district and start new somewhere else.”

Leading with Calm, Confidence, Compassion



Underlying Principles of Conflict

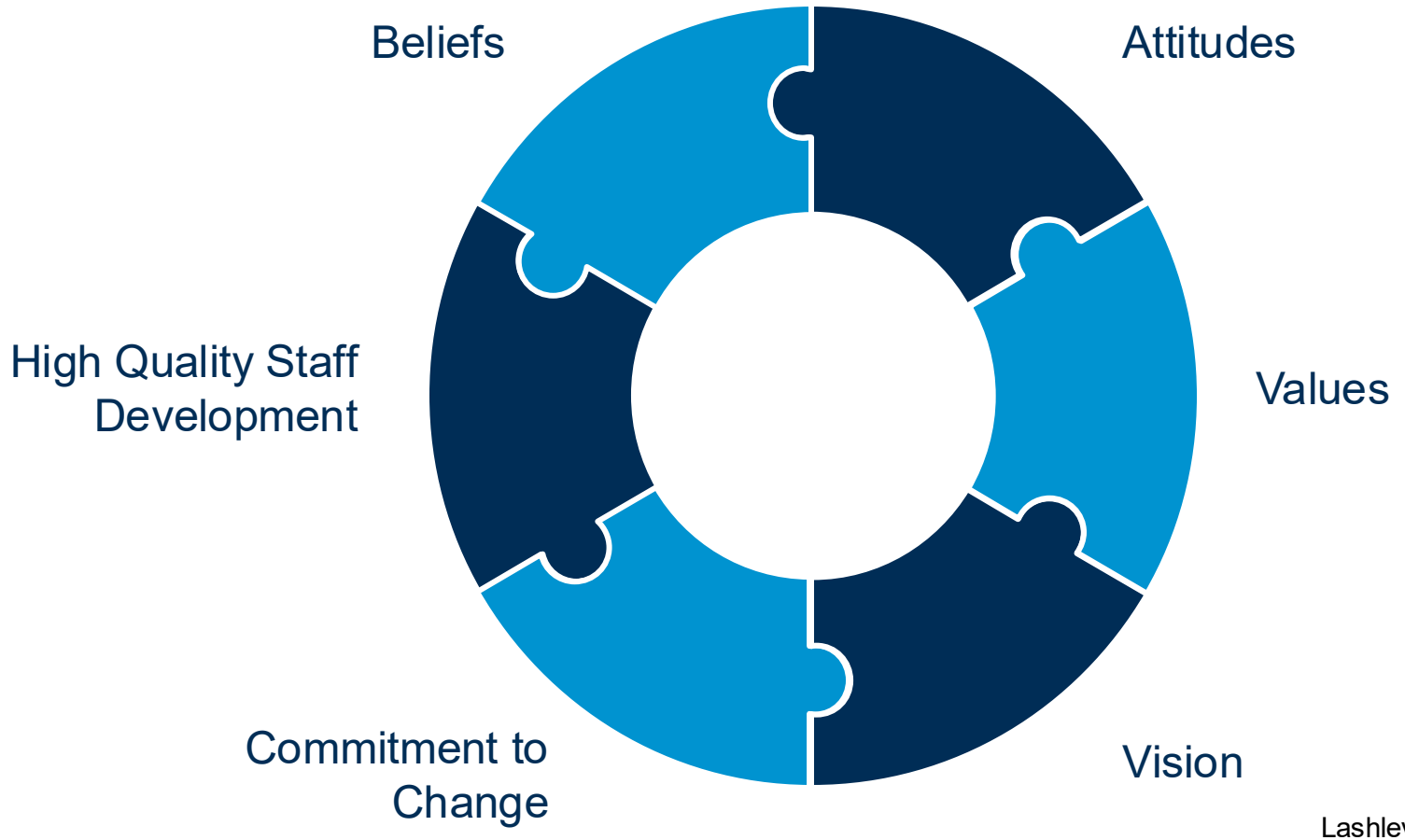
- Conflict is Inevitable
- Active Engagement
- Motivation
- Skills Required
- Self-Awareness
- Safe Environment

(Overton et al., 2013)

Common Sources of Disputes

- Assuming families are knowledgeable about special education
- Procedural barriers
- Communication difficulties
- Lack of trust
- Power imbalance
- Different views of student’s abilities and progress

Effective Leaders



Council for Exceptional Children, 2022; Kurland, Peretz, & Hertz-Lararzowitz, 2010; Lashley, 2007; Thurlow, Quenemoen, and Lazarus, 2019.

Core Beliefs for Meaningful Partnerships

Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, Davies, 2007

Anticipate Conflict and Plan for it

Dismantle Fear

Work to shift conflict culture to a positive one

(Blanco, M. 2024)

Positions vs. Interests

Position:

The specific demand or stance someone takes

Interests:

The underlying need or concern that motivates the demand

(Gershwin, 2020) (Turnbull, et al., 2015)

Bringing Interests to the Surface

- What need is the position attempting to satisfy?
- What is motivating the position?
- What needs to be heard and understood?
- What is the fear if the demand is not fulfilled?

Reframing Changes the Energy

Solution A

Solution B

(Original Source Unknown)

Listening As an Ally

- Encouraging & Clarifying
- Restating & Reflecting
- Summarizing & Validating

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Listening as An Alley

Be Proactive

- Build trust
- Set clear expectations
- Make data-based decisions
- Address concerns quickly
- Prepare teams
- Repair relationships quickly
- Stay student focused
- Document, document, and document some more
- Build a culture of problem-solving

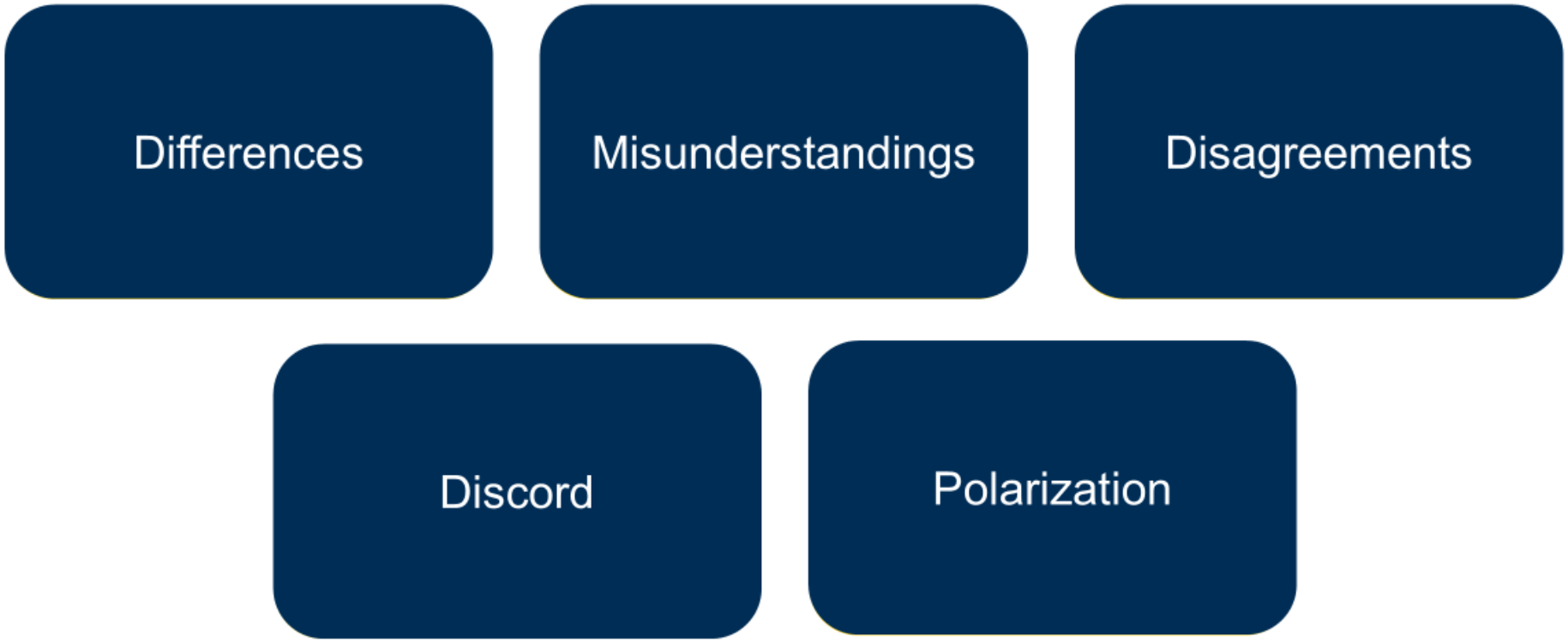
(Gershwin Muller, 2015)

Understanding Responses to Conflict

Avoiding	Accommodating	Competing	Compromising	Collaborating
Can serve as a temporary response when emotions are high.	While it resolves conflict, frequent use can lead to resentment and harm relationships.	It can be suitable when taking unpopular actions on important issues.	Negotiation between two parties with equivalent power.	Seeks solutions that meet everyone's needs and allows for creative problem-solving.

(Overton et al., 2013)

When Conflict Escalates



(Overton et al., 2013)

Responding to Escalating Conflict

- Differences
- Misunderstandings
- Disagreements
- Discord
- Polarization

In each of these situations, how do you think you would respond? How will staff respond?

At what point do you/staff start to feel uncomfortable?

How does that look and feel for you and the staff?

Do you outwardly display signs of frustration or anxiety? What about staff?

(Overton et al., 2013)

Compassion and Accountability

Alternate Route Staff

Fresh Out of College

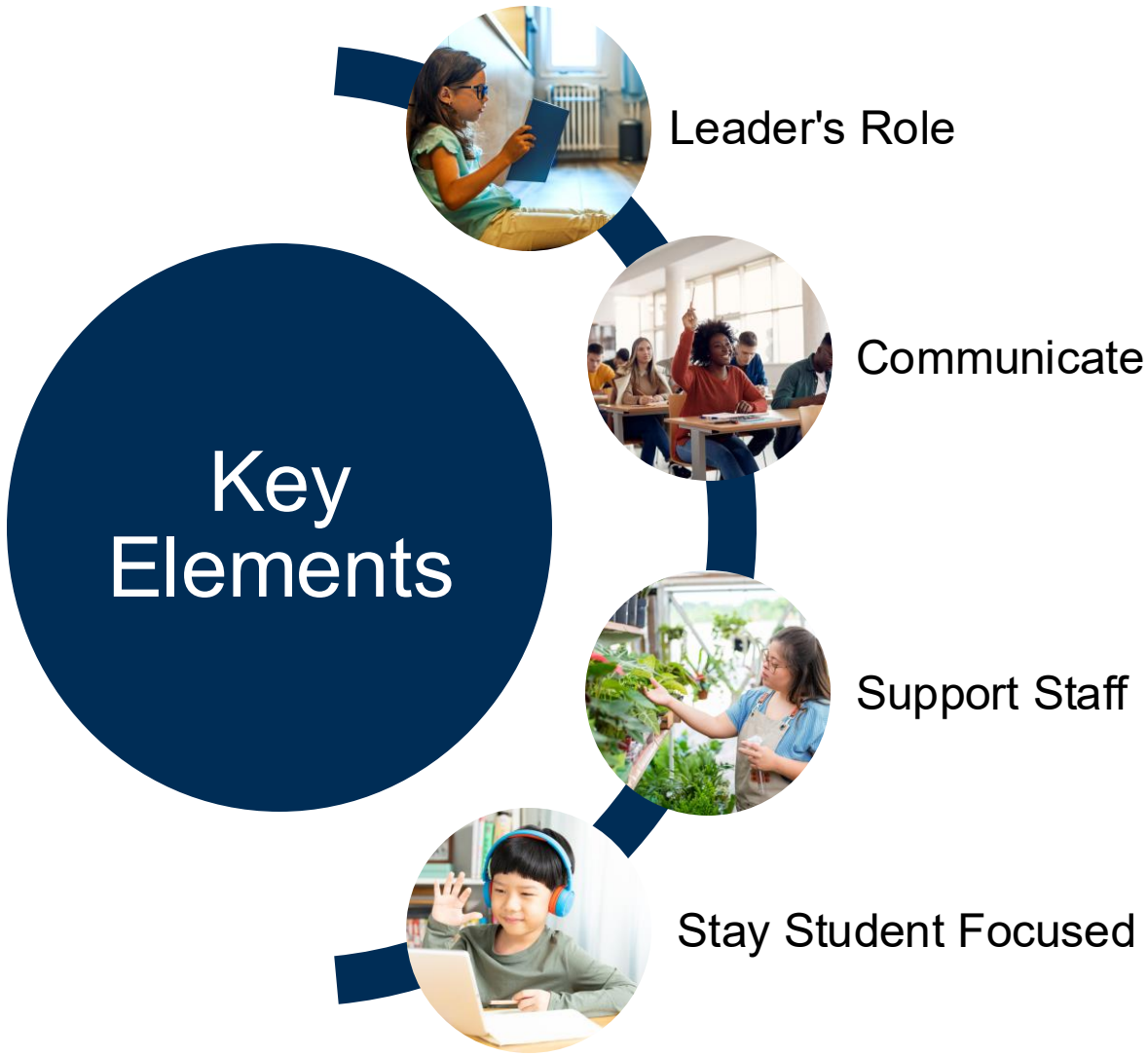
Experienced Staff

Workload

Prepare Teams for Dispute Resolution

1. Set the Tone
2. Explain the Process
3. Clarify Roles
4. Set Expectations
5. Prepare Them Emotionally

During the Dispute



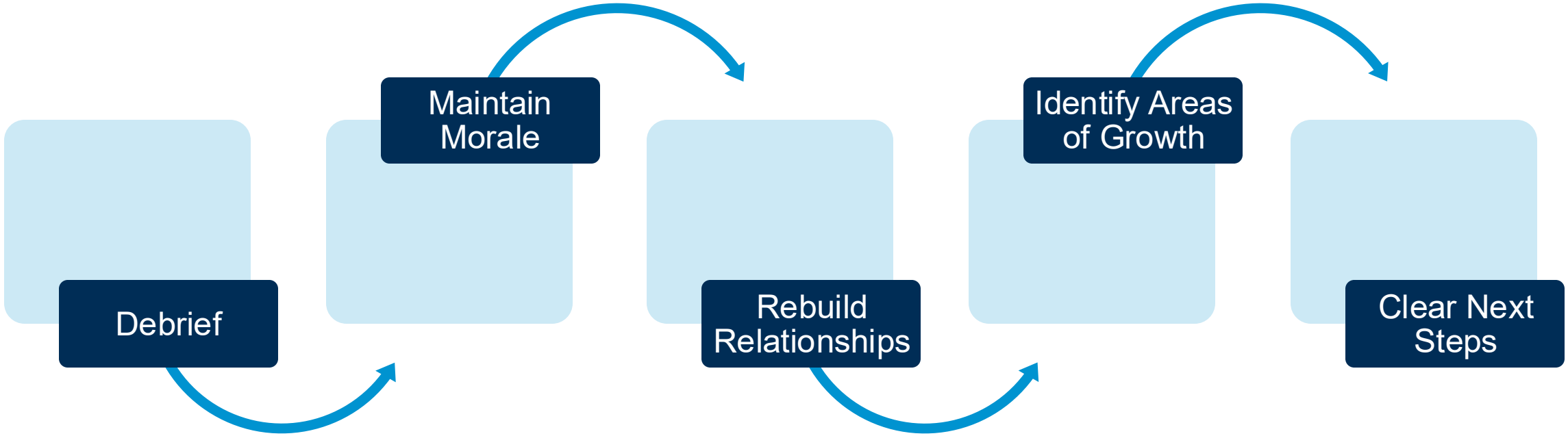
When a Meeting is Potentially Unsafe

Signs to Watch for:

- Hostility
- Disrespect
- Overly Confrontational
- Threats

(The Intentional IEP, 2025)

After the Dispute



Conflict is normal.

When it happens, take care of yourself and your team as you navigate the process.

Leading with purpose and compassion means caring for both students and staff while maintaining parent relations.

Idaho Training Clearinghouse Principals Corner

Idaho Training Clearinghouse Principals CornerLink

Leading with Purpose & Compassion

Please Take a Moment Complete our Participant Survey:

https://form.jotform.com/242065477679167

Thank you!

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