

## How president gets to yes

By JOHN STURROCK

PRESIDENT Barack Obama's willingness to acknowledge that he had chosen his words badly in his response to the incident involving Harvard professor Henry Gates jnr and a Massachusetts police sergeant – and his suggestion that all three of them meet up at the White House for a "beer summit" – marks him out yet again as a man who is able to act in a way which is different to that which we often expect of politicians. The incident, and the president's response, reminds us of three distinct stages which are to be found in many difficult situations.

First, the choice of language in the initial reaction: often, in the heat of the moment, people say things which, if they had time to reflect and were aware of all the facts, they would not choose. But it doesn't happen like that: we are impulsive creatures, even the president.

Many conflicts, whether in the office or on the world stage, start with words that trigger an escalation between protagonists who rapidly assume positions from which they find it difficult to escape. The words, whatever the speaker may mean, are often heard as violent attacks on the person or people to whom they are directed.

"Acting stupidly" would feel like a direct assault on the officer. The lesson for us all, not just Mr Obama, is to pause and draw breath before speaking. As the president said, he could have "calibrated those words differently".

Second, if offence has been taken, having the courage to acknowledge that and to accept that the other has been offended is often critical to de-escalating the situation. That is what Mr Obama did.

He acknowledged that he had contributed to "ratcheting it up". From what we can tell, though, he did not apologise. There are situations where apology is necessary.

The president may yet find that he is pressured into doing so. But full apology may not be necessary in many cases. For each, it is about preserving dignity and saving face. Thus, recognition that hurt has been caused and that the words chosen were ill-advised may be enough, especially if coupled with a reassurance that it will not happen again.

And Mr Obama engaged with the officer by telephoning him and assuring him that he was an outstanding officer and a "good man".

To hear that direct from your president is likely to be enough to satisfy the officer, who had stood his ground after the initial intervention by Mr Obama.

The president has made clear, however, that he still believes there was an over- reaction in the initial incident. But, in doing so, he has now sought to separate the individuals from the issue, which may still need to be addressed and which the president hopes will provide a "teachable moment".

Mr Obama's third strategy is the masterstroke of offering both of the initial protagonists the opportunity to meet with him over a drink. As his book *The Audacity of Hope*, and as his actions since his election have generally shown, the president understands the importance of communication, seeing both sides of a story and seeking to find mutually satisfactory ways to resolve a problem.

From a relatively minor incident in Massachusetts to a history-making speech in Cairo, Mr Obama's language is straight from the texts on principled negotiation: let's find our real interests, explore the concerns that others have, seek to understand where they are coming from, be robust on what we believe in, but always be respectful of those with different views.

And let's see if we can develop some objectively supportable options for moving forward.

Mr Obama is a natural mediator. His instincts in the Massachusetts matter are to bring people together, in the knowledge that a face-to-face meeting, with a credible third party present, is likely to pay dividends and nip this in the bud.

As he said: "My sense is you've got two good people in a circumstance in which neither of them were able to resolve the incident in a way that it should have been resolved."

That is not unusual. Whether the conflict is about an untidy arrest, or a dispute between workmates, or a tram construction project that isn't working as it should, or changes in terms and conditions leading to strike action and rubbish on the streets, bringing people together with the help of skilled third parties can often lead to a solution where a logjam existed. It is a mark of sophistication and maturity.

It's just a pity we can't all call on Mr Obama to join us for a beer when we need him – and that more politicians can't openly admit when they have got it wrong, and not be pilloried for it.