

Handling Difficult Customers in a Public Service Environment

By Carol Fredrickson

One of the most difficult things to do is to de-escalate an angry or menacing customer in a busy waiting room of a government agency. We need to be conscious of the safety of both co-workers and clients in these public buildings.

Rightly or wrongly, many angry people believe three things; that their situation is unfair, this situation is out of their control and that they are the victim in this situation.

In a public service environment, employees are usually overcome by two issues; the first is embarrassment. Most of us are embarrassed when someone is acting inappropriately and our mind races trying to figure out both what to do and what is causing this person to behave this way. The second is fear. They are concerned about how to de-escalate the situation and concerned that this person may have a weapon. After all, how many news stories have we heard where a disgruntled employee or unhappy client starts shooting?

The most important thing to remember is that the angry person wants to be heard!

They will not calm down until they believe that you are truly interested in listening to their point of view or their problem. These ten tips will help you verbally and non verbally de-escalate the situation.

1. Stop what you are doing and give them your full attention. If you continue to address them as well as whatever you were doing before, they will feel ignored and this will escalate the situation. People want to be heard and they want to feel like they count. Your body language should demonstrate to them that you do have time for them, that you do care about their issue, and that you want to help resolve their problem.

2. Use a calm neutral tone of voice when dealing with difficult people. Don't buy into their agitation and become defensive or angered. When nervous or in an uncomfortable situation, men have a tendency to drop their voice lower at the end of sentences and women have a tendency to get higher at the end of their sentences. Often people will speak increasing faster or slow the pace of their voice way down. This action combined with the higher or lower tone of voice is sure to escalate the situation. During my 15 years of working in law enforcement, I took some cues from hostage negotiators who have the neutral voice down very well.

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3. Express your concern and allow them to share their story. Too many times we take a little bit of information and then we run with it, sharing our opinions our thoughts or even sharing our rules and judgments. When you are dealing with an angry person it is best to allow them to share their story and vent their frustrations. The angry person should be doing most of the talking, well at least initially. Remember, people want to be heard.

4. Make sure your hands are open, empty and visible. You don't want a person who is angry, deranged, or emotionally disturbed to think that you are a threat in any way. Even a pen or a pencil may be perceived as a weapon to them. And pointing a finger at them can escalate the situation. Free hands are unthreatening hands - the look that you want to go for.

5. When possible move them to a controlled, neutral environment - such as a conference room with lots of windows. You have a responsibility to keep the public safe so you want to move the difficult person away from any public areas as quickly as possible. Show them where you would like to speak to them and allow them to go first with you following. Once in this conference room you should direct them to where they should sit and you should be seated closest to the exit. Leave the door ajar for safety reasons.

6. Ask open ended questions like "What would you like to see happen?" or "How can I best help you?" This encourages the difficult person to talk and shows that you are actually interested in resolving the situation. In most instances they will ask for something less than you willing to do for them. You may not be able to handle things exactly like they are requesting but they will begin to calm down during the process. Make sure that you are clear with them about what you CAN do for them. Too many times they have heard what CAN'T be done, which may have brought them to this point.

7. Validate their feelings. This is especially important for women because we connect with others on an emotional level. Until our feelings are validated we rarely "calm down." On the other hand, men in this type of situation do not want to discuss their feelings, so don't make the mistake of asking a man how he feels about the situation.

8. Keep your posture upright and relaxed. Your stance should be open and non aggressive. You want to appear confident, interested and relaxed. We have all seen the police officer that is overly confident, very uptight and whose posture is extremely rigid. They come off as arrogant. This type of body language can actually escalate the situation because the angry person feels threatened. Remain upright and relaxed and show them that you are not a threat.

9. Use a firm, yet respectful tone of voice. As things progress and if you are not having any success in de-escalating the situation, use an authoritative, respectful tone of voice and make it clear that their behavior is unacceptable. Give them one last opportunity to respectfully communicate their needs.

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10. If all else fails, call the police. First communicate your intention to allow this person to leave the premises if they choose to do so. If they refuse to leave, or agree that the police should be called to resolve the situation, then it is important to follow through on your intention. No idle threats. Stay strong and stick to what you say, even if it means more time and energy spent on the angry person.

Studies have shown that if someone were going to attack or become physical this will occur in the first two minutes of the encounter. During this time frame you want to be within 4 – 6 feet of the angry person. Close enough for them to see that you are interested in helping them but far enough away so that if they lunge towards you they couldn't reach you. It is after these first couple of minutes that you can usually move someone to a neutral environment where you can actually address their concerns. The big mistake that most public service employees make is to rationalize with the angry person in the first couple of minutes. The angry person sees this as your agenda – they don't get that you are listening and remember they will not calm down until they believe they are being heard! Public Service Employees have a lot to deal with and they are left to enforce rules that they may not even agree with. Don't get caught up in the chaos of the moment. Stay neutral, be neutral and show neutrality.

About the Author

Carol Fredrickson is a workplace violence expert, speaker and trainer who has been working with clients for 18 years to prevent 6-7 figure lawsuits, and more importantly to avert violent workplace disasters. Before launching her speaking and training business, Carol spent 15 years in law enforcement specializing in emergency services and disaster preparedness. She has been profiled and interviewed by hundreds of print, radio, and television outlets and she consults with the media on a regular basis.

Since 1993 over 100,000 people have benefited from Carol's powerful message of personal strength and self reliance. She keeps audiences on the edge of their seats with stranger-than-fiction case studies and "worst case scenarios" pulled from hundreds of real-life violent workplace situations - and preventing hundreds more through her work "in the trenches" onsite with corporate clients, partnering with law firms, and working closely with law enforcement agencies nationwide.

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