



UNIT-3

Dealing with Difficult Customers

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Apply techniques to deal with difficult customers

Unit 3

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Dealing With Challenges Assertively

An Assertiveness Model

One difficulty that we can face in our customer interactions is the need to act assertively. Being assertive is not natural for some people. It can cause anxiety for the person responsible for customer service. However, sometimes customer demands really are outrageous or cannot be met. Sometimes they are rude and we must intervene assertively in order to resume a sense of calm and professionalism, either in the workplace or over the telephone.

Speaking assertively doesn't mean being aggressive, angry, or disrespectful. Assertive behavior means standing up for your personal rights, and acting in direct, honest, and appropriate ways that express your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs without violating others' rights.

There is an assertiveness formula that can help when we aren't sure how to tell others how we think or feel and how we would like them to behave. There are several variations to this formula, and the formula doesn't work in all situations, but it can be useful. When using the model, you will frame your conversation in the following way:

- When you (specific behavior)
- I feel (specific feelings)
- I would appreciate it if you (suggested change of behavior)

Example: "When you come into our restaurant and yell at me to get you a good seat, I feel like you expect me to ignore the lineup that is here in front of you, and I feel embarrassed. I'd like you to acknowledge me, say good morning, and then wait your turn like everyone else."

Think of situations where you could use this formula. Practice the wording to yourself, and then try it out in a fairly non-stressful situation and see how it works. Like most things, it gets easier with practice, and feels more natural with time.

You don't have to act assertively in every situation, and this formula isn't the only way to deal with difficult or stressful situations. For example, most of us hate being criticized, but rather than become defensive, or react assertively, allow the criticism to prick your curiosity. Ask questions like, "Why do you feel that way?" or, "What exactly do you mean when you say I'm not playing fair?"

Dealing With Difficult People

Getting to the Heart of the Matter

Despite our best efforts and our good use of customer service techniques, our attempts can seem to be for nothing. Behaviors we thought we had influenced positively (or corrected altogether) can regress.

For example, your manager might have spoken with an employee (not you, of course!) about some below-par behavior: perhaps they are always late for work, despite the fact that they are supposed to be answering phones and greeting visitors promptly at 9:00 a.m. The manager has spoken with the employee, and although this will lead to improved behavior for a few days, he always slips back to being late.

What's Missing?

They aren't getting to the heart of the problem. It's not enough to tell the individual that they are breaking the rules, or that a colleague has to cover their tasks when they are late. If it were enough, the behavior would stop.

You can learn a lesson from this that will help you help customers. Ask yourself what is really bothering *you* to get at what is really bothering *them*. Often the behavior touches a nerve that is much more personal. For example, if you do a favor for a friend, and then they demand more from you, you may feel that they are taking advantage of the relationship. That's at a much deeper level than just the rules that are being broken.

If the person is perpetually late because they do not set their alarm (and get up to it) because they really do not care about their job, or they feel underutilized, or they are being bullied by a co-worker and cannot drag themselves into the office, then we are getting at the root of the real problem.

The ability to peel an issue back to its core takes patience and precision. Sometimes we don't do this because it can take time to uncover the real problem. We can often find ourselves in too much of a hurry to do this properly. At other times, our emotions get involved and we make a decision that we really don't want to go there because we'll also have to deal with what is bothering us.

If you don't stop to think about the big picture, you'll end up either missing the problem or going after too many problems at once. To stop yourself from being over-involved, you must be able to state the problem in a single sentence. If you make it longer, your conversation will lose focus as soon as it starts.

The Three F's

To get to the heart of the problem, evaluate the 3 F's: **facts**, **frequency**, and **frustrated relationship**.

Facts

What are the facts of the issue? Create a list so that you do not get sidetracked while you plan your conversation. Don't drag in other stories or unrelated issues that have happened previously. If you are

talking to someone about a shipping problem, stick to that and leave quality or customer service issues out of it.

Frequency

Make sure you have a very clear history of the frequency of the issue and any patterns. For example, if they say they've called the customer service line "tons of times," get an exact number, with dates and times if possible.

Frustrated Relationship

If your real concern is about the relationship, but you only focus on the pattern, then you are not likely to get the change that you are aiming for. You have to discuss what is important to you in terms of the relationship. Remember: the ability to peel an issue back to its core takes patience and precision.

Types of Difficult People

Difficult people get themselves sorted into categories, just so we can develop a strategy for dealing with them. If you pick up almost any book on the subject, you will find descriptions of these people and some suggested ways of dealing with them.

Test Your Knowledge

Description

Solutions

The Quiet One

Description

Solutions

The Jester
Description

Solutions

Yakety-Yak
Description

Solutions

Off Base
Description

Solutions

Bigger Issues
Description

Solutions

The Chatterbox
Description

Solutions

**The Know-It-All
Description**

Solutions

**The Whiner
Description**

Solutions

The Fourth Critical Element – Be a Problem Solver

Reducing Conflict

Conflict occurs when the emphasis is on the differences between people. The more divided you seem to be, the more differences there are. You get along better with people when the emphasis is on similarities. The difference between conflict with a friend and conflict with a difficult person is that with a friend, the conflict is tempered by things you have in common. Obviously, then, reducing differences is essential to your success in dealing with people you can't stand.

Here are some key tools for reducing conflict.

Blending

Blending is any behavior by which you reduce the differences between you and another person in order to meet them where they are and move to common ground. Blending increases your rapport with others. For example, have you ever been in conversation with someone when you unexpectedly discover that you both grew up in the same place? In that moment of discovery, differences were reduced and you felt closer.

Or you go to a restaurant with a friend, look at the menu, and ask, "What are you having?" Your question may have had little to do with menu choices and a lot to do with sending a signal of friendship.

You blend with people in many ways. You blend visibly with your facial expression, degree of animation, and body posture. You blend verbally with your voice, volume, and speed. And you blend conceptually with your words.

As natural as it is to blend with people you like or with people who share similar objectives, it is equally natural not to blend with people whom you perceive as difficult. The failure to blend has serious consequences, because without blending, the differences between you can become the basis for conflict.

Here are some examples of blending in a conflict situation.

Example 1

Customer: You people keep messing up my computer. I've had it in here twice since I bought it and it still isn't working.

Help Desk Technician: I'm sorry your computer still isn't working. When mine is not working, it's so frustrating. Waiting to have things fixed, especially when they are new, is even more frustrating. Let me try and help you today.

Here we demonstrate blending with the statement, “When mine is not working, it’s so frustrating.”

Example 2

Customer: I ordered those winter tires weeks ago! I can’t believe that they aren’t here yet. You must not have ordered them.

Helpful Tire Technician: I’m really sorry about the delay. Now that winter has arrived, I know I’d want my tires too. I can see here that they were ordered five weeks ago. Let me track the shipment and see where they are, or what the delay is.

Here we demonstrate blending with the statement, “Now that winter has arrived, I know I’d want my tires too.”

Redirecting

Redirecting is any behavior by which you use rapport to change the outcome of your interactions and reach a more satisfactory outcome. Blending always precedes redirecting, whether you are listening to understand or speaking to be understood.

Identify Positive Intent

We can define positive intent as the good purpose meant to be served by a given communication or behavior. Our failure to recognize and appreciate positive intent can have lasting consequences.

A powerful key to bringing out the best in people at their worst is to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume a positive intent behind their problem behavior. Since your difficult person may be unaware of this, ask yourself what real purpose might be behind a person’s communication or behavior and acknowledge it. For example, someone may be upset because they have not received the service they required. They may be difficult toward you and make personal remarks, but the positive intent behind their words is that they don’t want special treatment, nor do they necessarily mean ill toward you. They just want to get what they asked for.

If you are not sure about that positive intent, be creative and make something up that could be true. Even if the intent you ascribe to the behavior isn’t true, it will allow you to blend and develop rapport.

Identify Highly Valued Criteria

Criteria are the standards by which we measure whether ideas are good or not, the means for determining what a thing should be, and the benchmark by which people gauge whether they are for or against an idea. Criteria become especially important when differing ideas or points of view are being discussed.

Money, bonding, teamwork, or increasing knowledge are some of the things that may be important to us.

Whenever a discussion starts to degenerate into conflict, try to ascertain the reasons why people are for or against something. Then look for an idea or solution to the problem that blends these criteria together. That is another way to turn conflict into cooperation.

When Discussions Degenerate Into Conflict

When your problem person is talking:

- Blend visibly and audibly
- Backtrack or echo some of their own words
- Clarify their meaning, intent, and criteria
- Summarize what you've heard
- Confirm to find out if you got it right

While blending is an important skill to use when dealing with others, never blend with a hostile gesture directed at you. Don't meet aggression with aggression. If the other person raises their voice or shakes their fist, the key to blending is to underplay it assertively.

Your action plan for angry, aggressive people should include:

- Holding your ground and use deep breathing to stay calm.
- Interrupting the attack by repeating their name several times.
- Quickly backtracking or echoing their main point to show them you have been respectfully listening.
- Aiming for the bottom line by taking ownership and expressing the situation from your point of view.

Some more important points to keep in mind when you are dealing with difficult people:

- No one cooperates with anyone who seems to be against them. In human relations there is no middle ground. Unconsciously, people want to know, "Are you with me or against me?" That's one of the things you have in common with your difficult people.
- Express your truth in a way that builds someone up rather than tears them down.
- Use "I" language, because "you" statements can be accusatory.
- Be specific about the problem behavior.
- Show them how their behavior is self-defeating.
- Suggest new behaviors or options.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to being honest with someone is concern about hurting their feelings. But you do no one a favor by withholding information and allowing them to continue behaviors that don't work for them either.

Problem Solving in Six Steps

Step One: Define the Problem

- Discuss symptoms (especially if the problem is unknown).
- Discuss size (or seriousness) and impact (effect) of the problem.
- Determine the exact wording of the problem in question form.

- Define terms in the question.

Step Two: Research and Analyze the Problem

- List topics that need to be researched or discussed, including causes and past efforts to solve the problem.
- Research the problem if necessary.
- Discuss the research in an organized way.
- State the first topic to be discussed.
- Give everyone a chance to cite research or their opinion on the topic.
- Ask if anyone has anything further to say on the topic.
- Summarize the group's findings on the topic.
- State the next topic to be discussed and repeat the procedure until all topics have been discussed.

Step Three: Establish a Checklist of Criteria

- List all possible criteria and give everyone a chance to respond.
- Discuss each criterion.
- Reduce the list to a workable length by combining criteria where possible.
- Rank remaining criteria from most to least important.

Step Four: List Possible Alternatives

- Think outside the box. This means you have permission to get creative and find alternatives that are outside what we usually think of.
- These are just possibilities, so list anything that comes to mind.

Step Five: Evaluate Each Alternative

- Read through the list of alternatives, eliminating those that obviously do not meet the criteria agreed on in the third step.
- Reduce the list further by combining any similar alternatives.
- Discuss each remaining alternative's strengths and weaknesses, referring to research presented in the second step when necessary.
- Determine how well each alternative meets the criteria (according to the number of criteria and importance of each).
- Continue reducing the list until the best alternative (or alternatives) is reached.

Step Six: Select the Best Alternatives as Your Solution and Discuss How to Implement Them

- Outline the who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- Make sure you consider all people involved.
- You may want to develop contingency plans.

Further Reading: