Managing Difficult Phone Calls

TRAINER: Christina Reimer

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www.achievecentre.com  info@achievecentre.com  1.877.270.9776
GOALS FOR WEBINAR:

• Outline communication skills for phone conversations
• Develop strategies for dealing with emotionally heightened clients
GOALS OF EFFECTIVE PHONE COMMUNICATION FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE

- To build and maintain trusting relationships with clients
- To represent your organization and its mission and values
- To develop and communicate clear and consistent messaging
- To support upset clients and resolve conflict
“The two words information and communication are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through.”
EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

When you send a message and it is received in the way you intended.
COMMUNICATION OVERVIEW

• Be clear and assertive about our own goals
• Be responsive to the goals of others
• Without the benefit of body language, be mindful of word choice and tone of voice
• Be aware that context influences communication
• Be conscious that we are always communicating
VERBAL SKILLS

Pace

• Awareness of pace
• Speak at a pace that fosters calmness
• Avoid giving too much information at once
• Allow for pauses
• Adjust your pace if it doesn’t suit the listener
Tone

• Inflection (e.g., monotonic, dramatic)
• Emotions (e.g., anger, compassion, distrust, support)
• Which tone? (e.g., casual or formal; matter-of-fact or enthusiastic; humorous or serious)
• Match tone of voice with words chosen
DEMONSTRATION

1. I did not steal the computer.
2. I did not steal the computer.
3. I did not steal the computer.
4. I did not steal the computer.
ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATORS

• I will communicate my goals in a way that is clear and respectful.
• I will not deny the rights of others to express themselves, even if we disagree.
• I am flexible and leave room for the possibility that I might change my mind.
SUPPORTING THE EMOTIONALLY HEIGHTENED CLIENT

STEP ONE: Awareness
STEP TWO: Containment
STEP THREE: Problem-Solving
STEP FOUR: Closing
DISENGAGEMENT
STEP ONE: AWARENESS

• Self-check
• Review of situation
• Observe verbal behaviour
• Choose an approach
PRACTICAL TIPS FOR AWARENESS: BREATHING

- 4 seconds, breathe in
- 2 seconds, hold
- 4 seconds, breathe out
- 2 seconds, hold
PRACTICAL TIPS FOR AWARENESS: SELF-TALK STRATEGIES

• “I can get through this.”
• “I need to understand how this feels for her.”
• “One step at a time, it will be okay.”
• “I can face my fear.”
• “I’m in control. Relax and take a deep breath.”
PRACTICAL TIPS FOR AWARENESS: RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

- Body scan
- Posture
- Grounding
- Movement
- Muscle relaxation
STEP TWO: CONTAINMENT

• What “pushes buttons”?

• Effective listening skills

• Interest and empathy (“Feelings First, Facts Follow”)

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PRACTICAL TIPS FOR CONTAINMENT

1. The importance of names
2. Tone, volume, and pace of voice
3. Get curious
4. Find common ground
5. Small encouragements
6. Humour
PRACTICAL TIPS FOR CONTAINMENT

7. Acknowledgement of the problem
   • “You seem distressed. Are you alright?”
   • “Is there something bothering you?”
   • “What else can I do to help you?”
8. Use of “we”

- “We need to fill out this paperwork together so we can proceed.”
- “We can walk through the steps of the system together so that we can achieve the best outcome for you.”
PRACTICAL TIPS FOR CONTAINMENT

9. Avoid confrontational language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confrontational</th>
<th>More Cooperative</th>
<th>Most Cooperative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I can’t” is...”</td>
<td>“I don’t think I can”</td>
<td>“What I can do”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We don’t”</td>
<td>“We usually don’t…”</td>
<td>“What we do is…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You must”</td>
<td>“You might try…”</td>
<td>“Let’s try…”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PRACTICAL TIPS FOR CONTAINMENT

10. Giving choices

• “Mr. Smith is not available to take your call right now. Would you like to call back or leave a message on his voicemail?”

• “You can proceed with this in two ways…”
PRACTICAL TIPS FOR CONTAINMENT

11. Brain Shifting: Right Brain vs Left Brain

• “What day did you notice...?”

• “Could you recount in detail the conversation you had with John about...?”
PRACTICAL TIPS FOR CONTAINMENT

12. Silence

• “I’d like to take a moment to reflect on what we’ve talked about so far before continuing. Please stay on the line.”

• “Could we pause for a minute while I take some notes? I want to make sure that I can remember everything that you are saying as we move forward.”
13. Referral Technique

- Are you perceived as a “decision-maker”?
- Sometimes it’s not about what is being said, but about who is saying it.
14. Reflecting and Validating Feelings

- Identifying, acknowledging, and normalizing feelings
  - “I sense that this makes you angry.”
  - “Feeling uncertain is normal when you haven’t been told what’s going on.”
  - “I can hear that you’re really upset right now.”
15. Paraphrasing

• Listen for key feelings, thoughts, and statements of facts
• Use your own words to reflect back
• Confirm that what you think they said is what they think they said
• Allow yourself to be corrected
• Be brief
PRACTICAL TIPS FOR CONTAINMENT

16. Open-ended questions
   • Getting beyond “yes” or “no” for full, meaningful answers
     - Information-seeking
     - Clarifying
     - Probing
STEP THREE: PROBLEM-SOLVING

PHASE 1: Prioritizing Issues and Identifying Interests

• Start with the issue that has the greatest common interest
• Clarify interests:
  ◦ “What is important to you about this?”
  ◦ “What are you afraid might happen?”
PHASE 2: Looking for Solutions

• Brainstorm:
  - “Do you see any other way of doing that?”
  - “Let’s focus on issue number one for now.”

• Review possible solutions
PROBLEM-SOLVING

PHASE 3: Reaching an Understanding

• Realistic
• Doable
STEP FOUR: CLOSING

• Thank the individual
• Reassure the individual
• Clarify the next step
DISENGAGEMENT

• Politely end the conversation
• Notify the appropriate people immediately
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Are there clear policies and protocols in place for when and how to end unproductive conversations or when and how to transfer a call to a manager or supervisor?
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

2. Does your organization provide regular trainings on communication skills and conflict resolution skills?
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

3. Do the messages employees receive from management encourage, acknowledge, measure, and reward respectful behaviour?
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