

How to Resolve Complaints

“An open ear is the only believable sign of an open heart.”

David Augsburg

As a speaker, trainer and coach working with companies and organizations to improve customer and workplace relationships, one question I always get is, “What are some ways to deal with complaints?”

The word "complaint" is loaded with negative connotations. But in fact, complaining does offer an opportunity to set things right. According to Sandra Crowe, fellow speaker, friend, and author of *Since Strangling Isn't an Option*, "Every complaint is a hidden request."

How the complaint is handled is a bigger issue than what is wrong." Sometimes that hidden request isn't so hidden, but rather is expressed quite vehemently. What others want is for you to make it right, make it better, and replace their feelings of frustration with satisfaction.

When people don't get what they want or expect, they can express their aggravation ranging from mild to wild. Don't waste your time defending why you can't do something. Instead, invest your time and energy in finding solutions to make it right or better. Explanations don't solve problems; they sound like excuses. Frustrated, disappointed, or angry people aren't satisfied by reasons; they want to be heard and they want solutions.

If people dump their aggravation on you, arguing just adds fuel to their fire (or ire!) and they're more likely to react aggressively. The situation may not be your fault, but they're ticked or peeved and want answers rather than an argument. Their anger or irritation is a strident call for assistance.

Arguing is the wrong approach because it activates resistance and escalates their exasperation. People may become abusive when their upset and it isn't being validated, raising their voices to make sure you hear them loud and clear! Without acknowledgment, they might rattle on because you don't seem to "get it." When people are irritated or angry, acknowledging their frazzled feelings eases their pain. By doing what you can to make it right or better, you help to restore their composure and

confidence that you'll provide the needed support and assistance.

When someone brings you a complaint, agree with what you can. Agreement is a form of empathy and shows that you understand their feelings or concerns, usually reducing the intensity of their reaction. Seek agreement regarding the things you can. Avoid arguing because it's likely to escalate anger:

- *You're right, ma'am. The lines are exceptionally long today.*
- *You're right, sometimes I don't put away the laundry.*
- *You're right, sometimes I do procrastinate.*

Listen. Let them air their grievances. When people know they've been heard, the high-velocity energy surrounding an issue is often miraculously diffused.

Smooth ruffled feathers. Continue adding balm to their frustrated souls with an apology. Apologies help reduce angst by acknowledging the situation, and showing your concern for the problems it's provoked. Along with the apology, you can also name the factors responsible for the difficulty—not as excuses, but to clarify what contributed to the problem: "I'm so sorry you've had to wait. This horrendous hailstorm caused cancellations in so many flights today and we've been working double shifts to handle all the additional passengers." This might even evoke a sympathetic response, but don't count on it—doling out sympathy is difficult when perturbed.

Move into action: when someone's been wronged, they want it made right, pronto! By taking immediate positive action, you're demonstrating concern for their plight and doing something about it.

Think about what might improve the situation to make it right for them. Would it help if you found a replacement? Gave them a full refund? Offered something for free? Provided an alternative? Took it to a higher level of authority? For example: "I'm booking you on the next flight, scheduled at 2:00 p.m. and I'm also giving you a voucher for lunch. Once again, I appreciate your understanding and your patience. It's been quite a day!"

Ask yourself the following questions to expedite a successful and satisfactory resolution:

- What is really needed here right now?
- How might I provide that?"
- How can I help?
- What else might help?
- What other needs are important to this person?

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