

CONTROLLING RAGING CUSTOMERS:



A FRAMEWORK



Assertiveness applied within a technique such as PACR (a process developed by the Industrial Society for managing difficult telephone calls) provides a complete framework for managing emotions and controlling the call.

PACR – Pause, Acknowledge, Clarify, Respond. Each stage offers a clear and simple way of taking control, taking on the caller's issue, not their rage, and emerging in a positive emotional state.

From the very beginning of the call, adopt a measured tone of voice. Just as you would mirror body language if you were talking face to face, when on the phone talk with a similar 'energy' to the caller. For someone who is highly annoyed, a slow and deliberate response is not calming. Reflect their sense of urgency, then gradually slow down as you calm the conversation. Use a low tone of voice suggesting maturity and experience, and give your name. It's much harder to lash out at a person than at a faceless object.

- **Pause!** – Remember, don't take the call personally. The anger is not aimed at you but at your organisation. Hold back on your impulsive response. Diffuse your tension by breathing out – quietly. Give the caller a chance to let off steam, then move on to acknowledge.

- **Acknowledge** – Show the caller that you have clearly been listening by reflecting back their words and feelings. 'I appreciate why you are upset', 'I can understand how annoying this must be' Use the caller's name but not repeatedly as that becomes irritating.

- **Clarify** – At this point you should start to take control of the call. Start to ask about the details of the problem. 'Could you tell me exactly what happened' Link the request to what the benefit will be. 'I need to make sure I have all the facts so that I can help you, could you just explain ...' Check that your understanding is clear – and use this process to keep control of the conversation. 'I need to make sure I understand everything correctly' Signpost the conversation – review what you have covered and where this is leading. Highlight how you are moving towards solving the problem.

- **Respond** – Offer suggestions confidently. If you can't do something say why not and immediately link it with a can. 'We are not able to do ... because ... However, what I can suggest is ...' If the person still insists on asking for what you can't do, reiterate why this can't occur but with understanding and empathy. Try to work together towards a solution. At the end of the call confirm what is going to happen next. Clarify what they need to do, and thank them for their call.

Enough is Enough

Link your statement about their unacceptable behaviour to what you can do to help. 'Miss Jones, I can help sort this out if you could please stop shouting/interrupting'. Empathise but explain again what is unacceptable to you - 'I want to help, but I find your language unacceptable'. If the behaviour continues, then you need to warn the caller what the consequences will be if they do not desist - 'Mr Smith, I am not prepared to be spoken to in this way, I can see you are angry, but if you continue to be personally abusive I will have to put the phone down'

Why are more and more people prone to being difficult and aggressive when on the phone to anonymous staff at help desks and call centres? The safety of distance, the mounting pressure of everyday life or the lack of an ability to clearly express their feelings are all leading to increasing 'rage' in conversations between 'strangers'.

Resolving calls successfully is obviously important for customer relations, but equally important, and not always given sufficient attention, is the effect these calls have on staff. To reduce stress levels, improve staff satisfaction and retention, companies need to focus on helping staff to deal with these difficult situations both professionally and personally.

Training people to deal effectively with 'raging customers' makes an enormous difference to call outcomes, both practically and emotionally. Taking control, turning the caller around, and resolving the situation, delivers an immense feeling of achievement. To simply accept abuse, or respond in kind, leads to negative, inadequate feelings in even the most robust of characters.

What is 'rage'?

'Rage' is an irrational anger, which has run out of control. In order to diffuse rage some control has to be taken over the situation, to bring the emotion back under control.

Passive, aggressive or assertive?

First we look at someone's own way of reacting to a caller (either passive or aggressive) and to help move them towards a more assertive behaviour aimed at delivering a win-win situation. If you can see how you typically react to other people, you are halfway to being able to choose the responses you make. Three basic types of behaviour are of interest here:

- Passive
- Aggressive
- Assertive

Either passive or aggressive behaviour can be appropriate responses to a particular situation. Sometimes, it really is best to bite your tongue and say nothing – and sometimes it's right to fight back. However, it's also important to remember that if you are habitually passive you will damage your self-esteem; if you are habitually aggressive you will damage your physical health.

'Assertive' behaviour is different: learned, not instinctive. Assertive people know what they want and can ask for it without damaging either their own self-esteem or the other person's. Assertive behaviour is thoughtful, not reactive. It is concerned with solving problems, not scoring points. Learning techniques which move your behaviour towards an assertive 'pattern' will underpin your ability to deal with difficult, confrontational situations.

Abusive language

If the caller is aggressive or offensive and over stepping acceptable boundaries of anger, then you have the right to address their behaviour. Many people use bad language regularly on their daily lives, so its use to you may have no real significance. It is how they normally communicate and not particularly intended to offend. So if you home in on the bad language too soon, another issue will be created and probably more 'rage' will be generated. At first try and concentrate on the facts and get to grips with the caller's issue, but if the bad language is extreme and prolonged then you have a right to confront it.

Look after yourself

Persistent stress can harm your health, so you also need to learn how to manage any stress experienced. It will help you to stay in assertive mode and to deal more effectively with the situation – and you'll feel better afterwards.

- * Talk through the problem calls with a supervisor or friend
- * After a difficult call, don't rush straight into the next call
- * Look after your health, with sensible exercise and eating habits
- * Learn breathing exercises to calm your stress levels.

Now how do you feel?

Managing phone rage effectively is the key to minimising negative effects on staff. It builds self-esteem, and gives a sense of achievement rather than leaving a sense of leftover aggression, but it does require staff to be provided with training in the necessary techniques. Training in this area is something management must actively promote. It improves customer relations, staff well-being and retention, while reducing call escalations and demands on management resources. It is quite possible to produce a win-win situation.