

Responding to Conflict with Customers

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Defining Conflict

Conflict should be viewed as neither positive nor negative. Instead, it is an opportunity to identify differences that may need to be addressed when dealing with your internal and external customers. It is not unusual for you to experience conflict when dealing with someone else. In fact it is normal and beneficial as long as you stay focused on the issue rather than personalizing and internalizing the conflict. When you focus on the individual, or vice versa, conflict can escalate and can ultimately do irreparable damage to the relationship.

Conflict typically results when you and someone else disagree about something. The following are some examples five forms of conflict that might occur in your organization.

Between individuals. You and your supervisor or another employee disagrees on the way a customer situation should be handled.

Between and individual and a group. You disagree about a new customer procedure created by your work team.

Between an individual and an organization. A dissatisfied customer feels that your organization is not providing quality products or services.

Between organizational groups. Your department has goals (e.g. the way customer orders are processed or call handling procedure) that create additional requirements or responsibilities for members of another department.

Between organizations. Your organization is targeting the same customers to sell a new product similar to one that an affiliate organization markets to that group.

Causes of Conflict

There are many causes of conflict. The following are some common ones.

Conflicting Values and beliefs. These sometime create situations in which the perceptions of an issue or its impact vary. Since values and beliefs have been learned over long periods of time and are often taken personally at face value, individuals get very defensive when their foundations are challenged. For example, you might have been taught that it is ethically and morally wrong to lie to a customer, yet your supervisor tells you that it's okay to tell *a little white lie* (slight exaggeration) to explain a missed delivery.

Personal Style Differences. In my book *Customer Service Skills for Success*, I identify four behavioral styles that people often manifest and how to effectively deal with each as a service provider. Each person is different and requires special consideration and a unique approach in interactions. For example, your supervisor has a high D style, is much focused, and typically wants to know only the bottom line in any conversation. You have a high E style and find it difficult to share information without providing a lot of details in a highly emotional fashion. When the two of you speak, this can lead to conflict unless one or both of you is willing to adapt your communication style.

Differing Perceptions. People often witness or view an incident or issue differently. This can cause disagreement, frustration and a multitude of other emotional feelings. For example, another employee (Sue) tells you that she is upset because a deadline was missed due to another employee (Fred) not effectively managing his time. Fred later commented to you that your supervisor pulled him off the project in question in order for Fred to work on another assignment. This resulted in his missing the original assignment deadline and a perception by the Sue that he could not manage time.

Inadequate or Poor Communication. Any time there is inadequate communication, the chance for conflict escalates. For example, an angry coworker (Leonard) confides to you that he forgot to tell customer about limitations on your organizations return policy. As a result, when the customer brought a product back, another coworker had to deal with a frustrated and angry customer.

Contrary Expectations. When one party expects something not provided by another, conflict will likely result. For example, your company offers a 90 day parts only warranty on equipment that you sell, however, when it breaks down within that period, the customer expects free service also. If that expectation is not met, you have to deal with conflict and the customer is potentially dissatisfied.

Inadequate Communication. People generally like to know what to expect and do not want a lot of surprises from their supervisor. When they get mixed signals due to inconsistency, frustration and conflict could result. For example, your supervisor told the entire service staff that in the future, each employee would have an opportunity to earn bonuses based on how many customers they could convince to upgrade their membership in the organization. You believe that you have sold the most for the month, yet when you point this out to your supervisor, he tells you that the bonus only applies if you have high sales for two months in a row.

Goals That Are Out of Sync. Frustration and resentment can result from misaligned efforts. For example, you have been working as a service technician for over a year and have learned that, on average, it takes about an hour and a

half to install a new telephone line. Your supervisor regularly counsels you because you do not accomplish the feat within the goal of one hour.

Opposition Over Shared Resources. When two people or groups vie for the same resources, conflict usually results. For example, all monies for employee training are lumped into a central training budget in your organization. You have been requesting to go to a customer service training skills program for the past six months, however, you are told that there is only enough money to train people from the technical staff to learn new computer software.

Outcomes Dependent on Others. Whenever you have two or more people, departments or organizations working jointly toward goal attainment, the potential for conflict exists. For example, your department receives customer orders over the telephone, and then forwards them to the fulfillment department for processing and order shipment. If the fulfillment process breaks down, a customer has your name and number, so they typically contact you. If they are unhappy, it is you who has to placate them and spend time resolving the conflict.

Misuse of Power. Resentment, frustration and retaliation often result when employees believe that their supervisor is abusing their authority or power. For example, you overhear your supervisor telling an attractive employee that unless certain sexual favors are granted, she will not receive a desired promotion.

Guidelines for Effective Conflict Management

Even though each situation and person you deal with will differ, there are some basic approaches that may help in resolution of disagreement(s). Try the following strategies.

Remain Calm. You cannot be part of the solution if you become part of the problem. If you are one of the factors contributing to the conflict, consider getting an objective third party to arbitrate; possibly a coworker or your supervisor.

Be Proactive in Avoiding Conflict. As a customer service representative for your organization, you must try to recognize the personalities of those with whom you come into contact daily. If you are dealing with coworkers or peers, try to identify their capabilities and the environments most conducive to their effectiveness. If you are interacting with a customer, use verbal and non-verbal techniques discussed in earlier chapters to help determine their needs. Approach each person in a fashion that can lead to win-win situations; do not set yourself and others up for conflict or failure.

Keep an Open Mind. Be cautious to avoid letting your own values or beliefs influence your objectivity when working toward conflict identification and resolution. As you will read later, this can cause damage to your long-term relationship(s).

Identify and Confront Underlying Issues Immediately. Because of the emotional issues often involved in dealing with problem situations, few people enjoy dealing with conflict; however, if you fail to acknowledge and confront issues as soon as they become known, tensions may escalate.

Clarify Communication. Ensure that you elicit information on the causes of the conflict and provide the clear, detailed feedback necessary to resolve the issue. This effort can sometimes test your patience and communication skills, but is a necessary step in the resolution process.

Stress Cooperation Rather Than Competition. One of your roles as a service provider is to ensure that you work towards common goals with your coworkers, supervisor, and customers. When one person succeeds at the expense of another's failure, you have not done your job. Encourage and develop teamwork and cooperation when dealing with others.

Focus Resolution Efforts on the Issues. Do not get caught up in or allow finger pointing, name-calling, or accusations. Keep all efforts and discussions directed toward identifying and resolving the real issue(s). Stay away from criticizing or blaming others.

Follow Established Procedures for Handling Conflict. It is easier to implement a process already in place than to have to quickly come up with one. That is why most customer service organizations have set customer complaint handling procedures.

Conflict Resolution Styles

Among other things, the way in which you and your customers deal with conflict is influenced by their behavioral style preference (temperament), cultural values and beliefs, and what they have been taught (learned behavior). The following are five typical approaches to handling conflict were developed by Kenneth Thomas in his book *The Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*.

- *Avoidance* is a totally uncooperative and unassertive way of dealing with conflict. When using this approach, you ignore the conflict; often in the hope that it will simply go away. Generally, this does not work and the issue may resurface again, only with more emotion attached. There are times when this strategy might be appropriate, such as the timing for a discussion is not appropriate or emotions have escalated to a point where physical danger is imminent. In either situation it might be prudent to postpone dealing with a person or issue. Generally, the avoidance approach has a lose-lose outcome in which no one gets what they need or want.

- *Compromise* is a partial resolution and is between assertiveness and cooperativeness. When compromising occurs, both parties give and take in order to resolve a situation. You might consider such a strategy when power or controlling a situation is not important to either party, when trying to just get past an issue, or when it is in the best interest of both parties to maintain the relationship. Typically compromise ends up with a win/lose-win/lose result.
- *Competition* focuses on a dominance mindset in which someone comes out the winner. Highly autocratic personality style people often take this approach to resolving conflict situations. If you choose this approach to dealing with someone who disagrees with you, you likely focus on your success above that of the customer and the organization. This approach is a win-lose strategy in which you win at the expense of your customer's loss and can lead to escalated emotions and ultimately a lost customer.
- *Accommodation* happens when you and your organization takes an approach to dealing with customer conflict that allows the customer to win the outcome. This might be appropriate if you value the relationship (e.g. a long-time customer who spends a lot of money with your organization) or if what the customer wants is really inconsequential compared to what might happen if you do not grant their wish (e.g. the customer wants you to pay overnight shipping for an item because it was out of stock when ordered and they need it for a special event). This can create challenges if not done correctly because some customers might come to expect similar concessions each time something goes wrong in the future. In the extreme, this approach is a lose-win strategy and ends up with you and your organization giving in and "losing" while the customer gains everything desired.
- *Collaboration* results in the only true win-win outcome for both parties. When collaborating, you and your customer actively try to see the other person's perspective and come to a mutual agreement. For this option to work, trust is crucial. It is a good strategy to try to bring out and resolve lingering issues and to creatively solve a problem. Collaboration is both cooperative and assertive in its approach.

Salvaging Relationships Following Conflict

Managing conflict involves more than just resolving the disagreement. If you fail to address the emotional and psychological needs of those involved, you may find the conflict returning and/or severe damage to the relationship may occur.

Depending on the severity of the conflict and how it was handled at each step of the resolution process, it may be impossible to go back to the point in the relationship that you were in before the disagreement. The key to reducing this

possibility is to identify and address conflicting issues as early as possible. The longer an issue remains unresolved, the more damage it can cause. Whenever possible, apply one or more of the following strategies to help protect and salvage the relationship(s) between you and your coworkers, supervisor and customers.

Reaffirm the value of the relationship. You cannot assume that others feel the same as you or understand your intent unless you communicate it. Tell them how much you value your relationship. This is especially important when dealing with customers.

Demonstrate commitment. You must verbalize and demonstrate your desire to continue or strengthen your relationship. The way to do this with customers is through service recovery or working collectively with the customer to rebuild trust and the relationship.

Be realistic. Because of behavioral styles, it is difficult for some people to "forgive and forget." You have to systematically help restore their trust. It can take a while to accomplish this, but the effort is well worth it.

Remain flexible. A solid relationship involves the ability to give and take. It is especially crucial that you and the other people involved make concessions following conflict.

Keep communication open. One of the biggest causes of conflict and destroyed relationships is poor communication.

Gain commitment. You cannot do it all by yourself. Get a commitment to work toward reconciliation from any other person(s) involved in the conflict.

Monitor progress. Do not assume because the conflict was resolved that it will remain that way. Deep seated issues often resurface, especially when commitment was not obtained

Source: *Customer Service Skills for Success*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY).

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