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Effective Conflict Resolution (CDE #16067)

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The dictionary defines conflict as “a state of disagreement and disharmony; clash.” Conflicts can arise in a communications center at many different levels. Conflicts can occur between calltakers and callers or between employees on shift.

Most verbal conflicts start because one (or all) of the participants listens and responds emotionally, rather than intuitively and intellectually. Responding emotionally is like adding fuel to a fire: it only serves to inflame an already volatile situation.

Here are five listening techniques you can use to apply an intuitive and intellectual response to verbal conflicts.

- 1. Listen to the speaker’s whole message before forming an opinion or formulating a response.** Do not filter the message. Do not form opinions about and responses to only those elements you agree or disagree with.
- 2. Listen objectively to the intent of the message.** Do not use preconceived opinions or biases to jump to assumptions about the speaker’s intent.
- 3. Do not react emotionally to the speaker’s nonverbal communication.** Remain professional and controlled.
- 4. Listen to the speaker nonjudgmentally and with empathy.** Respect the speaker’s point of view, even if you disagree with it. Keep the channels of communication open. Encourage the speaker to come up with an acceptable solution to the problem/conflict.
- 5. Present your position clearly and concisely.** Make sure you communicate your understanding of the conflict/problem and the reasons behind your position. The speaker may not agree or like your position, however he or she will know it was reached fairly and is based on an objective understanding of the issues presented.

Applying these five techniques can assist significantly in defusing verbal conflicts. In addition, you can use other conflict-resolution techniques, depending on the situation.

Conflict Resolution between Calltakers and Callers

Conflicts between calltakers and callers can occur when calltakers are faced with argumentative or difficult callers. The best technique calltakers can use to defuse a potential conflict situation is to remain focused, professional and calm. This means:

- Never argue with callers. Gather the pertinent information relative to the events reported and do not allow yourself to be drawn into argumentative dialogues with callers. Always remember it takes two to argue.
- Control your emotions. It may be difficult when trying to deal with individuals determined to create conflict, but keep your emotions in check. Responding in anger to already angry individuals only escalates the situation. Remember you are not the problem; you are part of the solution.

Conflict Resolution among Employees

Whenever you have groups of individuals working in close contact, particularly in stressful environments, conflicts are inevitable. Little spats handled responsibly by the involved parties are normal and can serve to clear the air. However, when individual conflicts escalate until they affect center morale and productivity, supervisory intervention is required.

Here are the steps supervisors should follow to resolve conflict among employees.

- 1. Meet privately with each party involved.** Listen to all sides carefully to make sure you understand each point of view and why the conflict has occurred.
- 2. If necessary, do an independent review.** Seek the root of the problem.
- 3. Determine a solution that serves the best interests of the parties involved and the center.**
- 4. Bring the parties together and present your understanding of the conflict/problem.** Make every effort to get each party to understand the other's point of view and agree on an appropriate solution to the problem.
- 5. If the parties cannot agree on an appropriate solution, explain clearly and concisely the solution you have determined.** Stress that your decision is based on a fair and balanced analysis of the facts and the solution you are imposing is in the best interests of all parties and the center.

Sometimes conflict is based on unspecified dislike. When two individuals dislike each other, no magic formula can make them friends. However, two or more employees in open warfare can affect morale and productivity significantly. In this type of situation, supervisors must insist the parties involved put aside their personal feelings and behave in a professional, non-confrontational manner while on duty. If the parties cannot do this, some form of disciplinary action may be required.

About the Author

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