

SOME TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH AN ANGRY PHONE CONTACT

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As the information age spins to dazzling speeds, some may feel lost and overlooked by the systems, services and institutions they view exist to serve them. Some people withdraw — resigning themselves to the margins of social dialogue. Others react with anger. In today's relatively open society, many feel heightened stakeholder rights to the decision-making processes of our large organizations, whether they be academic, private industry, or governmental.

On a broader social level, there is growing recognition that civility issues are a growing concern in society in general. While this is not an exclusively recent phenomenon, many organizations now see the manifestation of this trend in growing contacts from angry, frustrated, or openly hostile people. Often these people shroud themselves with the readily available anonymity afforded by today's many alternative electronic venues, such as e-mail, voice-mail or web-based computer systems, and as a result, the normal constraints of civility are eroded. Sometimes they are simply proud to be openly and heroically hostile to a particular organization or type of business.

Recently, a number of ombuds have experienced encounters that challenge our abilities to understand what the motives and drivers of a particularly hostile contact have been. Here are some ideas we hope will help prepare you for such an encounter, though we hope you will never need them.

- Whenever possible, know who it is that you are communicating with — anonymity seems to lower inhibitions relating to civility. Likewise, if you know your contact you may have resources to help you understand their drivers, interests and perspectives.

- Treat your caller as a person and make sure that they understand that they are speaking with a feeling person too. Often people develop frustrations focused on the big and impersonal organization. If they appreciate you as a fellow member of the human caste your caller may gain a better ability to keep things in perspective.

- Never attempt to argue with zealots or challenge the caller's ideology, as bizarre or illogical, or antisocial as it may be. This does not mean that you need to suffer abusive or

harassing treatment, but there is little prospect that anything you say will rattle long-standing prejudices or conclusions about reality.

- Deflect hostile comments into opportunities to understand the caller's needs or sensitivities. Rather than reacting to an attempt to find your "hot button," it is often very disarming to respond to the effort with a question seeking an explanation of why the caller seeks to focus on this

- If you make a follow-up commitment to the caller, be certain to conservatively shape the caller's expectations. Never over-promise. Failure to come through on a commitment will serve as evidence in the caller's mind of the lack of commitment demonstrated by you and the institution. It is better to be frugal in your commitments and exceed them.

- Know when to cut your loses. The person may not respond to efforts to channel anger and hostility into an issue-focused dialogue. When this happens, you are under no obligation to serve as the person's punching bag.

- Check your information and sources before providing information. Avoid enabling a sense of justification for anger by giving the person an ostensibly valid excuse.

- Be guarded when sharing information. Whenever possible, avoid situations where it is likely that you will be misquoted. Misinformation attributed to you as an ombudsman damages the credibility of the office. Angry people are often challenged listeners. You may find it is preferable to insist that the caller receive the information through a source that can provide it in writing.

- Appreciate your own limitations and draw on help from experts when they are available.

- Practice reasonable tolerance and patience, but likewise demand basic decorum and observe it. Don't get drawn into the drama.

- Keep your own perspective and don't be afraid to laugh at yourself and to learn from your mistakes. Each challenging communication with an angry or hostile person is unique, and will rarely come off perfectly.

- Finally, honor the Ombuds Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics. These will provide useful anchors and benchmarks when assessing your role. ●



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