

DEALING WITH ANGRY CLIENTS - PEACEFULLY

By Barb Pierce, BEng, MBA, PCC, CEC

One of my clients—I will call him Adam—recently wanted to focus on how to have difficult conversations *without* the stress and drama. He works in customer service in the construction industry, so he regularly has to deal with angry homeowners.

Dealing with hostile people was causing him a great deal of inner turmoil. He gets flustered and takes it very personally when clients get angry with him. It affects his digestion and causes anxiety. It was time for a change.

By learning to engage his clients in collaborative conversations, he will calm emotions, allow the other person to be heard, and create the conditions that will lead to the best possible outcome.

What makes the coach approach unique in dealing with clients is that it allows you to create a strong connection and work *together* to solve the problem.

THE CASE FOR COACHING

A relationship built on the coach approach includes trust, safety and connection. It is a relationship where the coach guides the client to make her own best decisions. The coach allows the client to determine her own best action steps instead of telling her what to do or assuming that she (the coach) knows the answer. The coach does this by helping the client investigate various options and explore and choose specific and tangible actions.

THE STEPS TO CLIENT SATISFACTION USING THE COACH APPROACH

The coach creates the conditions for success by following five simple steps.

1. **Change the Energy of the Conversation**

Your frame of mind is key to engaging in coaching discussions, and the way you think about your client impacts the mood and outcome of the resulting conversation. Consider incorporating some or all of the following assumptions when you meet with clients:

- *Acknowledge that each person is influenced by, and operates from, their own model of the world*
- *The meaning of communication received is the response it produces*
- *Every behavior has a positive intention*
- *Everyone is always doing what they believe is right*



- *The behavior or decision that an individual makes is the best choice available to them given the circumstances as they see it*
- *There are no unresourceful people, only unresourceful states*

Even if you don't know any other coaching techniques, this mind-set alone will change the energy of the exchange. Instead of perpetuating hostility and a feeling of 'us and them,' you learn to empathize with your client and create the conditions required for a successful outcome. When you see your client from the eyes of compassion and ask how you can best serve her, your demeanor and thought processes will change. Your tone will soften and your facial expressions will emote the feeling that you are there to help. You will notice your client calm down and be more open to a peaceful dialogue.



2. Acknowledge Your Client's Request or Complaint

Listen.

Until your client is heard and acknowledged, you will not be able to move towards the optimal solution. Before you do anything, simply acknowledge what your client has said—without adding your own meaning and interpretations.

Coach: How can I help you today?

Client: I am very frustrated. You are the fourth person I have called in the last two weeks. My kitchen cabinets have dents in them. I don't know why they were installed. The workers knew about the dents before they put them in. Why is it so hard to get answers? I feel like I am getting the runaround. I want to know when they will be repaired or replaced.

Coach: I am hearing that you are frustrated. I am the fourth person you have spoken to about the dents in your cabinets and you want to know when they will be repaired or replaced. Is that right?

Client: Yes.

3. Confirm the Intention for the Client's Call or Visit

*“The increasingly frequent “a-ha” for most organizations it seems, is that people skills are not **soft** after all. They are absolutely hard-core business critical.”*

Jane Moran

Coach: How can I best help you today?

Client: I want to know what you are going to do about my dented cabinets.

Coach: What would be the best outcome for our conversation today that would make you feel completely satisfied?

Client: I will know what you are going to do about my cabinets and when it is going to happen.

4. Develop Possibilities

Coach: Have you thought about the possibilities open to resolving this?

Client: At first I was so mad I wanted everything taken out. When I calmed down, I realized that I would

accept having the damaged cabinets replaced. I want it to be easy, though. One visit to confirm the damage and one visit to make the repairs.

Coach: Is there anything else you need?

Client: An apology would go a long way.

Coach: If you had a quick, two visit repair and an apology, would that satisfy you?

Client: Yes. I would feel much better about this.

5. Develop an Action Plan

Coach: Can we work together to determine the next steps to make sure that they work for you and for our company?

Client: (more willing to engage now) Yes.

Coach: I need to call our kitchen contractor. I know that you have been angry with them, but it will be more complicated and will take longer if I am the intermediary. Can I arrange to meet you on site with the kitchen contractor to plan out how we can make this right?

Client: Yes, that makes sense.

Coach: Can you give me some times that you are available and I will check with the kitchen contractor on his availability.

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SUMMARY

By changing how you perceive the client, and allowing her complaint to be fully heard and acknowledged, you will open the door to a more peaceful dialogue. Then, by engaging the client in a collaborative discussion in which you work **together** on the solution, you help her to feel that her opinions are important to you, and that you value her as a customer.

By incorporating these simple steps, you will find that your client conversations are more pleasant and productive. Your stress levels will decrease and your time dealing with complaints will be more productive and satisfying.



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“ Because coaching has proven to be so effective, many major corporations invest in internal coaching and mentoring programs, usually for executives, leaders, and managers.”

Marilee Goldberg