



## Training Your Staff to Deal with Difficult Customers

Everybody's got them whether internal or external. It seems that no matter how high our level of customer service response is, there is always that one or two customers who want the impossible delivered immediately.

Savvy managers realize that the interaction with what feels like impossible customers and his/her staff is inevitable. While the boss tries to intervene in those episodes, it isn't always possible. Training staff to deal with unreasonable customers is the best way to ensure that the customer service reputation is preserved, and maybe even strengthened.

Consider this scenario. We are aboard a Bermuda to New York cruise ship and on our way home. We had narrowly missed a hurricane while we were in Bermuda, and the remaining seas were very rough. We are walking through the Purser's Lobby when we see a little elderly lady grasping the Purser by his necktie, pulling him down to face-to-face interaction. "Young man, the ship is rocking," she shouted. "Yes Ma'am," he replied all the while smiling. "We're out on the open ocean, and sometimes those seas are rough, and we feel it." "Make it stop," she demanded. "Well, I wish I could, but control of the ocean is well beyond any of our abilities. Rest assured that our captain and crew are doing everything we can to smooth out our ride. Is there some way I can ease the ride for you?" She relinquished her grip on his tie and told him that she still wasn't happy but felt better now that she'd talked to him.

When we talked to this young man to congratulate him, he explained that he knew his staff was watching, and their ongoing training was very important. He was intentionally modeling the kind of response he wanted from them. Impossible customer demands will come up again, and that is when the training really gets tested.

Of course, the first step in training your staff is training yourself. The manager must be the model for how it's done, regardless of the customer's approach or style. For many leaders, this is a daunting demand. Once the manager has accepted the responsibility for maintaining the service level within the department, he/she must walk the walk to deliver it.

Staff need to know and be comfortable with the idea that their manager will back them up in contentious situations. In many cases, the manager should be ready and willing to take over for staff dealing with especially difficult situations.

Once the manager is satisfied with their own ability to deal with difficult customer situations, training the staff is next.

It begins with a clear description of the service standards and outcomes the manager expects. When that is established, then one-on-one sessions immediately following a customer interaction is vital. These sessions are not negative for the staff person, rather, they are efforts to see what is needed to meet the standards and outcomes the manager seeks.

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These one-on-one sessions are especially effective following a highly successful customer interaction. Praise from the boss, specifically focused on the department standards, is the best and fastest way to encourage replicated behavior. When the manager offers detailed feedback on the behaviors that were effective in the recent customer interaction, he/she can expect to see those behaviors repeated.

Of course, there are other ways to train the staff to deal with difficult customers. Some managers go out of their way to bring in newspaper and magazine stories that highlight customer service situations. A portion of each staff meeting is devoted to a discussion of the pros and cons shown in the articles.

We know of one manager who uses role play with his team. The manager typically plays the impossible customer, and the staff discusses how they should approach the situation. The manager can step out of the customer role and join the discussion. Or repeat it with a different approach.

Naturally exercises and/or feedback for the staff generates team work. Once the training gets rolling, the staff become a team of “experts” on how to deal with difficult customers. More importantly, they collectively own the responsibility to establish and maintain a set of standards and targets for service effectiveness. It is not just the boss’ problem any more.

