



City of Eugene ❖ Eugene Police Department

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Dealing With Confrontations

If you deal with the public, you will at some point be dealing with someone who is upset or unruly. This topic provides some ways to plan for and handle confrontations.

Service Orientation

Unruly people have to be predisposed to unruliness and/or set off by something during their encounter with you. You only have control over the latter. You exercise this control by providing good service. Unfortunately, that won't be enough sometimes.

Make the Line Clear

By spelling out those behaviors that are unacceptable in advance, you ensure that everyone knows unacceptable conduct when they see it. Yelling? Ethnic insults? Physical contact? Spell it out in a policy and make sure everyone knows it.

Be Prepared

Everyone should know what protection measures are available, what responses are agreed upon, and what they can do to help each other. If threats or confrontations are anticipated, make sure fellow workers know about it.

Safety First

Trust your intuition. If you feel you are dealing with a potential threat, take extra precautions. Is there someone nearby who can back you up? Do you have a clear path for escape if necessary? As risk escalates, so should safety measures. When in doubt, get help or get out.

When you decide someone's a potential threat, determine:

A. Do I want to deal with this person by myself?

- If "YES," approach with caution, evaluating the situation.
- If "NO," get someone to help you or watch over you (see B).
- If "HECK NO" don't hesitate to call police or security (see D).

B. Can I deal with this person if I have someone watching or helping?

- If "YES," approach with caution, evaluating the situation (see C).
- If "NO," don't hesitate to call police or security (see D).

C. Now that I've met the person, can I deal with them?

- If "YES," decide on how best to placate and serve them. See the tactics in the following section for ideas.
- If "NO," don't hesitate to call police or security (see D).

D. If you are being threatened, get away and call for help.

When you call, identify the misbehavior, so helpers understand what you're up against. If worse comes to worse, protect life over possessions. Always choose your safest option.

Intervention

If you decide to intervene, try not to add to the problem:

- Keep body language neutral. For example, don't cross your arms or roll your eyes.
- Keep your voice calm, warm and cooperative. Use respectful and courteous language.
- Offer an apology, even if you did nothing wrong.
- Avoid commands, sarcasm, or using facts to invalidate the person's feelings.

Take Control

- Take the person aside. A customer is more likely to be flexible if they don't feel they are losing face in front of their friends.
- Set limits quickly and specifically. For example, "Calm down!" isn't specific. Instead, try "I will help you, but I need you to stop yelling first." This describes exactly what the visitor is supposed to do and puts the responsibility for the next step on them.

Listen to Understand

Sometimes people get frustrated because they feel ignored. Offering to listen carefully to their concerns may be all you need to defuse a situation. For example, "Please tell me what happened." Ask for their thoughts, feelings, desires, expectations, perceptions. Taking notes shows that you respect them and take their problem seriously.

First Deal with the Emotions...

Then deal with the problem. If you try to overlook that someone is highly agitated, their misbehavior may escalate until you acknowledge their emotional state. It's difficult for people to make rational decisions about behavior while emotionally in crisis. If you can help them dispel the emotional charge, they'll be in a better position to make rational decisions about behavior.

Help with Problem-Solving

Focus on the immediate crisis -- what led up to this crisis, what triggered their distress today, what piece of the problem can be dealt with here and now, and what requires

action further down the road? Ask them to be specific and concrete. Start with an open-ended question (e.g., "What's wrong?") This can let them vent further while trying to define the problem. Then pin down the problem with a "yes or no" closed-ended question (i.e. "Let me make sure I understand what you're saying. Are you telling me that your problem right now is that you need a place to sleep for the night?")

Provide Options

People don't like to hear a flat "NO." Always try to present some sort of options or service in a positive manner, even if you can't give them what they want. If you are offering something (e.g., "Let me make a call for you..." or "I will check to see if we have any openings in the next class") you will come across as helpful. If you are denying help (i.e. "No, we can't let you into that class," or "No, we don't provide that service.") you may be perceived as part of the problem.

When Nothing Else Works: Get Help!

Support each other. A second person on the scene can make you feel safer and be safer. They can distract the offender, make phone calls or step in and help. Isolation always works against you; allies make you safer.

For more information

Call (541) 682-5137 or e-mail the Eugene Police Crime Prevention Specialist.