

How to manage conflict rather than have it manage you



You can earn a Doctorate in Conflict Analysis and Resolution, but I think most of us have earned some credits for coping with conflict on the street level, and certainly in the hosting industry.

Managing Conflict

The key is learning how to manage conflict rather than have it manage you. I avoid disputes whenever possible, but realize they're inevitable – so instead of reacting on an emotional level, my solution is to manage them proactively. Part of that is being solution focused versus problem focused. It's all about communications; understanding what your personal triggers are, then mapping out the opposing positions, finding common ground, and then proposing win-win solutions.

Conflict Awareness

First, you should understand your own conflict patterns, then develop and practice methods to listen more effectively, map out the conflicts, and learn to differentiate difficult people from difficult behavior. We all know the type. Some clients and prospects just instinctively know what hot buttons to press.

Moving Beyond Conflict



What we're really talking about here is developing professional skill sets to increase the success of your business operations. Customer support is very much about resolving customer conflicts or problems. While the solution could be purely technical, the perception of value rests with your client. How well you communicate relates directly to customer churn. Bad communication skills = high customer churn. Great communication skills = raving fans and a loyal customer base.

The key, I think, is to actively listen, showing genuine interest and concern. Clarify the problem; ask questions, then listen – separating emotions from issues. Sometimes, you just have to say NO, it won't work. And after conflicts are managed, it's important to solicit feedback.

How Important is Feedback



Feedback is so important that you should reach out to your clients randomly to ascertain their comfort level with your products or services. Perhaps your perception that they're satisfied clients is completely off track, and they're actively searching for a new provider. How would you know until they sent in their cancellation request? At that point, you become reactive instead of proactive. Again, it's all about effective communications and productive interactions.

Some recommendations from other support groups

"I would say to take everyone out back and beat them with rolled up newspaper, but I know that is not the answer."

"For our company we do try to avoid being "over personal" when conflicts come up, as it seems emotions tied to work and everything thinking they "did more", "work more", etc. end up getting the better of everyone involved."

"I find that screaming as loud as I can at the other person always helps."

"Communication, communication, communication! Oh, did I mention communication!?! I totally agree that communication is extremely important to handling conflict."

I think that it's always best to approach things like this with a clear head, and sometimes the newspaper doesn't hurt either (just kidding).

Some examples

1. I had a prospect accuse me of being deceptive a few years back because I wouldn't offer him the same specific dedicated server that he said his friend had with us. Turned out his friend was collocating with us and purchased his server elsewhere. Plus, the only info

he gave me was the IP address of his friend's server – not his name. This was one of those cases where I had to say we did not offer that specific dedicated server, but could collocate one with those specs if he wanted. What complicated this was that he was a foreign prospect, and the translation wasn't easy. This chat could have gone any number of directions based on my questions. Thankfully, I was able to piece enough of the pieces of the puzzle together to at least answer his query. When a prospect accuses you of being deceptive, it's hard not to let emotion get in the way of resolving the underlying issue.

2. Way back when I was a field technician (customer engineer), I serviced high end typesetters and the going rate for service (non-contract) was \$120 flat rate for the first hour of service. That seems high, but these typesetters sold for \$35,000 and up. Anyway, I took one of those calls where the client hovers over you, watching every move you make. On this call, a wire had fallen off one side of a fuse that powered the floppy drives (I did say this was years ago). The entire call took maybe 5 minutes, but I had to charge them \$120 anyway. Needless to say, the client balked at having to spend so much money on a simple repair. Depending on how I reacted, this situation could have turned sour very quickly. Instead, I simply explained that the call only took five minutes to resolve because I know where to look because of my training. In reality, I was allowing them to get back online quicker, and do what they do best.

Our 26th President, Theodore Roosevelt, explained conflict resolution as "Speak softly and carry a big stick." While I think that's true in some situations, to succeed in today's business world, a rolled-up newspaper might be a better option.

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