



DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

INTRODUCTION

Our community expects every City employee to deliver quality customer service with every interaction. While the majority of interactions with our customers are positive and courteous, sometimes City employees encounter upset or angry customers. Working with upset or angry customers can be one of the hardest, most stressful part of an employee's job. This document provides techniques for employees to deal with difficult customers in a courteous manner. In addition, this document provides procedures and protocols for employees to take when difficult customers cross the line.

If an employee feels his or her safety, other employees' safety, or other customer's safety are in danger, employees should contact law enforcement. Threats of violence or physical violence is NOT acceptable behavior by anyone and we expect employees in these instances to contact law enforcement immediately.

IMPORTANT NUMBERS

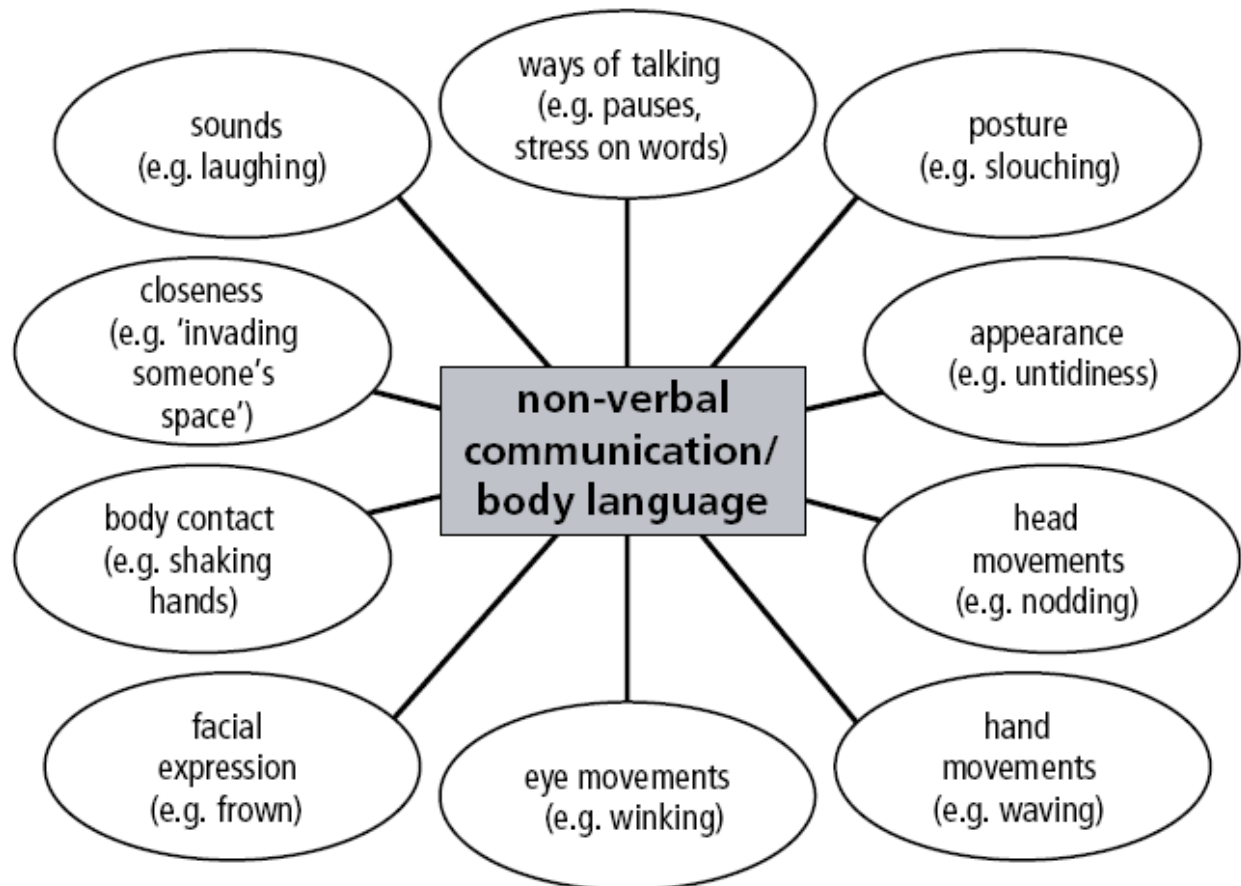
EMERGENCY – CALL 911

SHERIFF'S OFFICE DISPATCH – (386) 313-4911

HUMAN RESOURCES – (386) 986-3718

NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOR

When dealing with potentially upset or angry people, nonverbal communication and its impact on whether the situation will escalate or not is critical. When a person is losing control, he or she will focus on non-verbal communication cues more than on rational communication.



Kinesics – the message transmitted through the body posture and motion

- Do not stand face to face/shoulder to shoulder, this is perceived as a challenging position
- Do not hold your hands on your hips
- Do not cross your arms
- Do not make negative facial expressions
- Do not make negative body/facial gestures
- Do not stand with your hands in your pockets

Do (respect space/non-threatening)

- Do stand at an angle – this provides a non-threatening/non –challenging posture
- Do maintain eye contact

PARA-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Para-verbal communication – vocal part of the speech excluding the actual words – not what you say but ‘how’ you say it.

Experts agree that only a minor portion of the messages we send comes through our words. The major part of our communication comes through our non-verbal as well as our para-verbal communication.

Staff must be consciously aware of how they are speaking to someone as much as what you are saying.

- Tone – inflection or pitch
- Volume – loud or soft
- Cadence – rate and rhythm (fast/slow)

By altering the tone, volume and rate of speech, words can be a gesture of support or an insulting and sarcastic message.

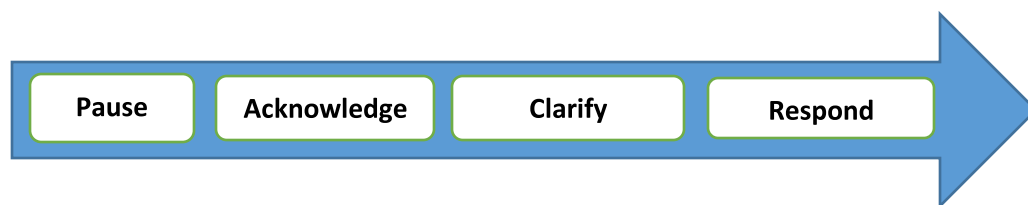
BE PART OF THE SOLUTION, NOT THE PROBLEM

Pause and Listen. This will allow the customers to express themselves.

Acknowledge. Show empathy and demonstrate that you are taking the customer seriously.

Clarify. State back to the customer what you heard, asking questions for clarification.

Respond. Your response needs to be positive and appropriate (even when it may not be what they want to hear). When you say that you are going to do something, make sure you do it or the issues will escalate creating a **REALLY** difficult customer.



SUPPORTIVE TECHNIQUES TO DESCALATE SITUATION

Anxiety: Noticeable change or increase in behavior

Tapping feet

Fidgeting

Pacing

Sighing loudly

Complaining to others

Supportive Staff Response

Be empathetic

Non-judgmental

Active listening

Be patient

Remain Calm

Allow them to vent

Restate the situation

Non-Supportive Staff Response

Over-reacting

Use of sarcasm

Fake attention or inattention

Giving ultimatums

Dismissing the person as

a chronic complainer

Defensive: Belligerent, challenging and hostile behavior

Aggressive

Loud

Clenched fists

Tightening of facial muscles

Supportive Staff Response

Be direct

State facts

Stay in control

Be clear & simple

Non-Supportive Staff Response

Freezing up

Over-reacting

Use of Sarcasm

Engaging in argument

BAD NEWS

Sometimes you have to tell a customer something they do not want to hear.

Two methods to give bad news that can keep the conversation positive:

1. **Instead of saying what you cannot do, say what you can do.** Tell the customer what is within your scope of authority.

Example: Customer has not paid their bill and came in today because they received a Final Notice Card:

“Yes, I see that your water is scheduled to be turned off on Tuesday. Here is what I can do... (Explain options for payment arrangements and assistance programs).”

Makes the customer feel you are working with them and trying to help.

2. **When you have to give bad news, ease it by making some positive statements.** Words like appreciate, glad and clarify are positive and help keep the situation positive. (As opposed to saying “Let me see what’s **wrong**,” or “I see the **problem**” or “You **misunderstood**.”)

Example: A customer believes their bill is incorrect because it is higher than usual:

“I appreciate your concern. I am looking at your account and I see (provide justification or ask more open ended questions for clarification). “Thank you for clarifying (provide justification or resolution)”.

CLOSING

The City is committed to providing a safe work environment. While we acknowledge that some of those that we come in contact with may be angry or upset, we want not only to provide you with guidelines and tools for dealing with difficult customers, but also want you to feel free to discuss any concerns or issues you may have. Following, you will find Procedures and Protocols by environment that can be utilized as a tool.

PROCEDURES AND PROTOCOLS BY ENVIRONMENT

When the techniques above no longer work and customers become increasingly rude or angry, employees should follow the procedures and protocols within this section. For ease of understanding, customer behavior is classified by color code by customer behaviors. These color codes are general in nature and should be used as guide for dealing with customers in the different environments.

Behavior Type	Description <i>Examples</i>
Yelling or Profane or Vulgar Language	Yelling or profane language not directed at the employee <i>This is fuc@#\$% ridiculous!</i>
Directed Profane or Vulgar Language	Profanity or vulgar language directed at the employee <i>You are a fu#@%\$% idiot! or I bet you slept with someone to get this job.</i>
Non-Directed Threats of Physical Violence or Threats of City Property Damage	Physical threats of violence directed at others or general threats of City Property Damage <i>Who do I need to knock around to get something done? or The next time I see a City white pickup, I am going to slash the tires.</i>
Harassment or Continued Disruptive Behavior	Continued engagement by a customer of one employee or several employees to irritate, intimidate, or disrupt the workplace Typically this continued behavior interferes with employees ability help other customers or carry out their duties
Directed Threats of Physical Violence	Physical threats of violence directed to an employee <i>You want to take this outside. or I am going to kick your a\$\$.</i>
Combination or Repeated Inappropriate Behaviors (Directed Profane or Vulgar Language, Non-Directed Threats, or Harassment)	Any combination, or repetition of the those orange coded customer behaviors
Deliberate City Property Damage or Physical Violence	Deliberate damage to city property or unwanted physical contact, such as hitting, pushing, or spitting
Combination or Repeated Directed Threats of Physical Violence	Any combination, or repetition of those red coded customer behaviors

IN THE OFFICE

Increasingly difficult customers in the office environment can be very disruptive to employees trying to carry out their normal work duties and the public conducting business at City Offices. When difficult customers cross the line in the office environment, the procedures and protocols below should be followed.

Behavior Type	In the Office Procedures and Protocols
Yelling or Profane or Vulgar Language	Warn the customer that the language is unacceptable and ask if they would like to come back after they calm down.
Directed Profane or Vulgar Language Non-Directed Threats of Physical Violence or Threats of City Property Damage Harassment	Warn the customer that the language or behavior is unacceptable and if it continues they will be asked to leave the building. If they continue, contact your supervisor immediately. Either the employee or supervisor (if present) should ask the customer to leave the building. If the customer refuses to leave the building, inform the customer that you are contacting the Sheriff's Office. Call the Sheriff's Office Dispatch and report the incident. Report the incident to your supervisor and follow-up in writing. Supervisors should notify Human Resources immediately and forward written information to Human Resources.
Directed Threats of Physical Violence	Inform the customer that you are contacting the Sheriff's Office and ask them to leave the premises. Call 911 to report the incident. If available, pull the silent alarm. Report the incident to your supervisor as soon as possible and follow-up in writing. Supervisors should notify Human Resources immediately and forward written information to Human Resources.
Deliberate City Property Damage or Physical Violence	Call 911 immediately to report the incident. If available, pull the silent alarm. Report the incident to your supervisor as soon as possible and follow-up in writing. Supervisors should notify Human Resources immediately and forward written information to Human Resources.

IN THE FIELD

The most vulnerable place for employees interacting with difficult customers is in the field. Generally, these encounters only involve two parties: the difficult customer and the employee. Extra care should be taken by employees to avoid these situations and leave the scene immediately if difficult customers become upset or angry.

Behavior Type	In the Field Procedures and Protocols
Yelling or Profane or Vulgar Language	Attempt to deescalate the situation. If situation continues to escalate, leave the scene immediately and report to incident to your supervisor.
Directed Profane or Vulgar Language Non-Directed Threats of Physical Violence or Threats of City Property Damage Harassment or Continued Disruptive Behavior	Leave the scene immediately. Report the incident immediately to your supervisor and follow-up in writing. Supervisors should forward this information to Human Resources.
Directed Threats of Physical Violence	Leave scene immediately. Contact Sheriff's Office Dispatch to report the incident. Report the incident to your supervisor as soon as possible and follow-up in writing. Supervisors should notify Human Resources immediately and forward written information to Human Resources.
Deliberate City Property Damage or Physical Violence	If possible, leave scene immediately. Call 911 immediately to report the incident. Report the incident to your supervisor as soon as possible and follow-up in writing. Supervisors should notify Human Resources immediately and forward written information to Human Resources.

ON THE PHONE

When customers on the phone become rude or angry and the techniques described above are not affecting the customers behavior positively, please follow the procedures and protocols below by color coded behavior type.

Behavior Type	On the Phone Procedures and Protocols
Yelling or Profane or Vulgar Language	Warn the caller that if the behavior continues the conversation will be terminated. Explain why the behavior is unacceptable. If the customer persists, tell the customer you are terminating the call and report the incident to your supervisor. Document any information about the call (name, number, account, address, etc.)
Directed Profane or Vulgar Language Non-Directed Threats of Physical Violence or Threats of City Property Damage Harassment or Continued Disruptive Behavior	Warn the caller that if the behavior continues the conversation will be terminated. Explain why the behavior is unacceptable. If the customer persists, tell the customer you are terminating the call and report the incident immediately to your supervisor and follow-up in writing. Document any information about the call (name, number, account, address, etc.). Supervisors should forward this information to Human Resources.
Directed Threats of Physical Violence	Tell the customer you are terminating the call. Call the Flagler County Sherriff's Office Dispatch immediately and report the incident. Report the incident to your supervisor immediately and follow-up in writing. Document any information about the call (name, number, account, address, etc.). Supervisors should notify Human Resources immediately and forward written information to Human Resources.

IN WRITING

When customers send written correspondence through emails or letters that cross the line, please follow the procedures and protocols below by color coded behavior type. Please note that written threats of violence must be taken just as serious as over the phone or in person.

Behavior Type	In Writing Procedures and Protocols
Profane or Vulgar Language	Forward the written communication to your supervisor for their response. Supervisors should respond to any substantive issues contained in the written correspondence and document the communication.
Directed Profane or Vulgar Language Non-Directed Threats of Physical Violence or Threats of City Property Damage Harassment or Continued Disruptive Behavior	Forward the written communication to your supervisor for their response. Supervisors should respond to any substantive issues contained in the written correspondence and explain that the language or threats contained in the written correspondence are not acceptable. Supervisors should forward the written correspondence and response to Human Resources.
Directed Threats of Physical Violence	Forward the written communication to your supervisor immediately. Supervisors should contact Human Resources and the Flagler County Sherriff's Office Dispatch to report the incident.

CAUTION LIST FOR EMPLOYEES

Human Resources will maintain a list and make available to City employees regularly. Depending upon the nature of the event, immediate notification may be made either via e-mail, phone or 800 Megahertz radio. Pictures and other pertinent information (vehicle type, plate number, etc.) will also be provided/retained according to the schedule below.

Behavior Type	Protocols for Future Interaction	When to Remove from List
Yelling or Profane or Vulgar Language	Employee or Supervisor	Not Added to List
Directed Profane or Vulgar Language Non-Directed Threats of Physical Violence or Threats of City Property Damage Harassment or Continued Disruptive Behavior	Supervisor or Director or City Administration	3 Years from Last Event
Directed Threats of Physical Violence Combination or Repeated Inappropriate Behaviors (Directed Profane or Vulgar Language, Non-Directed Threats, or Harassment)	City Administration	5 Years from Last Event
Deliberate City Property Damage or Physical Violence Combination or Repeated Directed Threats of Physical Violence	City Administration with Sherriff's Office Presence	Never