

Dealing with **HOSTILITY**

Responding to occasional angry verbal or physical outbursts directed at you, your co-workers, or your employer represents a challenge. Learning effective ways of dealing with hostility is essential.

You may not deserve it, but you are bound to be on the receiving end of hostility at some time. It is all too easy to let hostility from others get the best of us. We may retreat, give in more than we should, and end up feeling used or abused. Or we may overreact and get hostile in return. An insult may escalate to a name calling match or worse.

This newsletter looks at ways to handle antagonism that comes from customers, fellow workers, or the public. While some of the suggestions may be useful in responding to friends and family, this newsletter focuses on situations that are not part of our intimate lives. This kind of hostility is easier to **objectify - easier to view in terms of facts, avoiding personal feelings or prejudice**. It is impossible to completely ignore our own feelings. However, it is possible to feel shock or anger and still objectify what is happening. Think of the police officer who may feel berated with insults yet still behaves professionally while writing the ticket.

Best Ways to Handle Hostility

Suggestions for handling hostilities in the best ways possible -

Focus on similarities not differences. Direct the interaction towards problem solving. Something as simple as, *I would be upset too if this happened to me; what can we do to try and solve things?* or *This is not good, can we do something about it?* A response that tells the other person you are with them, not against them, and want to move towards a solution is an important skill to possess.

Do not make the person the problem. Mutually identify the problem and work towards a solution, even if there is no obvious solution at hand. A positive human interaction can work wonders in most situations.

Ask for clarification. Ask for information regarding what they see as wrong. This will keep things solution focused. Questions such as *who, what, where, when, how*, genuinely expressed, can keep the interaction positive, and solution focused.

Direct your emotional reactions towards a positive interaction. If you feel defensive, angry, attacked, unfairly treated, use your emotional indicators to react positively. This may mean taking a time out to center yourself and proceed with purpose versus reactivity. Ask yourself, *What is my goal or intent here?*

Check your own assumptions and be curious rather than reactive. You will find it easier to remain open to communication, relationship building, and problem solving by keeping in mind that people often react in non-productive, even hostile ways when feeling vulnerable. This may not be about you at all.

Acknowledge your own triggers to hostility. *What sets you off? Can you defuse your own hostility?* If you know you get angry when impatient with the slower speed of a fellow employee, you will have more insight on how to defuse another person's hostility if they are upset with your speed. You need to own your own anger in order to deal with both your anger and that of others more effectively.



Refer the person to others (eg supervisor, steward). If the hostility is too much, get support from others. Call in only the relevant people, as individuals may become more hostile if they feel they are being given the run around or being brushed off.

Use good communication skills.

- **Do not use the accusatory *you* when talking.** Replace *you* statements with *I* statements. *I see it this way.* Most of us find it much easier to listen to someone if they are not saying, *you, you, you* all the time.
- **Be specific about how you see things.** Generalities such as - *You always..., You never..., You are a #@%!* rarely lead to anything positive. Telling people how you see things in a non-blaming way is more productive.
- **Acknowledge what they are saying.** *You are right or that is a problem.*
- **Reassure them.** *It will be OK. We can work this out.*
- **Summarize what they have said.** A simple summary can tell the other person you really are listening.
- **Restart the interaction.** *This is not going well, can we start again? What exactly is upsetting you?*
- **Do not rush.** Try not to be in a hurry to get through things, *I need to take a minute, okay?*
- **Adopt an assertive, non-threatening body posture.** Your posture should say I am here to help, not hinder.
- **Adopt supportive facial expressions.** This includes- maintaining soft eye contact, respecting their personal space, and not crowding them. Standing at a forty-five degree angle to a person is usually seen as less aggressive than squaring off directly in front of them.

You can choose responses that either hamper or enhance communication. Planning ahead, visualizing potential incidents, and learning from past incidents are all good strategies. Whatever course of action you take, follow it through. Hostility needs to be well managed. If you waffle, the hostile person may find it easier to manipulate you.

To prevent being played one against the other, an employee team needs to agree on how to respond. After an episode that challenges your skills at handling hostility, take time to debrief it with fellow workers. They may have some insights that help prepare for any next time.

What If The Person Is Still Hostile to Me?

Some people use hostility as a way to get what they want, even if they know they do not have a valid issue. If you have such an encounter - do not escalate it further by challenging their sincerity. Rather, stick to the same plan, even if you become a broken record.

If you are being chewed out over the phone, wait until the person is quiet (or has slowed down) then take control of the conversation. Tactfully interrupt if the person goes off on a tangent. Focus on the problem to be solved.

If you are being personally threatened, get help - fellow workers, supervisors, or the police.

**If you are uncertain that you are being threatened you might say -
Unless you can convince me your threat is not serious, I am going to call the police.
Resist making counter threats as that would escalate the conflict.**