**Responding to Customer Conflict**

Businesses responsible for implementing Covid safe plans, are required to ask customers to check their identification and vaccination status. This responsibility places business owners and their staff in the challenging situation of policing these official health directives.

What is the business owner and staff member’s motive? To keep their customers happy, comply with the required Covid safe plan, prevent possible disease transmission, and avoid hefty fines.

What is the customer’s motive? To purchase the service or product provided by the business.

The last 21 months of restricted lifestyle and trade is taking a toll on all members of our community. Ongoing uncertainty and adapting to imposed changes produce stress which place us in a heightened state. When we are in a heightened state our decision-making part of the brain doesn’t function as well. Why? Our limbic system sends warning signals for us to act to protect us from danger. When this part of our brain is activated, we can potentially do what Daniel Siegel describes as, flipping our lids (Dalai Lama Centre for Peace and Education, 2012).

Businesses may experience customers who may be unreasonable or anxious in their approach when asked to show their vaccination status. This can be intimidating, and trigger uncertainty and anxiety in the workplace. This article provides a few practical tips to de-escalate potential conflict at work.

Asking someone who is emotionally heightened to calm down can trigger a similar response experienced by a matador holding up a muleta to a bull. When we are offering the white flag to our customer there are a few strategies that tend to be more effective.

1. Communication is more than words. Consider your body language, tone of voice, and pace of speech.

Use **silence** to allow the person to reflect.

**Slow** your pace of speaking and **soften** your **tone** and **volume**.

**Notice** how **your** **body** responds, this is an indicator of your thoughts and emotions.

Apply strategies to reduce strong emotions you may experience.

If possible, move to the side away from other customers.

1. When we are in a heightened state it is helpful to have our feelings acknowledged because it helps us feel validated. When we **acknowledge** and **validate**, we are not agreeing with the customer, but identifying their strong emotion.

We can make statements such as “I can see you are really frustrated right now, I’m sorry that you are frustrated”.

You may need to make additional statements to ensure the person has processed your acknowledgement.

1. How often have you become angry when faced with an angry person confronting you? It is easy to slip into our ego and want to prove that we are right and will not be told what to do. When someone is responding with strong emotions, with frustration and anger, their response is not about you. It may be directed at you, but it is about their response to the situation.

**Empathise** with the person and **consider** how you may respond if you were experiencing strong emotions.

1. When we are empathetic, we can better relate to others. This allows us to consider our **language** from the other person’s perspective. Avoid extreme language such as never, always, can’t stand it, no, must, should. Introduce words such as perhaps, consider, maybe. This gives the person opportunity to decide.
2. Help the person **explore options**. When we are feeling angry and / or upset, making decisions becomes difficult. We can help by exploring and providing options. “You can continue to refuse to show me your digital vaccination status and I could face a fine or, you can choose to help me by showing me your status so that I can help you by taking your food order. I really would like to take your food order and avoid the fine.” Exploring options can help reduce the fight response the person is experiencing.

For small businesses managing conflict with customers, the VTIC Partners In Wellbeing program is available to provide mental health and wellbeing consultation and coaching to business owners and team members. When we are experiencing emotional distress, talking to someone relieves the burden and can help us gain clarity on what we need at this time.

I can be reached on consultation@vtic.com.au or (03) 7035 5732. I work Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm. Outside of business hours support is available via the Partners In Wellbeing helpline 1300 375 330. The helpline operates 9am to 10pm weekdays and 9am to 5pm on weekends.

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