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Safely De-Escalating Anger at the Workplace

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Knowing what to do when you're confronted with an angry customer, co-worker, or stranger at work can help keep a situation from escalating and becoming dangerous. This article will help you safely manage what can sometimes be a challenging, uncomfortable situation.

What to do

If you are confronted with anger while you are at work, assess whether it is safe for you to try to de-escalate the situation yourself. If you believe that it is, let a co-worker know that you are going to try to calm the angry person. Since you will want to pull the person aside to give them a chance to compose themselves in private, you should also tell your co-worker where you are going. Note the room or location in which you choose to speak to the angry person and be sure exits are accessible and that you cannot be cut off from them.

These are some of the steps you may wish to take once you have convinced the angry customer, co-worker, or stranger to speak with you:

Encourage the person to talk. Anger is often a result of feeling mistreated or misunderstood. Allow the person to "talk it out." Sometimes that's all that's needed to calm things down.

Maintain a respectful attitude. You want to appear open rather than confrontational. Try to look relaxed and attentive.

Be a patient, sympathetic listener. Pay attention and show that you are interested by focusing on what the person is saying.

Acknowledge the person's feelings and use the person's name if you know it. This reinforces a personal connection that can have a calming effect.

Suggest a cooling-off period. If the person is still angry at this point, you might say, "Let's take a few minutes and start this conversation again." Then give them some space.

If their anger persists and it feels safe to do so, calmly refuse to deal with unacceptable behavior. For example, if a customer is angry, you might say, "I can understand why you're frustrated, but it is not acceptable to threaten employees."

Respond if the situation changes. If at any point you become uncomfortable or start to feel bullied, walk away or try to bring a manager or co-worker into the room or area.

Check with your manager or HR for your organization's policy on handling an angry customer, co-worker, or stranger at work.

What not to do

Don't raise your voice. Keep your tone calm and level.

Avoid arguing. You want to avoid a shouting match.

Don't be confrontational. Avoid pointing a finger, crossing your arms, or putting your hands on your hips. Also avoid any physical contact.

Refrain from making judgments. Accept criticism in a positive way. For example, if a customer makes a complaint, you don't necessarily have to agree with what the person has said, but acknowledge it rather than judging or arguing.

When anger escalates

Sometimes anger can become a safety concern for you, other employees, customers, or the angry person themselves.

If the person starts screaming, shouting, or pounding fists, contact your supervisor, manager, or security if applicable. Try to do this without the person noticing so as not to anger them further.

If the person's anger seems out of control, make every effort to leave the area. Immediately contact security and let them know there may be a threat to people's safety. If you do not have a security representative on-site, call 911 for police intervention.

Plan for escalated anger

Your department may want to implement a signaling plan before situations escalate. This will allow you to alert others that you need help and can't safely leave the room. Your department could use a personal safety app or, before speaking to the angry person, you can prepare a text to your managers or security that says "emergency" or "help now!" Then, if needed, you just have to push "send" to call for help.

Escalation plans would need to be arranged by your organization. Speak with your manager or human resources (HR) representative if you have questions regarding plans for escalated workplace anger.

Seek support

Dealing with anger in the workplace can be unsettling and can increase your own level of stress. If you are dealing with episodes of anger from customers, co-workers, or your manager, it's important to seek support. Contact your organization's assistance program or HR representative to talk confidentially about your concerns. ■

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