



Diffusing Confrontation, Anger, Frustration
By Ann Golden Eglé, MCC
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Confrontation rarely comes with sufficient time to prepare. It hits you like a bolt of lightning and calls upon you to act immediately.

The steps you take in that next moment will either ignite the fire or begin to diffuse it.

For example, a board member, supervisor, client, customer, direct report, driver, fellow flight passenger or neighbor may become incensed. You're the target.

What now? In this initial moment you may not know if this is about you or something else entirely. All you know for sure is that you need to take charge to diffuse the situation.

Confrontations are sudden, shocking and unexpected. They can leave scars on relationships, oftentimes permanent scars, if not handled immediately and respectfully.

We each have a normal 'confrontational' reaction mode. Our most common reactions are to: 1) counter back, 2) be defensive, or 3) accept what is happening.

Countering back, though instinctive for many, is never a great idea. It starts the ping pong of confrontation that steadily heats up. Countering back may look like this: "You're wrong!" "You don't understand." "You're being overly emotional." It always starts with an accusatory 'YOU'.

Defensiveness needs little explanation. Nothing is more important in that moment than to defend ourselves. We refuse to listen to what's being said and jump immediately to defense mechanisms like blame, anger, ridicule. As with countering back, temperatures rise, and fruitful conversations cease.

Acceptance is the only way to begin to diffuse a confrontation. Let me give you some examples.

Acceptance to diffuse someone's extreme anger or frustration with you could look like this in the first few moments: "You've got a point, I hadn't thought of it that way." "I see you're upset; help me understand." "Let's take a moment to explore your frustration."

Getting to a place of acceptance is not natural for most of us. There are some steps to practice prior to feeling comfortable with this approach. Though they may seem arduous when first glancing through them, with practice they only take a few minutes when you need them most in the heat of a confrontation.

Throughout each of these Top 7 Steps, it's vital to be mindful of the other person. Are they with you, listening, beginning to agree and calm down?

Or are they stuck in their distressed state and revving back up? If the latter, start over with step one until you can move forward.

To illustrate these steps, let's assume a key customer has just confronted & lashed out at you.

Complete focus on other. Our tendency is to focus on the injury that has just landed upon us. Instead, focus on the upset individual. Where is this really coming from? It may have nothing to do with you, or it may be all about you.

Inquire. Imagine having this high level 'A' list customer whom you're counting on for future sales, suddenly angry and threatening to cut off all business with you because of an important missed deadline or miscommunication.

Rather than taking it personally, center yourself—breathe, feel your feet on the floor and consider what's happening inside of him.

Ask something like: "Please allow me a moment to understand. We haven't delivered on our promises and you are understandably upset. Is that right?" or "You're upset with _____ (provide a specific example of what he just stated to let him know you've heard him)." Speak slowly, confidently and with concern.

Show gratitude. "I appreciate your directness. You could have fumed over this for weeks, avoiding all contact with us. Instead, you care enough about our long-term relationship to voice your disappointment. I appreciate your honesty and loyalty."

Validate and find truth. Validate the other's emotion and find a nugget of truth in it. "I can see how upsetting this is to you. You understandably had very high expectations. You had a lot on the line for this delivery and we didn't meet it. This set you back."

Don't offer excuses at this point. Your customer still needs to feel validated and heard. You are not sure if this missed deadline will become a common occurrence?"

Express authentic empathy. "I see your disappointment and am now beginning to understand how hard this must have hit you. We did not fulfil our obligations to you. You may not feel that you can trust us moving forward. Is that right?"

Offer solutions. If you've begun to sufficiently quell the outburst, you've now returned to a productive conversation. What can be done moving forward? What does your customer need to hear now?

In this case, he needs: 1) assurance of what you will do to correct the current situation; 2) an outline of specific checkpoints moving forward to ensure that missed deadlines will not occur again; and 3) a set time to check back with him regarding this plan.

Offer an authentic, sincere expression of confidence that you will work together to make this work, if that is your intention.

Validate again. “I’m really happy that you brought this to my attention. You are a highly valued friend and customer. Your frustration was justifiable. It took courage to voice your dissatisfaction. I appreciate your willingness to work with me toward a solution. You have changed the way we do business and proven even more so what a valued customer you are to us.”

In taking the above steps, you are not condoning the behavior of your upset customer. The point is not to make anyone right or wrong.

You are simply accepting the immediate confrontation for what it is. In doing so, you are making efforts to begin a reasonable conversation where you will: 1) fully understand the situation, and, 2) create a game plan moving forward.

Of course, every situation is different. People are different. One thing I know for sure is that everyone needs to feel heard and valued. Everyone.

I challenge you to look back at a previous confrontation and see how you might have been able to perhaps handle it more effectively through use of these Top ‘7’ Steps.

Master Executive and Leadership Coach Ann Golden Eglé, MCC, has steered highly-successful individuals to greater results since 1998. President of Golden Visions & Associates, LLC, Ann can be reached at 541-385-8887 or subscribe to her newsletter at GVAsuccess.com