Communicating With Customers

Don’t ask questions you don’t want to hear answers to:

What Does This Mean?

Principle 10: Don’t ask questions of angry customers, when you don’t want to hear the answers.

Questions are an important tool in defusing, but often employees ask questions when they really do not want to deal with the answers, or spend any time on the answers. The best way to illustrate this is with the following example.

Customer: It’s because I’m green [ethnic background] isn’t it. You just don’t like green people.
Employee: Why do you think I don’t like green people?
Customer: Isn’t it obvious? I see you giving these non-green people what they want. And I’m the only green person here ... so I’d have to be an idiot not to notice your racist attitudes ... [and on and on].

The employee wanted to show that she was concerned about the customer’s remarks, and wanted the customer to know that he was being taken seriously. Presumably, the idea was that the customer would realize the employee was concerned and would calm down.

Unfortunately, look what happened. The client made an accusation of bias, which we will presume was untrue. The employee, by asking the question, opened the door for more discussion which clearly was not in anyone’s best interests. Note also how this fits in with Principle Nine (What does "What you focus on, you get more of" mean?). The employee focused on the accusation of racism, and therefore got more of it.

Now, in some situations, it may be appropriate to ask the above question. It depends on the situation. You need to judge whether there is anything to be gained by asking such a question. If you NEED to ask it, then do so, but be aware that it encourages the client to continue on the topic, rather than on the problem the customer is having in the first place.

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Author: Robert Bacal
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