

Techniques For Defusing and Calming Down Angry Customers

When A Customer Plays One Employee Off Another? When a Customer Plays One Employee Off Another ("So-and-So Said") - What To Do?

THE SITUATION

On occasion you may come across a customer who plays one employee off another. There are two situations where a customer may do this. In one situation, a customer contacts one employee (a coworker of yours) and then contacts another employee (you) and receives inconsistent information. In that situation, a customer might say, "But I spoke to John (coworker), and he said that I could . . ." In this situation, the customer is acting in good faith and is confused about the conflicting information he received.

In the second situation, the customer is not acting in good faith: he or she lies about getting different information from another employee and is hoping that you'll bend the rules and buckle to the pressure of "what so-and-so said" to do what he or she wants. Customers will sometimes contact a number of employees, hoping to find someone who gives the answer the customer wants.

You may recognize this as similar to what children sometimes do with their mothers and fathers. The challenge is that it's hard to tell if a customer is playing off one employee against another as a way of manipulating or whether it's a good-faith effort to resolve conflicting information. How do you handle a situation where you don't know whether the customer is being honest about what another employee said, or whether the customer might be honestly mistaken?

TECHNIQUES USED

? Not Taking the Bait (1)

? Offer Choices/Empowering (2)

? Summarize the Conversation (3)

DIALOGUE

In this situation, the customer calls to try to get an employee to make an exception to a particular procedure. The employee cannot tell whether the caller is legitimately asking for clarification or trying to manipulate when he uses the "so-and-so said" phrasing. The employee informs the caller that he is unable to do what the customer asks.

Customer: *Well, I don't see the problem. I spoke to John McGee yesterday, and he said there wouldn't be a problem in getting this done.*

Employee: I can't address what John McGee might have said to you, since I wasn't part of the conversation. Which leaves us a few options. You can get back in touch with John and continue the discussion with him, or we can talk about your situation a bit more to see whether we can find some way to accommodate you that works for both of us. Which would you prefer (2)?

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Customer: *Well, John's hard to get in touch with, so maybe we can continue to talk about this, since I have you on the phone.*

Employee: *OK. Let's see if I understand your situation properly. You want to [fill in relevant information], and you would like us to make an exception because [fill in relevant information]. Is that right (3)?*

EXPLANATIONS

When a customer starts the employee-vs.-employee tactic, it creates a problem. If the employee deals directly with what the customer says as if it's accurate, the employee may end up being manipulated. On the other hand, if the employee completely ignores what another employee might have said, that can result in inconsistencies or even conflict between employees. So, the employee's first response is to avoid taking the bait (1).

The employee acknowledges that he heard what the customer said, but does so in a way that doesn't commit to further discussion about what the other employee might have said. At this point, there is little reason to go into any detail about what John said, unless John is involved in the discussion.

However, since the employee doesn't know what's happened, what's true, and what John really said, he provides the opportunity for the customer to go back to John to finish conducting his business. This sends the message that the employee is being flexible and helpful and leaves the decision with the customer (2).

If the caller isn't telling the truth about what John said, then it's likely the caller will not want to go back to John. In effect, offering this choice is a way of calling the customer's bluff, if it is a bluff, without being obvious or offensive about it.

When the customer decides not to contact John, the employee returns the conversation to the issue at hand by summarizing the situation as he sees it (3). Apart from showing he's listening, summarizing addresses the possibility that the employee has missed something important about the situation that might have caused John to give conflicting information. It's a form of clarification.

HINTS

- In a "so-and-so said" situation, you really can't comment on a conversation you weren't party to, no matter how much the customer wants to push you into it.
- Remember that you simply don't know what John said or what information John used to draw his conclusions.
- Either avoid the bait or involve John in the discussion.
- Keep in mind that even if a customer provides an honest recollection of what your colleague said, that recollection may be inaccurate, incomplete, or garbled.

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