

# **Customer Conflict | Employee Stress, Safety and the Bottom Line**

## **6 Key Training Components**

Employees serving the public know all too well that challenging customers can be difficult to manage and at times, very upsetting to deal with. A number of factors can quickly elicit customer anger including delays, line ups, service issues, rules, fines, payments, service restrictions, or negative decisions. It is recognized that conflict creates stress for workers. This can lead to health problems, increased risk of violence and be very costly for organizations.

### **Employee Stress**

An escalating customer can generate a 'fight or flight' response in employees having to deal with raised voice levels, verbal abuse and at times, intimidating appearance. The ensuing stress response will often momentarily cause among other things, the employee's hearing to diminish, co-ordination to lessen, and hinder their ability to think. It's important to recognize that good service effort at the earliest stages of conflict averts many situations from escalating. Unfortunately, despite such service effort, some customers will say and do things that test the patience and tolerance levels of workers. In workplaces that deal with customer conflict on a regular basis, over time, this cumulative stress will affect the employee's ability to maintain their cool and respond professionally. Poorly prepared employees, lacking the necessary skills and mindset, often respond to the escalating customer by either shutting down, overreacting and over time, eventually burning out.

### **Impact on the Bottom Line**

In the short term, these negative kinds of employee reactions to customer conflicts result in the feeling of failure, humiliation and stress for the staff member. In the long term, the organization suffers from an increase in employee stress leave, absenteeism, turnover, decreased productivity, lessened service motivation, poor morale and increased number of incidents of customer violence.

### **Typical Organizational Response**

In response to escalated customer behaviours and incidents, organizations often react by implementing additional security measures such as panic buttons, protective barriers, CCTV cameras, extra security guards and so on. In a well-intended but somewhat naive effort to support employees, organizations inform their staff that when it comes to various customer behaviours, staff shouldn't have to 'take it.'

Through things like zero tolerance policies and various training curriculums, staff is encouraged to set verbal limits with customers, point to zero tolerance posters, refuse service, walk away, call security and so on. This, as one can imagine, has nothing to do with defusing an escalating customer or truly supporting those employees continually having to face these kinds of interactions. In the more extreme, perhaps one should ask how frontline employees feel after being yelled at or threatened by a customer hammering the security glass with their fist. Infrequently do I see organizations objectively investigating incidents and truly addressing the contributing factors that played a significant role in escalating the customer's behaviours.

### **Worker Safety**

The fact is that the outcome of a customer interaction is generally determined by the response of the worker to their customer's behaviours or the situation at hand. Although physical security is an important consideration, the interactions with customers impact the level of risk more than the physical environment itself. Having said that, rarely are employees given the real world skills required to effectively manage these heart pounding situations. Employees require practical tools in order to manage customer behaviours. A rehash of conflict resolution, service excellence or the prescriptive 'paint by number' crisis response to dealing with customer behaviours, in my opinion, falls short and may actually serve to increase risk.

### **Key Training Components**

Effective customer management requires that staff have the ability to assess behaviours throughout the dynamic interaction, making safe and effective communication choices while managing their own emotions. The following is an essential list of things to look for in a truly comprehensive violence prevention curriculum.

1. Training provides *real world* solutions for effectively managing early levels of customer agitation through to escalated behaviours and threats of violence.
2. Training specifically addresses the kinds of risks your workers are likely to encounter during the course of their work.
3. The Training Specialist confidently demonstrates the skills presented via spontaneous, job specific role-play.

4. Employees are given the opportunity to actually 'try-out' the skills presented and should be required to respond to realistic, dynamic, job specific scenarios.

5. The Training Specialist identifies, critiques and coaches those employees who require adjustment to their 'style' of customer interaction.

6. The training provides the skills required to enhance personal safety for situations that are unlikely to be safely managed through standard defusing strategies; robbery, theft, sexual assault, stalking, fight interviews.

Well trained employees learn that they do indeed have choice in how they respond to difficult and sometimes volatile interactions; choices that inevitably determine the outcome. **Renewed objectivity and increased confidence = reduced stress, improved morale, increased safety, enhanced service attitude and productivity.**

Hugh Pelmore is the President and CEO of ARETE safety and protection inc. Hugh has provided over 4500 workplace violence prevention and harassment prevention workshops to virtually every industry sector throughout Canada. For more information on ARETE's Service to Safety™ | workplace violence prevention or ARETE's OnSide Workplace™ | bullying and personal harassment workshops, go to [www.arete.ca](http://www.arete.ca).