

## Handling Aggressive Situations

### The Control Trilogy

There are three key stages involved in defusing aggressive situations – they involve calming the person then reaching them and finally moving forward. Situations are often unintentionally escalated because people do not realise the importance of following this sequence. There is no point in trying to move someone forward if they have not been calmed down. It is important that these are not seen as being completely discrete – each stage is dependent on the others and the chances of successfully resolving an aggressive encounter come from flexibility in returning to a previous stage of the trilogy if progress is hindered.

Whatever you say or do it must be done with feeling and sincerity. If you sound patronising or smug you will exacerbate the situation.

What you are trying to do is control a potentially difficult situation by using the skills of listening to calm someone down, and build up trust and rapport in order to reach them and ultimately move them forward.

#### **Stage 1 - Calming (showing understanding)**

##### **Display calmness**

However difficult it may be *never* lose your own temper – you will only add fuel to the fire. Show the other person that you are calm and self controlled. It is much harder for him or her to continue to be angry if you are obviously not responding.

##### **Encourage the other person to talk**

An angry person will run out of steam very quickly if nothing is done to aggravate the situation. Use open questions and non-verbal prompts to encourage him or her to talk. Listen carefully and gather as much information as you can – resist the urge to counter arguments or disagree until they have calmed down.

##### **Listen with empathy**

Put yourself in the other person's place. They may have a legitimate grievance so make sure you get all the facts.

##### **Avoid an audience**

Don't allow the other person the 'play to the gallery'. The audience may be drawn to take sides or increase the likelihood of loss of face. If the encounter takes place in a reception area take the person to a quiet area where you can talk freely without being overheard. Often the act of walking to another room can begin to calm someone down.

##### **Take your time**

You must create the space to deal with the situation. If the other person senses that you are impatient to finish the encounter they will become increasingly agitated.

## **Stage 2 – Reaching (developing empathy)**

### **Show understanding**

Let someone know that you understand how he or she feels: 'I can see why you are annoyed' - make sure that your tone of voice, expression and body language support what you are saying.

### **Ask Questions**

Clarify your understanding by asking questions and checking details.

### **Summarise**

Demonstrate that you have understood the key points the person is making by summarising what they have told you about the issue

## **Stage 3 - Moving Forward**

### **Tackle issues one by one**

Often an angry person will let all their grievances pour out. Listen carefully and try to identify each issue and respond to them individually. If appropriate ask how the person would like to see the situations resolved.

How would you like to see this progress from here?

What are you hoping I will be able to do?

Tell me what success would look like in this situation?

The decision has been made so how do you feel we can move forward from here?

### **Avoid loss of face and structure expectations**

Even if you know that you are unlikely to be able to meet the person's demands make sure that you can offer an alternative which will save face on both sides. Once the initial anger has passed people often need to be given a 'way out'. Sometimes this can be achieved by suggesting they talk to a colleague or your manager.