

# Chris Botterill's Technical Support Customer Service Guide

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## ***Dealing with Conflict - Summary***

The most unproductive thing anyone can do in the early stages of a conflict is to try to prove a point, even if they know their right.

Taking a position in a disagreement is important in defining what you want, but is counter-productive in showing understanding as to what the other party wants.

The real question then becomes "*How can you prove your point from a neutral position*"? The answer is not as simple as the conflict itself, but there is a process that can help you achieve success in all your negotiations.

As you read on you will learn that all conflicts can be resolved using the same set of tactics, however, you may find that the way you apply these tactics will be circumstantial in the way you have the first contact with a client.

## **Dealing with Unexpected Conflict**

There will be times when you are put into situations where a client may be upset or angry about something within seconds of dialogue. You had no previous knowledge that the client was upset, and you are unsure what the problem is.

Since you were unable to prepare for the conflict you may feel as though the other party is being over-aggressive, or even attacking you personally. It can be difficult to collect your thoughts when you are in these circumstances, and even more difficult to keep your emotions in check.

The key in these situations is to listen. Remain calm, cool and collected. One of the best ways to do this is to allow the client to vent and wait for them to come to you with a question. The point being made here is that when someone requests a response, it is an opportunity to re-gain control over the situation. The question that client asks is simply a cue to tell you it is your turn to talk.

When a client “cue’s” you to respond to their question, it is recommended that you provide an indirect response. The best tactic you can use to “avoid” answering a question and taking a side early is to use the question-a-question tactic. This tactic makes the other party commit to a reason for their complaint, and can help you build a foundation for your position later in the negotiations.

### **Preparation for Conflict**

It can be difficult to call someone when you know they are upset. Chances are they will expect you to address their concerns immediately and they may have some built up hostility towards you - even if they have never talked to you before.

One thing that may help you to prepare for conflict is to understand that the client is not mad at you (if they are you should have a supervisor contact them), they are simply frustrated or angry over something they have no control over. Gather as much information about the situation as possible before calling them. Place the call when you are ready.

The first few moments of the conversation will always set the tone as to where the negotiations are headed. It is wise to follow a system for all calls that pertain to conflict. Below is a suggestion to how to make contact in these situations:

- Place the call
- When answered, ask for the individual you would like to talk to in a pleasing, upbeat voice. No one wants to talk to a downer, especially someone that needs results.  
**Example:** “Hello, may I please speak to *NAME*”.
- Once you have the individual on the line, there are three things you need to do:
  1. Inform them of your name
  2. Inform them of the company you are calling from
  3. Inform them of why you are calling them

**Example:** “Hello (*Client Name*), my name is (*Your Name*) and I am calling from (*Company Name*). I understand you have an issue with (*describe the issue*) and I am here to help you today”

- Remember to speak clearly, confidently and get to the point as soon as possible. You want the client to feel as though they are in good hands. First impressions are lasting impressions, especially in tense situations.

## ***Listening Skills***

### **Pro-Active Listening**

In a typical sales or service environment you will be sitting or standing in front of the person you are dealing with. You are able to use body language (hand gestures and facial expressions) to assist in a conversation. When dealing face to face, you may nod your head to show that you agree, or frown to show that you may not agree.

When you are dealing on the phone the client cannot see your face. They have no idea if you are rolling your eyes or preoccupied by something else. This is why it is extremely important that you give most or all of your attention to everything the client says. You can do this by reiterating or re-phrasing questions or comments they have made and giving assurances you are still listening like “sure...” and “can you explain further...”

When you partake in pro-active listening, the customer will feel as though you care about their problem and that you are trying to understand how they feel. They may even turn from hostile to friendly.

The only way you will understand what someone wants is to hear them out. No matter how unreasonable or unrealistic the situation is, it is your job to figure out exactly where they stand. Some people believe that the only way to win is to debate over your position. If you were in the middle of a debate this may be true, however, your job is not to prove someone that you are right, it is to prove to them you truly understand their concerns, fully and completely.

Not only does proactive listening help you to clarify and fully understand the problem, it also:

- Deflates anger and frustration as it allows the client to express all of their concerns
- Builds a trust relationship between you and the client
- Helps gather pertinent information that you otherwise may not have known about
- Helps you identify and prioritize their main concerns
- Saves time as you will be able to isolate the client expectations quicker

### **The Sympathetic Response**

A little understanding goes a long way. There may be times a client gets a raw deal and there's nothing anyone can do about it. Understanding how they feel in

these situations, and offering sympathy can assist in the process of helping the client make sense of the circumstances.

The rule of thumb in being sympathetic to a client is to put yourself in their shoes, and imagine how you would like to be treated. You may even be able to offer information on how to deal with the situation, but always remember to keep your dealings professional and business like.

### **Overcoming Language Barriers**

There will be times you will have to communicate with individuals that may not speak clearly or that use English as a second language. Many people can become quite annoyed and even upset when there is a problem communicating with one another.

When you run into difficulties understanding someone it works best to slow down the conversation. You can usually do this by speaking clearly and slowly, and to use shorter sentences. Also make use of commonly recognized words that are short and clear. Do not get frustrated if you can't understand the client - they will feel your frustration which can make matters worse.

Every circumstance will be different but sometimes you may have to take extreme measures. As a last resort you may need to explain that you are having a difficult time understanding them and if it is possible, you would like to have someone else in your organization help out with their problem.

### **Handling Customers with Poor Communication or Listening Skills**

There are individuals that are bull-headed, or have difficulties listening to what you are asking of them. It's not impossible to deal with these clients, but it does require a firm hand. Clarity is the key in these situations. You need to define and communicate a clear objective to the client and what it will take from both parties to achieve it.

You do not need to talk down to these individuals in order to have them understand, but you will need to share with them that you require their full cooperation to move forward. If you work on building a good relationship from the start it will be much easier to "tell" a client what they need to do.

In worst case scenarios, read the section on refunds to see how to handle a refund if nothing else can be done.

## ***Phone Etiquette***

### **Greetings**

A person can hear a smile in your voice when you pick up the phone, so practice what it takes to make your smile show.

## **Holds**

If you need to put a client on hold make sure it is at an appropriate time of the conversation. Do not leave a client hanging with unanswered questions that you have the answers to. You must also have their consent by asking "Is it alright if I put you on hold?"(or something to that effect). It is very important that you specify the amount of time they may be on hold, or to give them the option of us calling them back.

## **Transfers**

As mentioned earlier you should always try to have the client in a conference with the person you are transferring to before the client makes the transition from your care to another's care. Make sure to go through the main objectives and expectations while the client is listening so they can add or clarify anything else.

## ***Your Attitude Shows***

When you're having a bad day people will know it. You may not actually come out and say you're having a bad day but the way you interact with others will show your mood. Believe it or not, attitude is a choice. Whether it's the tone of your voice or the way you "sigh" when something goes wrong, you are showing your attitude and people will feel it.

It can be very difficult to change the way you feel about something because that is human nature. We are not machines that can turn emotions on and off; we react and respond to situations and environments based on emotion.

You can control your attitude because you can control how you interpret things, and the way you handle them. For example, if you get into a situation where a customer is irate and simply will not listen to any logical reasoning, you have a choice to fight them or join them. If your attitude is to go against everything that they say, you will find your relationship with the customer will deteriorate to a point of ending the relationship. On the other hand if you were to listen to their problems and understand why they feel they way they do, you will actually build an alliance with the customer in the way they feel. This doesn't mean you have to agree, but you still need to understand why they feel the way they do.

You will soon start to see that many people are upset for reasons unbeknownst to them. They might just need a chance to be heard, and by listening, you have given them something they wanted without even knowing it.

Attitude will set the tone for where you can take a relationship with someone. If you are inconsiderate or simply do not care, the individual you are supposed to be helping will see you as one more problem they need to overcome. Separate people from the problem and you will be able to solve the issue at hand with fewer obstacles.

The bottom line is that there is very seldom reason to lose control of your attitude. Your attitude will define the relationship you have with a customer and will enable you to take the relationship to a whole new level. Even when you disagree about something, you should still be able to agree to disagree. When you do this you are separating the person from the problem, and can start to work together to solve the problem.

## ***Documenting Problems & Concerns***

As you read through this article, you will hopefully be able to start understanding how to avoid problems and how to build relationships with people who have problems. Another part of understating and caring for someone's problems is to record discussions you have had with the client. Imagine spending a great deal of time rebuilding a poor relationship with a client, only to have your feet kicked out from under you because you did not communicate the problem to others that would be involved in the problem resolution process.

There are three very important things that need to be documented when dealing with problems:

- The problem (document it in detail)
- The customer's expectations
- The agreed upon, or proposed resolution

## **Documenting Expectations, Concerns and Problems**

The first step in resolving a problem is preventing them altogether. This is why you must document what the client expects and any concerns or problem they may have in achieving their desired results.

Documentation will have a cascading effect for every person that works with the client behind you. The ultimate customer relationships are the ones that continue to grow with each contact, not ones that have to start from scratch every time the customer deals with someone new. The client needs to build a trusting relationship with the company, as much as the people they deal with.

When every person understands what the client wants, the client will feel cared for – no matter who they deal with - and respond by coming back time and time again.

When documenting expectations, make sure to start by prioritizing and focusing in on the main problems the client wants resolved. Do not focus on the things you would like to do first, even if you think they are more important. You can always discuss the problems with the client to see if they are aware of the other issues at hand.

Make sure you communicate the plan that you have in resolving their issues, and confirm what you are about to do is what they want. This is accomplished by asking questions like “is this correct?” and “is there anything else you need looked at before I begin?”

### **Agreed or Proposed Resolution**

When you have dealt with a customer and addressed their concerns make sure everyone knows about them. In some cases you will not be able to help the client with the problem and will require someone else to deal with them. In these scenarios it is very important that everyone is clear on what has to be done. This means documenting the discussion with the client, and what you have both agreed upon.

Whenever possible, try to introduce or involve the other person who is going to help resolve the problem into the discussions. You may be promising something that cannot be done and a good way of preventing these problems is by getting the person that is going to be fixing the problem involved in the discussions of resolving their problems. Use conferencing if possible - but at the very least document exactly what the client expects and why.

When you involve everyone in the conversation there is no question as to what was said or interpreted as every person was a part of the transition. With particularly difficult customers, it is beneficial to introduce them to the next person they will be working with making sure you reiterate the customers expectations and goals while they listen on the phone.

### ***Understanding Personality and Desires***

There are many different personality styles you will meet when dealing with clients all over the world. A good resource in understanding personality types can be found here: <http://www.geocities.com/lifexplore/oldham.htm>.

You cannot possibly categorize every customer you deal with, but you can start by understanding that everyone shares similarities. The first thing to remember is that everyone thinks of themselves first. This is generally the simple honest truth. If you throw a softball at someone’s face they will raise their hands or duck to protect themselves before the people around them. It’s instinct. You cannot be successful in serving a customer if you cannot find what it is they want. Instinctively they will have something they desire - even if they don’t know it – that is why you are working with them in the first place.

You will deal with many different people from many different cultures. Some people will have very similar beliefs to yours, and some will not. The point is that you never know what you are going to get so always start on common ground. If you can build a relationship based on the fact that you understand the client’s

desires it will be much easier to deliver a successful experience by working “with them”, rather than “for” or “against them”. Most people like to work together and will enjoy the experience of helping them reach their goals and desires.

Occasionally you may not be able to deal with certain customers. This is normal, and difficult situations can be avoided by making sure the client is dealt with by someone who can relate to them. Explain to the client that you are going to get someone who can better serve them because you may not be able to achieve what they desire. It is of utmost importance that you stay with the client for the whole transitional phase from your care to another care.