Chapter 3: Problem-solving techniques

Empathy

It is often said that the 2 most valuable skills required to resolve problems are empathy and assertiveness. Appearing to be on the same side as the customer, but still not providing them with what they actually want, resolves many issues. Most people do not want to argue with someone they like.

Empathy is:

- the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences
- imagining being in that person's situation

Empathy is not the same as sympathy.



If a person you are dealing with is feeling frustrated or angry about something that is happening to them, imagine being in that person's situation and let them know you understand why they feel this way. People can become even more emotional if they think that no one else understands their situation.

Letting people know that you appreciate what is happening to them and that they are upset about it will go a long way towards helping you to build a rapport with them, which will help to calm the situation so that you can deal with it more effectively.

Even if they are actually in the wrong, you can still calm things down by being empathetic towards them, even if you do not agree with them yourself.

Customer perspective. Use the following to look for a way to resolve the conflict:

- what the customer thinks and feels/sees/say/does
- customer pain (fears, frustrations, obstacles)
- potential gain (goals, wants, needs)
- understanding the customer's point of view

Problem-solving techniques during conflict

It has already been established that the best way to deal with conflict is to try to prevent it from happening in the first place. Unfortunately, that is not always possible, so you will need to plan how you will deal with potential conflict situations.

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Managing customers' expectations

Part of providing good customer service is being able to understand and then manage customers' expectations.

When members of the public, be they customers or work colleagues, visit the premises or site where you are working, they will already have preconceived ideas of what to expect. They will already have a rough idea of what services, goods, facilities or entertainment will be provided, and will also have expectations and ideas of how they should be treated while they are there, for example by members of staff, including the security team.

Problems may occur, however, when someone you are dealing with has misguided or unrealistic expectations. If they disagree with one of the rules or regulations on the site and object to a security operative attempting to change their behaviour, then this is where conflict can raise its ugly head.

You can defuse conflict by using the **PART** model.



P - PREDICT where and how conflict might occur:

As a security operative, you need to be aware of subjects and incidents that are likely to bring out frustration, anger and even aggression in others. You can do this by learning about the venue or the services being provided, as well as the types of people you are likely to be dealing with.

A - AVOID those subjects and incidents where possible:

This can be done by using proactive service delivery strategies, managing customer expectations and making sure that you always give a good impression and come across as positive to those you have to deal with.

R - REDUCE the chances of situations escalating where conflict does arise:

If people's frustrations lead to conflict, you need to be able to recognise this early on and use techniques to try to stop the situation from worsening. You must then try to calm things down so that you can deal with the actual problem. This can be done by staying calm, building a rapport with people, acknowledging that there is a problem, actively listening, showing empathy, winning trust and explaining things to people properly.

T - TAKE action by using problem-solving strategies:

Try using one or more of the following problem-solving strategies to deal with the situation.

Focusing on the problem

When people become frustrated or angry, they often say and do things that they normally would not as the emotional side of their brain has taken over. Under these circumstances, you will need to try and keep yourself calm, and not react negatively to the negative behaviour being shown towards you. It can be difficult, but you need to try to look beyond the swearing and abuse and try to find out what the real problem is so that you can deal with it. Once the other person realises that you understand their problem and that you are willing to deal with it, they will often calm down.

PART model.





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Building a rapport

During the very early stages of an encounter, you need to build a rapport with the person you are dealing with. By being positive and helpful, and communicating well, you should be able to quickly form a healthy working relationship with them, building trust and confidence at the same time.

If they like you, they are more likely to believe that you are both willing and able to help them or deal with the situation fairly and appropriately.

With long-term problems, agreeing formal solutions and putting them into some form of written agreement or set of protocols will often help. That agreement will need to be monitored regularly to ensure that it remains relevant and useful, or updated and adjusted as necessary.

Active listening

The use of active listening skills will definitely improve relations between yourself and the customer. If a customer approaches you with a query or a complaint, you should allow them to finish what they are saying before advising them, avoiding rushing or interrupting them. Always let the customer tell you what their views are. Active listening involves:

- listening carefully to what your customer tells you
- showing that you are listening by making eye contact and using suitable body language
- asking more questions, if necessary, to gather further information
- summarising what customers have told you, to check that you have fully understood
- giving customers the opportunity to let you know if you have not got it quite right

Explaining

People can become frustrated very easily if they feel that something is not going their way. They may not understand one of the rules or the reasons for it and may not want to accept a decision you have made. Quite often, by politely and simply explaining the rule, stating who made it and the reasons for it, the heat can be taken off a conflict situation.

Providing options

When trying to resolve a situation, involving the other person in the resolution can help. It may help them to feel a bit more empowered if they think that they are helping to decide how to move forward.

- **Are there any other options or alternatives you can offer them?**
- **Another venue or site?**
- **Would they like to see a supervisor about the problem?**
- **Is there an official complaints procedure they could use?**



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Aiming for a win-win

When faced with dealing with complaints or disputes, you need to concentrate more on resolving the actual problem than on just winning the argument for the sake of it.

Ideally, you need to aim for getting a win-win result - this is where both sides of the dispute are reasonably satisfied with the outcome. This may require some compromise from both sides, or it can simply be a matter of you dealing with the situation professionally, politely and pleasantly.

A win for you could be being able to enforce a rule or policy without upsetting the other person and being able to feel that you have done a good job.

A win for them, whether the decision goes their way or not, could be that they walk away feeling that they have been listened to, have had the situation explained properly to them and that they have been dealt with appropriately.

You should aim for a win-win in all encounters with customers or members of the public.

Even the simplest of words or actions can be considered a 'gift' by the other person, for example:

- offering them a seat while you deal with the problem
- offering them a drink
- fully explaining the rules and reasons for them
- explaining the formal complaints procedure to them
- offering to take their details to pass on to the management
- offering to pass them over to a supervisor
- advising them of an alternative venue or site
- offering them a chance to come back later or on another day
- offering to call them a taxi
- offering to call a friend or relative to help them

If the previously discussed problem-solving techniques are used (active listening, empathy and negotiating options) with the customer, then many cases will result in a win-win outcome.

