



# Information Overload

Issue 7, March 2003

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## Welcome

When was the last time you had a bad day? Did you find yourself saying or doing something that you know you shouldn't have, but did it anyway. Fortunately for most of us, those days are few and far between, but what happens when you are on the receiving end of someone else's bad temper, how do you cope? Everywhere you look, there is ample evidence of it, road rage, slamming doors, people yelling at one another, suffering unreasonable behaviour from work colleagues and of course, for those of us who work in the customer service industry, dealing with the general public can be extremely demanding and stressful. So how do you cope with it, and just as importantly when we are having a bad day, how do you make sure you don't "take it out on" your family, friends and colleagues? In this month's newsletter we will be looking at some of the issues regarding how to deal with difficult behaviour. How to recognise the triggers and what you can do to make sure their bad day doesn't become yours.

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### In this Issue we will be looking at:

- Types of workplace conflict
- Everyday sources of conflict at work
- Phases of a difficult incident
- Five Basic Methods for Resolving Conflict

### Types of Conflict

#### **Vertical:**

This type of conflict occurs between a person in a senior position and a subordinate. This could be a senior manager and a manager, manager and subordinate; parent and child. In all cases it is usually because of a power struggle and feelings of domination and repression between the two parties.

#### **Horizontal:**

Occurs between peers or people at relatively the same level, included in this is sibling rivalry. Typical workplace conflict of this nature is often characterised by harassment, or threats of violence. A high absenteeism rate, and/or high staff turnover rate at work is often seen as a direct result of this type of conflict.

### Everyday sources of conflict:

#### **Personality clashes:**

These are very common within work forces, social groups and families, and are extremely

difficult to resolve, as it is hard to isolate the actual problem and is often put down to not liking "something" about another person, or "managerial style." When dealing with this type of behaviour it is important to discuss specific behaviours that cause offence or conflict rather than generalisations.

#### **Expectations:**

Unmet or unmanaged expectations are another type of conflict that often causes considerable conflict. Included in this are those people who have been "acting" in a role for a substantial period of time, and are not promoted when the position becomes available. Misunderstandings with regards to delegation of work, for example timelines and importance are not expressed clearly. It is important to ensure open lines of communication are available between all parties, and any misunderstandings cleared up quickly to avoid problems being compounded.

#### **Performance Management:**

Can be a large cause of conflict in a work environment. Negative comments and reactions to feedback, or a lack of adequate feedback throughout the year can cause shocks and disappointment when the appraisal takes place.

#### **Inequity:**

Of treatment, opportunities and/or remuneration that one person receives in relation to another. Parents, managers, teachers and other persons in authority or

seniority may be accused of having “favourites”. This can include both ends of the spectrum, for example the “star” may be offered better opportunities, whilst those who are considered less talented, hardworking and less competent are given an “easy ride.”

**Harassment:**

Can take many forms, and is not limited to either horizontal or vertical conflict but can occur throughout the entire fabric of society. Typical forms of harassment include Sexual, Racial and Bullying. This type of action can be classified as repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards another person that creates a risk to health and safety. It's usually defined as aggressive behaviour that intimidates, humiliates and/or undermines a person or group. The behaviour of the aggressor usually includes yelling and screaming, threatening behaviour that is designed to belittle or humiliate, abusive language, isolating or ignoring someone, repeated failure to give credit where due and/or constant criticism and the sabotaging of someone or their work or their ability to do the job properly by not providing them with vital information and resources.

**Conflicts with customers and clients:**

Can have a serious negative effect on your business. Disputes over contracts, terms and conditions, timeliness of service, intellectual property, quality of goods and service are all seemingly part of everyday working life. Where such a conflict arises, it is important to settle the matter in a positive way, although the use of mediation and/or arbitration may be necessary if large numbers of organisations are involved.

**Phases of a Difficult Incident:**

**Provocation Phase:**

The first signs that the behaviour of a person is moving away from being acceptable include: a lot of pacing about,

clenched fists, angry muttering, persistent staring/minimal eye contact, lack of concentration, shuffling of papers, and so on. Your ability to detect behavioural changes will be improved by any knowledge of the particular person and your own experience.

**Escalation phase:**

Things can start to get out of hand. It becomes apparent that the behaviour is not 'normal'. The longer this phase goes on the less chance of 'diversionary' strategies working.

**Crisis Phase:**

The person is increasingly aroused emotionally and psychologically and moves to assaultive behaviour. Safety is important, and you may wish to remove yourself from the immediate area or request assistance.

**Assaultive Behaviour Phase:**

Here the person 'blows'. This phase may include violent language and/or a physical attack on a person, property or self.

**Recovery Phase:**

The person will need some sort of support or will return to the crisis phase. The adrenaline principle is a factor long after the actual assault. The aggressor will determine the pace of intervention.

**Depression Phase:**

Typically the aggressor is exhausted mentally and physically and may experience shame or guilt and may well become depressed, as the enormity of what has been done is realised. They should be receptive to comfort and support at this stage.

It is important to note that some incidents can be diffused and will not escalate, but in other cases the crisis may move from provocation to assault in seconds. In this case, physical safety is the sole, short-term consideration.

Taken from <http://www.fenman.com>

## Five Basic Methods for Resolving Conflict

Method	What happens when used:	Appropriate to use when:	Inappropriate to use when:
<b>Withdrawal</b>	Person tries to solve problem by denying its existence. Results in win/lose	Issue is relatively unimportant; timing is wrong; cooling off period is needed; short-term use.	Issue is important; when issue will not disappear, but build
<b>Smoothing</b>	Differences are played down; surface harmony exists. Results in win/lose in form of resentment, defensiveness and possible sabotage if issue remains suppressed.	Same as above, also when preservation of relationship more important at the moment.	Reluctance to deal with conflict leads to evasion of an important issue; when others are ready and willing to deal with issue.
<b>Forcing</b>	One's authority, position, majority rule, or a persuasive minority settles the conflict. This includes managerial directives. Results in win/lose if the dominated party sees no hope for self.	When power comes with position of authority; when this method has been agreed upon.	Losers have no way to express needs; could result in future disruptions.
<b>Compromise</b>	Each party gives up something in order to meet midway. Can use facilitation, alternative dispute resolution, mediation, Conciliation and arbitration. Results in win/lose if "middle of the road" position ignores the real diversity of the issue.	Both parties have enough leeway to give; resources are limited; when win/lose stance is undesirable.	Original inflated position is unrealistic; solution is watered down to be effective; commitment is doubted by parties involved.
<b>Collaboration</b>	Abilities, values and expertise of all are recognized; each person's position is clear but emphasis is on group solution. Results in win/win situation for all	Time is available to complete the process; parties are committed and trained in use of process.	The conditions of time, abilities and commitment are not present.

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**A Thought to Ponder:**  
**“Knowledge speaks, but wisdom listens”**  
*Jimi Hendrix*

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