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Defusing Conflict with a Simple Phrase

Don't threaten –solve the problem

In my February newsletter, I wrote a very short article about how you could deal with difficult people by asking yourself, “At what level do I want this resolved?” This phrase is actually a very powerful tool for resolving conflicts if you turn it into a question to the other person. It offers a simple, non-threatening way to overcome the resistance that can frequently occur in dealing with crisis.

The Concept

In my experience, conflict arises primarily because the person you're dealing with either has no interest in helping you or does not have sufficient authority to help you. The problem is that they don't often tell you their reasons for resisting your request and instead come across as unwilling to help or overtly hostile. Regardless, they pose an obstacle to getting things done.

Unfortunately, a lot of people deal with this obstacle by becoming threatening. The phrase, “Do you know who I am?” springs to mind. Guess what? He or she doesn't care who you are. They still answer to their boss, not to you. Furthermore, threatening them with your authority

only makes the defensive and less inclined to help you.

The trick is to recognize the root cause of the conflict and to reach out to someone who can actually resolve it.

The easiest way to identify the problem is to ask. “At what level would you like this resolved?” asked in a calm, non-threatening voice. The reaction will usually be a puzzled look and a comment such as, “What do you mean?”

Your next step is to layout some options. My line was usually something like. “Well, I can call your supervisor or department head if that would help. Who would you like me to call?”

Let's look at a couple of ways this could play out:

Authority Needed

During a particularly bad winter storm, we opened a series of emergency shelters. When the time came to close them, we encountered considerable resistance from homeless advocates. It seems that while the emergency conditions were done, the normal rainfall was being used as a justification for keeping the shelters open.

The solution was to consolidate our emergency shelters into a single temporary shelter that would be operated under one of our human services contractors.

We were given only a weekend to convert an old warehouse into this new shelter and work came to an almost immediate halt when the public works foreman refused to incur the overtime needed to get the job done. Rather than argue with him, I asked the question and explained my options.

The foreman looked at me for a moment, then said, "You know it would really help if you could call my boss. He can authorized this overtime."

I called his supervisor and explained our situation and he immediately authorized whatever we would need and suggested some additional resources. I handed my phone to the employee so he could talk to his supervisor and that was the end of the matter.

I Don't Care Who You Call

Things don't always go so well, of course.

On another occasion, we were setting up an emergency shelter in one of our local gymnasiums under a pre-arranged agreement with our Parks and Recreation Department. The site manager was not only non-cooperative but downright hostile.

As was the case in many of our gyms, he had turned off his showers and used them for storage. Clearing them out wasn't an issue for us but turning the water on was. He adamantly refused to do this, even after I pointed out that we had an agreement that this would be done when we used the gym as a shelter.

I asked the question and, instead of the usual reply, got the response, "I don't give a s*** who you call!"

I smiled at him and stepped outside where I made a call directly to his Department Head.

After explaining the issue to him, his reply was immediate, "I'll take care of that for you." Over the next twenty minutes or so, I received a series of phone calls from intermediate supervisors letting me know they were working on the problem. The final call was from the plumber who said he was on the way to turn on the showers and would be there in just a few minutes.

And the site manager? I assume he received a less than pleasant phone call because he kept out of our way. We didn't become friends but he raised no more issues for the duration of our operation.

What Happened?

This two examples show the importance of identifying and removing the root cause of the conflict. In one case, it was merely a lack of sufficient authority to grant our request, something that the foreman didn't articulate in our discussion. In the second case, it was resentment that we were taking over the manager's gym, which was going to disrupt his schedules and create work for him, something he would never have admitted. Both issues were easy to identify based on their reactions to the question, "At what level would you like this resolved?"

By the way, this works in other situations as well. My daughter has her own version, which she uses on me regularly. When I'm a bit slow in doing something she's asked me to do, she smiles sweetly and says, "Dad, is there anything I can do to help you help me?" Works every time. 

I wish I could claim credit for this simple and effective strategy. It was one of the best lessons I learned from my friend and colleague of many years, Kent Paxton, who's probably forgotten more about emergency management than I'll ever know. Thanks again, Kent!