

Effective Sideline Communications

By Sideline Teammates

Of the 6 Sideline Skills provided, none is more discounted but elusive than “communications”. Since no days goes by that we don’t talk and listen its tempting to simply dismiss this entire discussion about effective communications. But expert communicators would beg to differ, by suggesting that while everyday communications rarely get us in trouble, how we communicate when distressed can cost us many good customers, helpers, and suppliers – our entire business. Think about times when you’ve gone into a store to buy something and left empty handed simply because the business representative treated you poorly. Doesn’t take long for word to spread, putting the poor communicating business in an irretrievable business hole.

So what is different about communicating under pressure from everyday communications? Mostly there are 4 important differences that make stressful communications more critical to get right:

1 whoever is more upset needs to be talking first, and the other person carefully listening – since really upset people are simply not going to listen until they vent their concerns. So even if you as the Sideline are pretty upset yourself, try to suspend your concerns or temptation to question or problem solve for the other person until they’ve talked some.

2 to the extent that the other person is more upset and wants to complain, one way you can help them frame their concerns without diverting, downplaying, or short-circuiting their need to talk is to find a way to ask them what it is they want you to do different or better on their behalf. It might be as simple as saying “I can tell you’re upset. So I can be helpful to you, could you please tell me what you would like me to do at this time to benefit you?” If necessary [or if they are an endless talker] you might consider fetching a piece of paper and asking them if you can write down what they want so you have it correct. This approach goes far to deflect the emotion associated with their upset, and allows you to gain control of the conversation while still being in listening mode. What you don’t want to do in listening mode is ask them “Why?” they want what they want. The ‘why’ part of an upset conversation often extends the monologue and emotions way beyond reasonable to understand their concerns.

3 If after being a good listener for the other person and letting them state everything they want, it becomes important that start seeking agreement about anything that moves the conversation toward positive action, not more ruminating about what’s wrong. It might be as simple as your saying, “now that I know what you want, can I have two days to research this problem and get back to you?” Or you might say “now that I understand you are upset about X and Y would like to receive Z as compensation for your disappointment, please allow me to get back to you this

afternoon with a proposed settlement after I've had a chance to discuss this with my helper."

4 And lastly, in the heat of a distressing conversation, one of the most important things to be done is avoid problem solving or making judgments in front of the upset person. If you attempt to problem solve, you're assuming the way you solve problems under pressure is the correct way for that person to solve problems, which is almost never the case. People like to solve their own problems, their own way, even if it's not your way. Similarly if you are tempted to judge the upset person's actions it will likely put you in one of life's 3 dangerous corners: persecutor, rescuer, victim. Upset people don't like to feel like it's someone else's prerogative to judge their actions. Nor do they want to feel rescued by another person, when they far prefer to manage their own problems, their own way. And they don't want someone else to patronize them by suggesting they are helpless victims, incapable of properly managing their own problems.