

On the Front Lines



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Condominium managers and board directors often find themselves on the front lines of “customer service” wishing they knew how to better deal with a difficult situation or person. Condominium managers, in particular, face this on what seems to be a daily basis.

How do you deal with irate owners and residents? What tools have you got in your skill box that can help avert the next world war at a condo? You may find yourself at the start of a dispute, and with the right tools, you may be in a position to resolve it before the conflict gets out of hand.

Time, effort, money and goodwill can all be lost when a situation gets out of hand. Here are several things you can do.

Listen, listen and listen

Are you really listening or are you just waiting for your turn to talk? When someone is upset, you are an obvious target. You can tell there’s a problem often by their tone of voice or their heightened emotions.

No matter how the problem presents itself, adjust your mindset. Try putting aside any feelings you might have that the situation isn’t your fault, that the other person has made a mistake or is unfairly criticizing you, and just listen.

Put yourself in his or her shoes. Whether you believe the problem is a valid one or not. It is valid to them. Hear them out.

Active listening is a skill that requires practice. It is the art of fully concentrating on what is being said rather than just passively ‘hearing’ the message of the speaker. To understand requires an attitude of curiosity and acceptance, and by keeping any judgement at bay.

You can restate and verify your understanding of what the person has said. It shows you are listening and have interpreted their concerns

correctly. Try using phrases such as *“what I think I hear you saying is....”* and *“did I understand you correctly when I heard you say...”*

Often, people just want to be heard and they want their feelings validated. By taking some extra time to listen to what someone has to say, the steam gets let out and things deescalate. Reflecting the feelings or emotions of the client shows you understand and acknowledge how that person feels and what their concerns are. Reflecting statements can look like this *“You are angry that your neighbour is....”* or *“You are frustrated that the lobby renovation is taking longer than scheduled”*.

Curiosity kills assumptions (not the cat)

Assuming you know what’s going on without verifying it can lead to further problems. We often mistakenly jump to conclusions based on previous experience with a situation or person. Like not listening, assumptions can result in higher levels of irritation and, in the end, resolving the problem takes longer and gets more complicated instead of easier.

Perhaps you are dealing with the chronic complainer who, this time, does have a valid complaint – and as much as having someone cry wolf all too often, assuming there’s no wolf can lead to disaster.

Being curious, asking questions and clarifying your assumptions can help you to better understand the situation. If you are not sure you understand the problem let the person know by saying *“I’m not quite sure I understand what you are saying.”* Or *“I don’t feel clear about the main issue here.”*

Clarifying questions helps to reduce misunderstandings and ambiguity and often are the *How, what, when, who* questions needed to gain more insight into the problem. By asking clarifying questions it allows the person to explain further which can lead to more insight

into the problem. “When did this problem start?”, “What does the noise sound like you are hearing?”, “When and where do you hear this noise?”

Moving forward – exploring options

After you have listened, probed and gotten a better sense of the conflict without making any judgements or assumptions, you’re in a better position to explore options.

People are more likely to agree to a possible solution if they have had input into its creation. Working together to come up with possible ways forward goes a long way to having workable long-term solutions. How do you do this?

By asking “Let’s see how we can resolve this issue together.” But don’t discard any idea before you have finished brainstorming to get as many of the options that you and others can come up with. Then, in looking at solutions, a good guide would be: “Which of these proposals works best to save all of us time, effort and money, and demonstrate good will?”

In a condo environment, solutions may be great for those initially involved in the dispute, but what about the greater condo good? To ensure the possible solutions are a win-win for all parties involved and/or those who might be affected by the possible solution, be sure to ask the question - “Knowing what we know now, what do you think will work for everyone?” Involving the people who are in the dispute in coming up with options that are not only possible, but also take into consideration the overall community you live in, produces better results.

One important tip: Your role as the condominium manager or board director is to ensure possible solutions comply with the Condominium Act as well as the corporation’s declaration, by-laws and rules.

These are just a few of the many tools you have at your disposal to more effectively deal with concerns before they escalate. Allowing someone to be heard and understood increases the chances that the problematic situation will result in collaboration and cooperation. Involving them in coming up with solutions helps ensure the issue doesn’t come up again soon. ■

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