

# Diffusing workplace violence

*When a violent situation arises, it is important to be prepared both mentally and physically.*

**Defusing an aggressive individual is a skill that should be learned and practiced. Employees can use the skills below when dealing with individuals in person or on the telephone.**

## Plan ahead

Think about possible violent situations that could arise at work. What incidents could occur? Are you more at risk of a customer or co-worker committing an act of violence or robbery, or more at risk of a domestic issue spilling into the workplace? Run through these scenarios in your mind and think about what you would do in each situation.

Also, know what reactions and weaknesses you have. Do you hesitate in responding to an individual in tense situations, making the individual even more upset? Do you become verbally abusive when someone raises their voice or uses profane language toward you? Do you bluff in order to try to intimidate the individual? Do you use physical force to show frustration? If so, you need to train yourself to control these weaknesses, so they don't aggravate an already stressful situation.

Realize that in most cases the individual is upset with the company and not with you. If an upset individual talks to you, you become a company representative. Co-worker confrontations are usually company-related, rather than direct, personal disputes.

## Make a connection

Whether the individual is a customer or co-worker, try to genuinely relate to how they are feeling and understand what they are saying. Most of us have had bad experiences with customer service, been disappointed at losing a promotion or have felt left out. If you can connect with that individual, you have a better chance of calming them down and working out a solution.

## Stay calm and in control of yourself

When someone is angry, yelling, and acting in an aggressive manner, your job is to calm them down. Speak to them in a calm, soothing voice. Do not try to match the vocal tone of the person by shouting or yelling. If they are yelling, avoid the temptation to raise your voice as well. Keeping a calm tone of voice will encourage the individual to bring their vocal tones down to match yours. This will allow you to speak rationally and focus on a solution.

## Ask questions

Ask the individual open-ended questions. These questions will allow the person to explain what is bothering them. The more they talk, the more they can explain what they are feeling and what upset them in the first place. Also, the more they talk, the less upset they allow themselves to become. Ask them what you can do to help come up with a solution.

## Reflect back

Repeat back to the individual what they have been saying. This is a great way to keep the conversation focused on the issues. Listening to what they are saying and repeating it back will help to ensure that you are both communicating correctly and prevent further misunderstandings. Also, try to keep them focused on the most recent event that has upset them, rather than bringing up years of past issues.

## Use positive language

Focus on telling the individual what can be done.

- Do not use phrases such as, “It’s our policy”, “If you would have done\_\_\_, we could have helped you”, “you failed to include\_\_\_”, etc.
- Instead, use phrases such as “We would be happy to process the forms if we could get\_\_\_”, “Might we suggest that you\_\_\_”, “You seem to have a different point of view on the issue... please allow me to explain our view”

The most important part of using positive language is that you focus on what can be done rather than what can’t.

The basics of defusing an individual are:

- Stay in control of yourself
- Ask questions to figure out what the problem is
- Work for a solution
- Present options to the individual
- Repeat those options as many times as necessary for them to hear you

Most of all, stay safe. If the situation remains tense, make sure you have a safe way out or get a supervisor to help you.

Dealing with tense situations is never fun, but you can usually resolve the individual’s concerns by following the above guidelines. If a situation is heading towards or has already become physical, seek a safe place and call security and/or 911 as soon as possible.

**Site specific requirements:**

**Employee participants:**

**Date:**

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