

MAY I ASK WHO'S CALLING?

We all have limits, and when we reach them it's not unusual for us to begin behaving more than a little out of character.

Jeanne worked in the call center of a mutual fund company during the high-tech meltdown in 2001. As you may expect, she and her coworkers had to deal with more than their share of calls from customers unhappy with the sharp drop in the value of their investments. She was fielding close to 100 calls a day, five days a week, and after a while they all kind of blurred together.

There was one call, however, that stood out. One that Jeanne will never forget. The man was in tears, and his voice reflected both intense anger and deep sadness. He told her of being laid off from his lucrative job in the high-tech sector and how, because of his employment situation, and the dramatic fall in the value of his investments, his life was now in ruins. He was bankrupt, his wife was leaving him, and the bank was taking back his home. When he wasn't weeping, he was shouting at Jeanne, demanding to know how her company could have been so stupid as to not have seen the crash coming.

He talked for over 15 minutes without interruption, and he eventually hung up without giving Jeanne the chance to respond. Just as well, because she was at a complete loss for words. She had recognized the voice — that of her next-door neighbor and longtime friend.

Who are Callers from Hell? All but a small few of them are just regular people like you, me, and Jeanne's neighbor. Most are fundamentally nice, decent people whom you have simply managed to catch at their worst. And it's usually a safe bet that they aren't enjoying the situation any more than you are. So what is making them behave so unpleasantly?

It's a good question. And it's one that we typically don't spend enough time trying to answer. Oh, sure, we ask the question lots of times. "What's his problem?" "Who does she think she is?" "What kind of drugs is he on?" The list goes on. We ask it but rarely try to answer it — which is rather unfortunate because it is the cornerstone to resolving conflict. If I've learned anything over a decade of studying conflict in the workplace, it's that there is almost always more going on with a difficult person than meets the eye. And the better you understand the baggage the person is carrying, the more successful you will be at dealing with conflict.

So let's talk about what's going on in the difficult caller's mind when he's dialing your number. What's motivating him? What's contributing to his emotional

state and behavior? There are five fundamental things that contribute to your customers' emotional states and behaviors, five variables that dictate whether they are calling with positive expectations or negative expectations: *needs*, *personal situation*, *current circumstances*, *personality*, and *predisposition*. Let's take a look at each of these variables and the impact that it can have on a caller's behavior.

Needs

Everyone who calls you has a need. She needs to buy something, clarify some information, get some help, or sort something out. It can be a positive need — such as buying a gift for a favorite niece — or a negative need — such as calling to get help for a misbehaving computer. Whether it is positive or negative, when a customer picks up the telephone to make a call, her need is usually at its peak — she has just seen the item advertised on an infomercial, her television just went on the fritz, her credit card has just been declined, she just got your message, and so on. As we discussed earlier, the very nature of the telephone just begs for impulsiveness.

One of the most common errors we make is second-guessing customers' needs. I can't begin to tell you how many situations I've seen in which it was the

serviceperson who escalated — and at times even created — a conflict with a caller by incorrectly assuming he or she knew why that customer was calling. I remember one such instance in the reservation center of a car rental agency. I was listening to the calls of the call center agents and providing feedback and coaching on how they could improve their closing ratio. While listening to one of the agents, I began to notice a trend. Every customer who called in, of course, began with a question (we'll talk more about this in chapter five), and I'd guess that close to 60% of them started with an inquiry about price, such as "What's your rate for a midsize car?" What was interesting was that the agents had become so conditioned to responding to questions about price that they'd begun to assume that price was the most important issue for *everyone* who called.

One caller, with a very pleasant — positively buoyant — voice, called in to inquire about a car. Here's how the conversation went.

Caller: Hi! I need a nice car for the weekend. Price isn't important.
 What kind of full-size cars do you have?

Agent: We have Monte Carlos, Grand Prix, and Impalas.

Caller: Hmm. . . . You used to have Cadillacs.

Agent: Yes, sir, we still have them.

Caller: Do you have one available for this weekend?

Agent: Yes, sir. They are quite expensive, though. We do have a