Don't Push My Buttons

DE-ESCALATION IS THE ART OF MAINTAINING A FOCUS ON THE OUTCOME.

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"DON'T PUSH MY BUTTONS" IS A PHRASE USED TO DESCRIBE A FEELING OF ANNOYANCE.

IT PROVIDES A SENSE OF THREAT... that there is an "or else" at the end of that command! We live in a world where people feel entitled to operate on the premise that if you "dare" to "push my buttons" the offended party has the right to abandon all civil behaviors and punish you the "pusher."

Well, guess what? These folks have jobs and some of them are frontline agents working in your contact center. It is these folks who are the focus of this article. There is a disconnect for some when it comes to working in customer service. They see every interaction as a battle they must win and if they don't win, you know whose fault it is. Yes, the other party's because they pushed their buttons; the other party "drove" them over the edge. The other party disrespected them or "gave them attitude" or, heaven forbid, called them some name. Whatever the reason, it is often enough to justify (in their mind) negatively escalating the interaction instead of de-escalating!!

The reality of many of these encounters is that the frontline agent is often the architect of the situation, in effect, pushing the buttons of the caller. It begins by not really listening, jumping to conclusions (due to "distortion, deletion and generalization"), or simply providing a list to the caller of what the agent cannot do! The result is treatment that makes the caller feel as though they are of absolutely no value, to which they react and risk "pushing the buttons" of the agent. The agent becomes incensed when the caller is unhappy, doesn't understand the judgment made, or reacts negatively and the situation escalates into battle!

> VERY OFTEN, THOSE WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF ESCALATIONS HAVE A CORRESPONDING HIGH NUMBER OF "BUTTONS PEOPLE PUSH."

We must keep in mind that the front line often faces difficult situations that are not of their own making… changes in policy or procedures that disappoint customers, product performance or warranty issues, marketing campaigns they know nothing about, and complaints from customers. However, leaders know this will happen and must first work to avoid hiring the "easily offended." This is done by investing in some due diligence when hiring to weed out those without the skill or interest necessary to de-escalate. An interesting challenge with folks whose buttons are easily pushed is that they tend to take things much too personally. They haven't had the opportunity or skill to craft a professional persona that protects them from the emotional outbursts that occur when their buttons are pushed. I have heard agents defend outrageous behaviors by claiming that the customer "pushed my buttons." There is an entitlement belief that this defense actually makes the behavior acceptable. "Oh sorry Jane, I didn't mean to imply that you should be professional with all of our customers… just the ones who treat you right." I don't think so!

Consider the customer who has already looked at the website FAQs, has navigated the IVR, and perhaps was left on hold listening to marketing messages for 5 minutes… so yes, they may arrive frustrated. The skilled professional recognizes the signs of frustration or anxiety and takes steps immediately to de-escalate rather than ignore or become defensive.

Leaders must devote a proportionate amount of time in training the front line on how to avoid and de-escalate volatile situations. The front line needs to take key elements of effective communication and put them to use as valuable de-escalation strategies. As examples:

- Acknowledge the caller's issue up front ("I'm sorry you were delayed," "Let me take care of this for you," "I understand this is taking more time than you intended").
- Repeat and confirm information to the caller to build confidence.
- Offer positive feedback during the call and move to action.
- Use non-inflammatory words and phrases.
- Show empathy and understand the power of tone of voice.

Above all, frontline staff must be skilled in two key areas: (1) ability to identify the FACTS (the fine art of questioning) of a situation; and (2) solid know-how when it comes to products, services, policies and procedures.

Another area to closely monitor is the nature and number of escalations to supervisors or managers. Very often, those with the highest number of escalations have a corresponding high number of "buttons people push." Don't make it OK for agents to lose control of a call because they believe that when their buttons are pushed they are entitled to react! That posture effectively trumps vision, brand and any customer experience objectives the organization has set.

De-escalation is a strategic communication skill that many contact center professionals possess. It is the art of maintaining a focus on the outcome. Think about why a person contacts you. Most frequently it is because they are looking for help and not because they are looking for a fight. If someone is looking for a fight there is a certain pleasure in not taking the bait, remaining professional and allowing the rant to occur until they run out of steam. Circle back with acknowledgement of the situation, a review of the facts and a proposed solution. This is the skill Winston Churchill was referring to when he famously said, "Tact is the ability to tell someone to go to hell in such a way that they look forward to the trip."

It's back to school time again. I would like to propose a renewed training and learning effort that focuses specifically on communication skills as it relates to de-escalation strategies. Evaluate your current curriculum and ask yourself, "Is it enough?" "Are we producing tangible results?" Then ask the agents! It could be a great initiative with a catchy chant: "2 - 4 - 6 - 8, HOW DO WE DE-ESCALATE!" Have a team of agents craft a list of words and phrases that work and ones that don't. Search for call recordings that illustrate examples of good and bad. Ask agents to identify their buttons. I can see some great big buttons to post on the "LET IT GO" wall! Encouraging your front line to invest in self-awareness and self-regulation is much more powerful and long-lasting than doing something because you were told to… good luck!

"It usually takes two people a little while to learn where the funny buttons are and where the testy buttons are."—Matt Lauer



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