

Ten Critical De-Escalation Skills

by Kim Olver

Being able to de-escalate one's own and the anger of others is an important skill to have in business. Hopefully, this is not something the reader deals with on a regular basis but unfortunately most people in business encounter either their own anger or the anger of others more frequently than they would like.

In order to be successful at de-escalating anger, a person must understand and become skillful in the following areas.

Prevention Steps:

1. Recognize that anger is a choice of a wide range of behaviors that could be used to get what one needs in a situation. It is a behavior that has benefit for its user. Anger can get people the attention they need, help them escape things they don't want to do, help them gain control over another person or situation, or pump them up when they are feeling small and insignificant.
2. The person interacting with the angry person must identify his or her own emotion at any given point in time. If the helping person is also experiencing anger, then that person will not be very effective assisting others to manage theirs.
3. When potential interventionists are experiencing anger, they must be able to change what they are doing or thinking to get their emotions under control or seek the assistance they will need to manage the situation.
4. Perform a quick self-assessment. A potential helper must ask the following questions. Can I avoid criticizing and finding fault with the angry person? Can I avoid being judgmental? Can I keep from trying to control the other person into doing something he or she doesn't want to do? Can I keep myself removed from the conflict? Can I believe that the people using anger have the right to make decisions and choices about how they meet their needs and that they have within them the ability to make those decisions? Can I try to see the situation from the angry person's point of view and understand what need or needs he or she is trying to satisfy? And finally, can I remember that my job is to place the healing of relationships as my primary concern?

If the listener can't answer these questions in the affirmative, then he or she will need assistance in managing the person who is expressing anger.

5. Recognize early warning signs. Many incidents of anger could be prevented if those who are around a person about to become angry notice the subtle change in the person's behavior. Quiet people may become agitated; while louder, more outgoing people generally become quiet and introspective. Paying attention to these subtle changes and simply commenting on the change could help the individual talk about things so he or she wouldn't have to become angry.

Prevention goes a long way. However, there still will be times when you don't notice the early warning signs or when your first encounter with the person occurs when they are already in an angry state.

Also, it's possible that you will do everything right in this prevention phase and angry people will still choose anger as their best chance for getting what they want. When any of these situations occur, the listener will need to employ one or all of the five de-escalation skills.

Intervention Steps:

6. *Active listening* is the process of really attempting to hear, acknowledge and understand what a person is saying. It is a genuine attempt to put oneself in the other person's situation. More than anything, this involves LISTENING! Listening means attending not only to the words the other person is saying but also the underlying emotion, as well as, the accompanying body language.

By simply providing a sounding board and a willing ear, a person's anger can be dissipated.

7. *Acknowledgement* occurs when the listener is attempting to sense the emotion underlying the words a person is using and then comments on that emotion. The person may say something like, "You sound really angry right now!" By acknowledging and really trying to understand what the angry person is feeling, that person becomes able to release a lot of the aggression.

8. *Agreeing*---often when people are angry about something, there is at least 2 % truth in what they are saying. When attempting to diffuse someone's anger, it is important to find that 2 % of truth and agree with it.

When someone is angry and the listener attempts to reason with the person, his or her efforts will be largely ineffective. When the listener agrees with the 2% of truth in the angry person's tirade, he or she takes away the resistance and consequently eliminates the fuel for the fire.

9. *Apologizing* is a good de-escalation skill. I'm not talking about apologizing for an imaginary wrong. I am talking about sincerely apologizing for anything in the situation that was unjust. It's simply a statement acknowledging that something occurred that wasn't right or fair.

This can have the effect of letting angry people know that the listener is sincerely sorry for what they are going through and they may cease to direct their anger at the person attempting to help.

10. *Inviting criticism* is the final of the de-escalation skills. In this instance the listener would simply ask the angry person to voice his or her criticism of the listener or the situation. The person intervening might say something like, "Go ahead. Tell me everything that has you upset. Don't hold anything back. I want to hear everything you are angry about."

This invitation will sometimes temporarily intensify the angry emotion but if the listener continues to encourage the person to vent his or her anger and frustration, eventually, the angry person runs out of complaints. Just let the angry person vent until the anger is spent.

Even when using the above ten skills, there may be a rare occasion when the listener is unsuccessful in the attempts to decrease the other person's anger. The listener's safety should be the primary concern. The listener should not get between the angry person and his or her only means of escape and shouldn't allow the angry person to block the listener's only means of escape.

Anyone intervening in an emotionally charged situation should always have a plan or an established way to get help if needed and remember to always stay calm. An angry person is generally someone capable of getting out of control. When out of control people sense they are intimidating and scaring others, it can increase their sense of power and control, resulting in an escalation of the situation. The helpers must stay calm and act as if they are in control of themselves and the situation.

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