

Conflict resolution tools are lifesaver for staff retention

By Clare Denman

“My staff told me they knew when I was mad because I’d motion my pen towards them — like I was taking aim with a dart,” laughed Heather Blacquiere, a former manager of an aquatic centre in Edmonton. “I can’t believe I did that,” she said. “It wasn’t the staff I was mad at. It was the customers.”

Three years ago while doing her MBA, Blacquiere accepted an invitation to attend the People for People conference (peopleforpeople.ca) on conflict management and leadership.

Blacquiere saw value in attending the conference to assist her staff at the pool. “Working with the public, there are lots of issues,” she said.

And those issues had led to many of her lifeguards quitting, or not wanting to come to work.

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She described her staff as a team of young, good-looking women. “The guards were constantly subject to pick-up lines and inappropriate statements. None of us knew how to put a stop to it. How do you tell customers to ‘back-off’ without being rude?”

Blacquiere identified a common reaction to conflict, “We didn’t know how to control our own feelings, so we couldn’t control the patrons. When they escalated, we escalated.”



Blacquiere said she learned about a few invaluable tools from the conference keynote Sharon Strand Ellison, that she later used in training staff.

Back from the conference, the tools got tested. Now, in a conflict, the first thing Blacquiere said she does is take a deep breath. “It sounds so simple but it gives me that moment to be conscious and calm.”

And in that breath, Blacquiere asks herself a grounding question (one that worked for her). “Will this matter 10 minutes from now, or a year from now?” The answer was always “No” and Blacquiere was able to slow down, loosen her anger and get herself outside of any defensiveness she felt.

“It’s entirely non-defensive communication”

“Once I’m logical, I can get to the underlying problem instead of being a part of the problem. In a heated moment it’s easy to think that someone is attacking me personally.”

Using this technique, Blacquiere was able to paraphrase the real issue to the customer, “I’d say, ‘Is this the real issue?’ They’d say ‘yes.’ I’d say, ‘well we can solve that,’ ...and they’d calm right down.” With amusement at her own insight she added, “Why would they fight with a person who agrees with them, and wants to help?”

Blacquiere said that her staff employed this simple tool and started gaining perspective about the patrons who were taunting them. “Once they started taking their emotions out of the picture, they realized that many of the remarks were simply the young men looking for attention. So then the guards started respectfully saying ‘Hi’ to these guys, and most of the negative attention stopped.”



Blacquiere then trained her staff to use the same emotional detachment to set boundaries with the patrons. “They calmly told the guys when they had crossed the line. They told the truth without attacking back and then that line was respected.”

The disarming “non-conflict” technique is part of the innovative work of Ellison.

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Kara Deringer, People for People conference organizer, university instructor and conflict management expert, says the technique works because, “It’s entirely non-defensive communication.” Deringer explained: “The process does not use manipulation or control and frees people in conflict from power struggles. When we drop any need to be defensive, others often drop theirs too.”

According to Ellison, our involuntary need to defend ourselves (flight or fight response) fuels conflict. When we are conscious of this instinct, there are communication tools we can use that disarm others from their own defensiveness.

Body language was another tool Blacquiere used in her staff training. “I had one girl who everyone complained, had a bad attitude. She practiced her non-defensive communication in the mirror and she started to notice her own gestures.” Blacquiere moved her head sideways toward her shoulder, and back up. “We called it ‘the attitude head wave,’” she laughed. “Once that guard learned to stay neutral — her words, body language and expressions — people’s opinions of her changed.”

“We improved our teamwork”

Blacquiere said the tools were simple to teach, and simple to use. “They just took practice,” she said. “Using the same tools and practicing together, we were able to help each other and back each other up. It improved our teamwork.”

Doing the ‘head wave’ and pointing her pen, she added, “We had to look back and laugh at ourselves.”