

Responding to Difficult Phone Calls - Article by the Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS)

This article contains information and helpful tips on how to respond to a caller who is angry, aggressive or distressed. You may find the article equally beneficial in dealing with any kind of difficult call.

Stay calm. Always remember the caller is not personally attacking you, you just happen to be the person answering the call. Don't take it personally. Keep your voice low – do not respond by “raising your voice”.

Let the caller know what you can do or give him/her the information they are seeking. If necessary, explain the limitations and/or the regulations.

Don't react. Callers may be emotional. This is part of the human response to bad news or frustration and usually lasts only a few minutes. While these emotions may be directed at you during the phone call, they are not personal.

Try using supportive language like:

- I can see this is upsetting for you
- I am sorry to hear that...

- Let me see what I can do to help you



Listen to the emotion with empathy - this is the ability to see the situation of the other person as though you were that person.

Listen carefully. When someone is complaining or seems very angry or upset listening can be hard to do, but when you listen the caller senses you care. Allow the caller to finish speaking before you say anything. Listen for the key facts and the key feelings.

Take notes. This is important, because a caller may discuss a number of issues during the conversation and your notes will facilitate your recall.



The important thing is not how the problem seems to you, but rather how the caller perceives it. Assume the caller has the right to be feeling as they do – try not to evaluate the merit of the complaint.

Repeat back. When the caller has finished describing the problem, look at your notes and repeat back what s/he has said. Seek clarification if necessary. The caller will realise you have been listening carefully and this sometimes helps the situation.

Pause. If you must put the caller on hold, advise the caller that you are going to do so, tell him/her what you will be doing and when you expect to be back on the line.



Don't panic. Count to four, breathe in slowly, hold your breath momentarily, and breathe out slowly.

This calms your mind, regulates your breathing, balances your emotions and relaxes your body.

Follow-up. You cannot always solve the caller's problem and you may have to pass the inquiry to someone else.

When this happens advise the caller of your planned action and what, if any, follow-up s/he can expect. Take down the caller's contact details, and when

you have established the follow-up action ring the caller back, in a timely fashion.

Know the policy. Become familiar with the policy applicable to your organisation in relation to call management. Follow the guidelines laid down on how to deal with these calls in your Department/Office.

Check it out. Inform your manager/supervisor if required what action you took and why. It may also be helpful to document what happened.



Referring to the policy and seeking clarification as to best practice, will build your confidence in dealing with future difficult calls.

Cause for concern. Callers may appear very distressed and you may be concerned about their safety and welfare. Indeed, callers may at times talk of suicide. If so, it might be appropriate to discuss with them their options for support. It could be helpful to have the phone numbers of a few voluntary support agencies close to hand.

Mind yourself. Avoid going it alone if possible. Get help during a difficult call and talk it through afterwards if needed. When you have listened to a very distressed person, you may find that you feel upset, drained, angry, guilty, frustrated, or experience many other feelings. It is important to talk to someone else about your feelings and the effect the conversation had on you.



Talk to a colleague and/or talk to your manager. Take a few moments. Seek additional support if necessary.

Role of the CSEAS. The Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS) is also there to assist and support you at this time. The Employee Assistance Officer (EAO) in your area can provide you with emotional and practical support.

Remember. You may only receive difficult phone calls infrequently. Keeping in mind what is contained in this article, and bringing your own ideas to bear, you will find a way to deal with these calls. Please do take care of yourself and remember that support is available.

Please visit the CSEAS Website www.cseas.per.gov.ie for information on the CSEAS.

Seirbhís Chúnaimh
d'Fhostaithe na Státseirbhíse



Civil Service Employee
Assistance Service

Contact Details for the CSEAS:

Ph. 0761 000 030 or e-mail: cseas@per.gov.ie or Address: CSEAS, Dept. Public Expenditure & Reform, 3rd Floor St. Stephen's Green House, Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2.

- to make an appointment with an EAO in any region
- to arrange a telephone consultation with an EAO in any region
- to make a general enquiry

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