

Responding to Disruptive People

Ways to [possibly] de-escalate a person who is being *difficult*:

- Stay calm (and if you can't stay calm, try to look calm).
- Do not personalize the outburst.
- Be patient.
- Try to make an understanding statement (establish commonality).
- Try to focus completely on the person.
- Send a message that you are equals. Don't patronize or condescend. "*Can we take a minute to talk about your concerns?*" (Tone is often more important than the words you use).
- Remember people don't like to look bad, therefore find a way that will help the person "save face" and not look bad.
- Whether or not you're "right" (or even acting responsibly), in a public dispute, may be less relevant that whether or not you can find a way for the other person to exit the situation gracefully.

Reminder: When things get out of hand in public places, it's usually because someone feels his status, position, or self-image had been publicly challenged. Don't fixate on right-wrong outcomes that the other person has established as the working reference for the exchange, because it will encourage high-conflict interactions. Attempt to disengage and construct another outcome that leave the disruptive person's status, position, and self-image intact, and you make it much more likely for the interaction to conclude harmoniously.

How not to escalate an already bad situation:

- **Ask questions instead of making a statement**, for instance instead of stating "*If you don't calm down I'm going to call the police/public safety.*" You might say "*Don't you think it's reasonable of me to ask you to lower your voice since other people are in the vicinity...?*" or "*Would you step outside (or into my office) so that I can better understand your concerns?*"
- **Don't use sarcasm.** Overcome the natural instinct to say/mutter something vaguely rude or angry under your breath
- **Find a neutral reason to disengage**, and let your supervisor know what's going on. (If you're stuck next to a really aggressive or objectionable stranger, don't lecture him/her on the importance of manners and a positive attitude.

Reminder: There are people out there who try to get attention by being rude. They want to provoke you any way they can. Stay poised and politely decline the invitation to sink to their level.

References: [Coping with Difficult People](#), Bramson. [Fundamentals of Negotiating](#), Nierenberg. [Staying Well with the Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense](#), Elgin.