



# Dealing with Difficult People

Handle Angry/Upset Citizens With Tact and Diplomacy

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# What is “difficult”?

- What's your definition of a “difficult person”? “Difficult situation?”
  - *Often, it's simply **DIFFERENT** from you*
- What is it about “**you**” that makes it difficult to deal with difficult people or tough situations?



# Difficult People Need...

- To feel important
- To be acknowledged
- To be heard, understood and responded to respectfully
- Urgency regarding their issue
- To feel part of the solution



# Personal Before Professional

- **Personal needs need to be met first before people will listen**
  - *To be heard*
  - *To feel respected*
  - *To vent*
  - *To have some control*

# Personal Before Professional

- Personal needs need to be met first before people will listen
  - *To be heard*
    - *Listen and respond with empathy*
  - *To feel respected*
    - *Protect their esteem. If they are mistaken, be careful not to sound judgmental*
  - *To vent*
  - *Listen, take notes, move to a private place, reiterate their issues to clarify and assure them you understand*
  - *To have some control*
    - *Give them some. Think about offering alternatives.*

# Difficult Factors



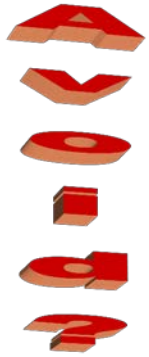
- Difficult usually has some *emotional* component.
  
- Ask yourself, what is it *that's pushing my hot buttons* in this situation?
  - What would I like to do?
  - What should I really do?
  - What “tag line” can I plan to use in advance of this situation?

# How do you personally respond when faced with tough situations?



**Aggressive?**

**Win/Win**



**Compromise?**

**Give in...**

# How do you typically respond in tough situations?

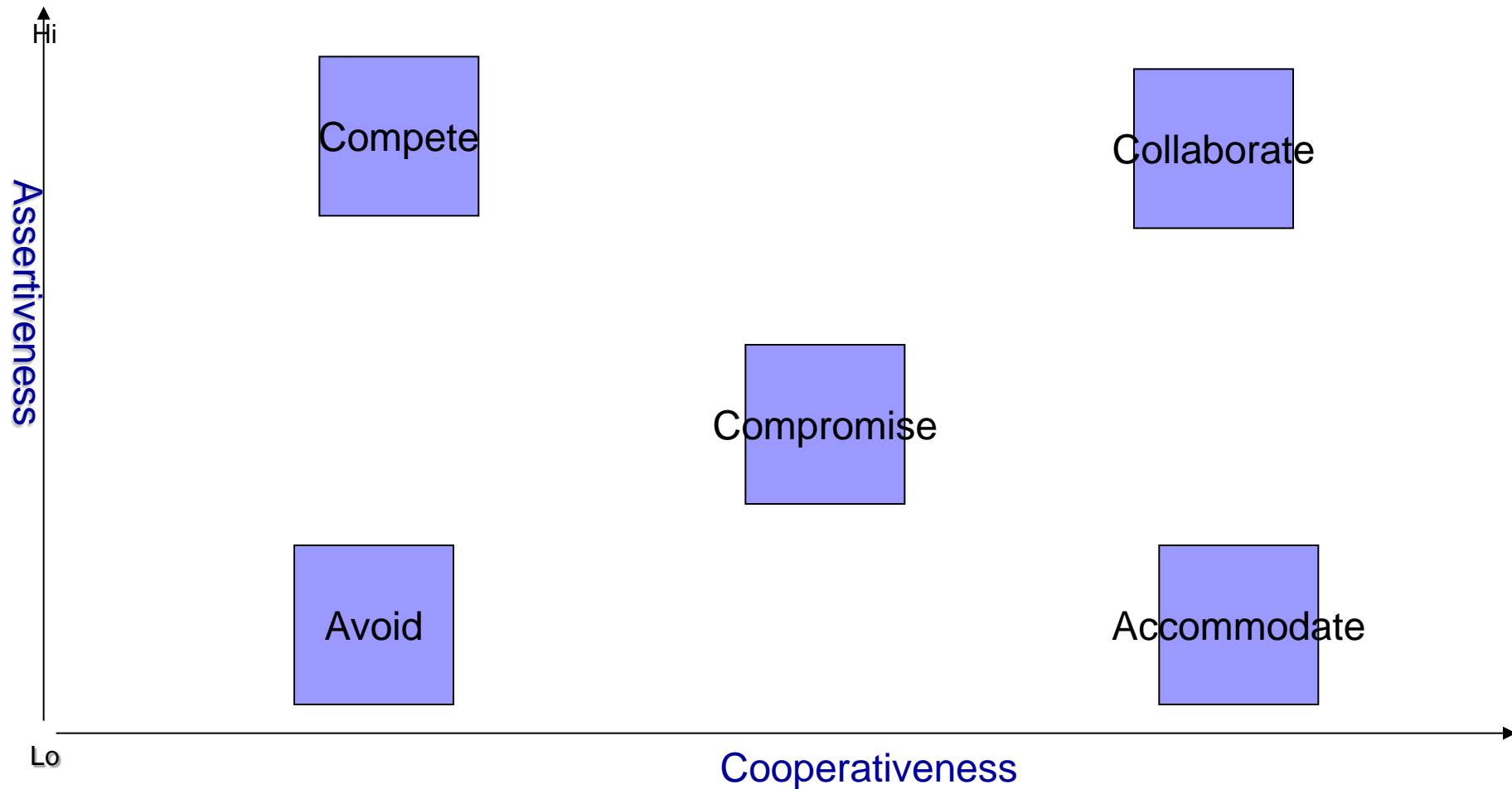
- **Aggressive?** *Want to crush them? Typified by very high assertiveness; no need for cooperation here! Find yourself regretting what you said to the citizen after the fact?*
- **Avoidance?** *Want to run for the hills? Find yourself stammering, unable to come up with the right words? Want to talk to anyone about this issue except for the person standing in front of you? Wish they would just leave?*



# How do you typically respond in tough situations?

- **Negotiate?** *Want to deal? Make everyone a little happy including yourself? Bend the rules for the citizen?*
- **Believe in the win/win?** *Truly look for consensus where everyone is very satisfied with the outcome?*
- **Give in?** *Are you willing to give in to the citizen's needs no matter what?*

# Kilman's Model: Diagnose, then Respond



# Competing (high assertiveness, low cooperativeness):

- When we compete, we're seeking to satisfy our own needs. We appear extremely uncooperative and highly assertive. In its worst case, the situation can appear like war, where there's no solution in sight.
- ***Yet competing can sometimes be the option to choose; for instance, in emergencies, with safety issues, or when we're enforcing unpopular rules with citizens.***

# Avoiding (low assertiveness, low cooperativeness):

- When avoiding, we're not satisfying our own needs, the City's needs, nor the needs of the other party. Our position is to *not take a position*, with resulting frustration or anger building.
- ***An appropriate time to use avoiding would be when the issue is trivial, just a gripe, or if we know we have no chance of satisfying our the City's needs or concerns.***

## Compromising (moderate assertiveness and moderate cooperativeness):

- Compromising means we split the difference by giving up half our needs in order to get the other half met.
- ***Compromising is effective when we're operating under a deadline, when we've got incompatible goals, when we're working at cross-purposes, or when the issues are too complex to be addressed completely any time soon.***

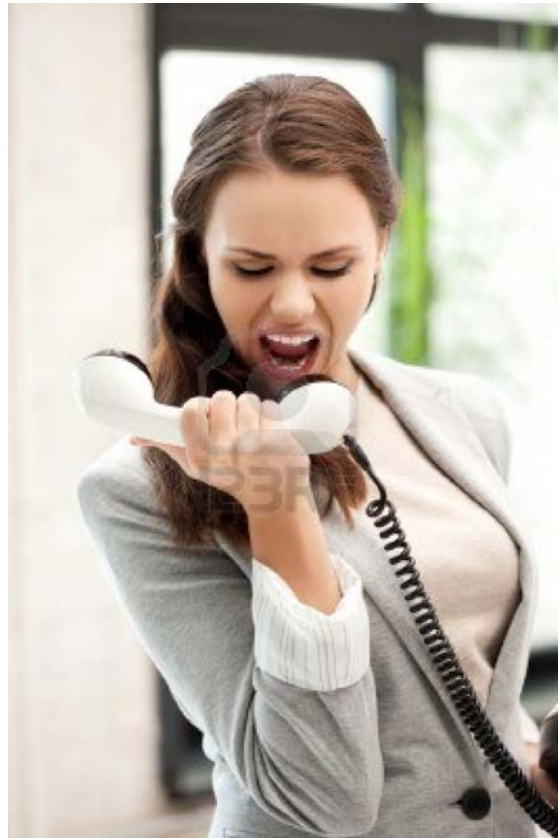
# Collaborating (high assertiveness and high cooperativeness):

- Also known as seeking a "win-win" solution. To truly collaborate, needs of both the citizen and the City will be met, however creatively. It takes a great deal of probing for honesty around the issues.
- ***We will collaborate when we want to improve relationships, when issues are too important to be compromised or accommodated, or when we're seeking consensus.***

## Accommodating (low assertiveness, high cooperativeness):

- To accommodate, we satisfy the needs of the citizen, not our own. This may work in the short term, but if we continue accommodating, the result is loss of control and anger. **We may also set some dangerous precedents.**
- ***We may, indeed, accommodate when the main goal is to keep an even keel or stability in our department.***

# ANGRY CITIZENS





# Anger is difficult to control:



- it's usually a defense against a perceived threat
- it's usually a response to one's personal rights or strong beliefs
- it focuses us on the here and now and not the bigger issues
- there is a demand aspect to anger; we want our way now!
- anger is full of energy; suppressing it is not healthy

# Our Response to the Angry Citizen? Are You Fight or Flight?

- Adrenalin is pumping
- Muscles become tense
- Respiration becomes faster and more shallow
- Blood pressure elevates and heart rate increases
- Voice pitch alters and volume gets louder



# Biology of Dealing with Difficult People

1. Something triggers anger.
  1. Internal factors might be related to memories, perception, past history, your current stress level. The other party can't see these triggers.
  2. External factors could be an argument, attack, or disturbing information.
2. Your body prepares for fight or flight. As your endocrine system takes over, your quality of judgment is decreased.
3. You're approaching crisis. Depending on your mode of dealing with conflict you're ready to act out (fight) or turn the anger inward on yourself (flight).
  2. Be careful with the person approaching crisis. Talk quietly. Use non-confrontational language.



# What Happens, con't

4. You've acted and your body is now recovering. You must use the hormones that have been pumped into your body. Another crisis could escalate here if not careful.
5. After the fact. Your body compensates for all the escalation of heart, blood pressure, hormones and breathing. You may feel guilt, remorse, depression in this post-anger phase. It's important to talk now.
  5. Do this talking in private, away from citizens



# Managing Your Anger When Dealing with Difficult People

- Don't react: tell yourself to be calm, manage your physical reactions, detach
- Be aware of personal triggers and determine plans for dealing with them
- Practice stress management techniques when faced with conflict: Breathe
- Empathize: this means stating your understanding, not necessarily agreement
- Try to move to problem-solving mode



# Managing Their Anger

- Give others the right to be angry: anger may be OK
  - Think of anger as an opportunity to get to work on a problem
- Do not be baited by anger; stay a “cut above”
- Recognize that the need to be aggressive signals the person's lack of control; respond to that need -- give them some simple control
- Let the person vent. Listen carefully while they do!
- React "below" their level of intensity; ***do not match it***
- Admit if you're part of the problem; jointly work to solve the issue
- Stay calm and focus on the person

# Determine the concerns that drive the difficulty

- Actively listen.
  - Make eye contact.
  - Don't interrupt.
  - Allow the other person to vent.
  - Paraphrase back what the person has said for understanding.
- Ask questions that demonstrate your willingness to understand, such as:
  - "What is it about our situation that bothers you?" or
  - "What is truly important to you?" or
  - "Tell me more so that I fully understand".




# Respond to Them



- Control your emotions and control your voice
- Stick to the issues
- Never assume anything and never tell another person how to feel
- Stick to the present; don't dredge up old stuff
- Cite REASONS for policies and procedures
  - Do not simply respond with “it’s against our policy”
- Bring a third party into the conversation if needed





# What if “YOU” are the Negative Person?

- Know what pushes your hot buttons and be prepared to react calmly
- Remember that most people are responding to the situation, not you personally, so you’re not being personally attacked
- Count to 10 before responding
- Check to see if you’re listening for understanding or simply listening before responding
- Ask people to re-state their issues for clarity
- Don’t feel pressure to respond immediately; tell people you’ll get back to them

# When THEY'RE having a bad day....



- Meet them from a standing position for control
- Let the person vent ***until they start repeating themselves***
- Use their words. Reflect back your understanding of their situation so they know you understand. *They may even apologize!*
- “*This is what I understand you’re saying*”
- Put on a calm, professional face
- Stay “a cut above”

# You Can Only Control Yourself



# Compose Yourself



- Control your emotions
  - *In order to be calm, breath. And yes, you'll want to breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth in order to keep from hyperventilating!*
  
- Posture of power
  - *Stand squarely and confidently. Whenever you can stand vs. sit, you'll enjoy more control of the situation. Face the individual directly with solid eye contact. You will even feel more control when standing while on a phone conversation*
  
- Don't MIRROR their defensiveness
  - *Oftentimes the other person is defensive and we mirror that defensiveness (balling our hands into fists, scowling at one another....)*

# Compose Yourself



- Give them *s p a c e* *physical and venting*
  - *Allow the person room to vent.*
- No verbal violence – passive language
  - *Respond to aggressive language with passive language, i.e. "How could you be so stupid" with "I understand you're frustrated with this error".*
- Set ground rules
  - *Set ground rules if necessary, i.e. "I'm happy to work on the problem Mr. Brown but I cannot continue this discussion if you're swearing at me."*

# Compose Yourself!

- *Keep this thought in mind, "Anything you feed will grow". If you feed aggression with aggression, you'll have a difficult situation out of control!*





# Ask Questions to Demonstrate Your Willingness to Understand

- "What is it about our situation that bothers you?"
- "What is truly important to you?"
- "How can we meet your needs while also making sure I do right by my job with the City?"
- "Tell me more so that I fully understand".
- "Given that I can't do *this*, what CAN I do to help you?"

# LISTEN *Attentively*

- Diffuse tension
- Lean forward
- Nod
- Respond with facial expression
- ***Show you care about what they say***





# LISTEN RESPECTFULLY.

## Do's...

### ■ ***Be attentive***

- *Face the other person squarely with your right shoulder to their left to communicate concern*
- *Maintain an open posture with arms and legs uncrossed*
- *Paraphrase often so they know you understand*
- *Move to a place where you can give the person your full attention; but keep an escape route! Maintain good eye contact*

# Listening “Do’s”

- *Keep your body language to a minimum*
- *Try to look pleasant and professional*
- *Let the person know you're following their train of thought. This does NOT mean you agree with them. However, in difficult situations, emotions are engaged.*
- *Let the person know you understand both the facts as well as feelings: Describe what you see in a tactful manner, i.e. "You seem real frustrated", or "I can see you rolling your eyes. I understand that this policy is hard to take."*

# Listening “Do NOT’s”

- *DO NOT multi-task in tough situations*
- *DO NOT interrupt the citizen*
- *DO NOT tell someone how they should feel*
- *DO NOT solve the problem before the citizen has vented*
- *DO NOT tell the citizen that you know how they feel*

# REFLECTING SKILLS



- Reflect facts/feelings – mark of true consideration
- Note “**tone**” of situation
- Observe body language
- Empathize
  - How would you be feeling?
  - What would you be thinking?

# Accurately Reflecting Back...

- Paraphrasing, i.e. "In other words, what you're saying is...?"
- Reflect feelings, i.e. "You're upset about..."
- Ask if you're interpreting their meaning correctly? "I want to make sure I'm on target with this..."
- Clarify with questions, i.e. "What can we do to help?"
- Sum up the situation, i.e. "Let's see if I have this correct..."



# VALIDATE THE PERSON

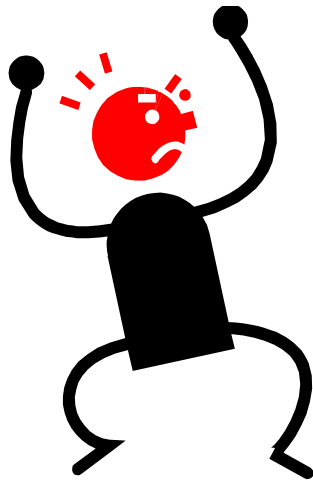


- *Use the person's name.*
- *Show your appreciation for the person's concern or issue.*
- *Repeat back their issue to confirm your understanding. On occasion, your repeating back their problem, especially if it's unreasonable, will help the person hear just how demanding, unreasonable, or rude they may have been.*


# Validate the Person

- *Choose your words carefully.*
  - *Be careful not to patronize individuals.*
- *Let the person know if others have experienced the same problem or issue so they don't feel alone.*
- *Look them in the eye and appear pleasant and approachable.*
- *Ask for specifics.*

# TYPES OF DIFFICULT CITIZENS AND HOW WE CAN BEST RESPOND TO THEM



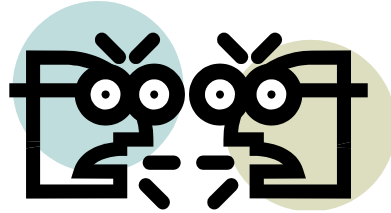




# What does the argumentative person need?

- To be heard without interruption
- To blow off some steam
- To work off some of their adrenaline
- To have their arguments respected

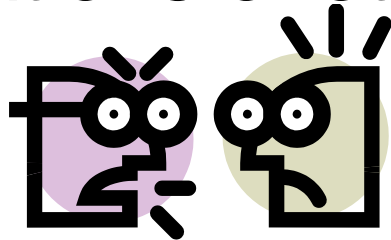
# THE ARGUMENTATIVE PERSON



- Be polite, firm, respectful
- Remember the person is the one with the problem, not you
- State problems clearly, do not threaten
- If you sense the session becoming heated, take a "cooling off" period
- Ask person to explain his/her denials

# The Argumentative Person, con't

- Pre-plan for argumentative behavior with specific examples
- If off-track, get re-focused
- If a citizen claims, “You never enforce this with my neighbors”, state that you will deal with their issues only and respect the individual situations of others.





# What does the silent person need?

- Time to think
- Safety around their esteem

# THE SILENT PERSON

- Don't fail to cover all the points you planned to
  - Silence does NOT mean agreement
- Ask direct questions that elicit short responses
- Give the person plenty of time to answer
- If you sense the person feeling persecuted, stress that future talks will only take place when things are really serious





# What does the crier need?

- Safety around esteem
- Empathy and sometimes sympathy
- Reinforcement
- Help

# THE CRIER

- Keep cool - be positive - don't apologize or agree to overlook the problem
- Take a short break for the person to gain composure
- Have tissues available
- Return conversation to a positive point of agreement and start again.



# The Crier, con't

- Stress confidence they can handle the situation (i.e. code enforcement) or improve
- If person remains silent, does the silence mean agreement?
- Ask if there's anything "constructive" you can do to help?







# What does the refuser need?

- Their own way
- Their own “voice”
- Negativity

# THE REFUSER



- Be firm
- If you need to increase awareness of their negativity, use their words verbatim when feeding back their issue for agreement
- Stick to the purpose of your discussion
- Don't impose extra steps or sanctions because you don't like the person's attitude
- If the refuser says he or she will not try to improve the situation, cite the negative consequences to a citizen that may follow if there is failure to fix the situation



# What does the controller need?

- To be right about something
- To have the answers themselves
- Control

# THE CONTROLLER



- (SHERMAN TANK who rolls over people, mind is made up, has to be right, and will throw tantrums)
  - Be firm
  - Do not raise your voice or yell; this will escalate their behavior
  - Make them aware of the cost of their behavior
  - Give them options, all of which would be fine with you but gives them their choice



# What does the complainer need?

- To be heard
- An audience
- Others to agree with them
- Details to be acknowledged

# THE COMPLAINER



- Ask them to put complaints in writing
- Make sure your nodding when listening doesn't communicate nodding in agreement
- Bring in a third party
- Ask them for the positive side or if they understand the City's stance?
- Reiterate your understanding of their details but give big picture answers, otherwise they will argue details again...
- Ask what they or you can truly influence and if nothing, drop it



# What does the pessimist need?

- Others to agree with their pessimism
- An audience
- Reinforcement that things are as bad as they think they are

# PESSIMIST



- Remember that your job is NOT to change this person; it's to answer their questions and move on
- Rise above their attitude; be positive
- Ask them for the worst-case scenario and anything less than that is good news!





# What does the know-it-all need?

- To be respected
- To be valued
- To correct others
- Detail

# KNOW IT ALL



- Knowledgeable citizen, air of superiority, knows a lot of city history, easily insulted when questioned
  - Be accurate
  - Use questions rather than challenges
  - Keep a calm tone of voice
  - Ask for their opinion
  - Build on their thoughts, ideas



# What does the “yes” person need?

- Safety and security
- No threats
- No conflict
- Agreement



# The “Yes” Person



- Make it safe to disagree
- Ask very direct questions
- Ask closed-ended questions
- Think about potential problems ahead of time
- Allow and encourage them to say “no”



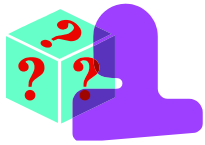
# What does the indecisive person need?

- Help with decisions
- More time
- More information
- Approval

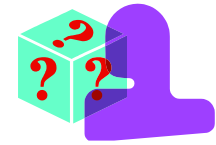
# INDECISIVE



- May be relationship-oriented, lacks decision-making skills, concerned about what others think, looking for more facts
  - Be honest
  - Use prioritization techniques
  - Give them yes/no choices
  - Advise them of the consequences of indecision
  - Encourage candid feedback
  - Validation



# What About You?



- ***Do not take their behavior personally***
- ***Do not attempt to change them; instead manage how you respond to them***
- ***Listen before speaking up carefully***
- ***Allow them to vent***
- ***Define your boundaries; do not accept abuse***
- ***Try different approaches till one works***
- ***Kill them with kindness***
- ***Empathize***

# Handling Difficult People/Situations in a Public Forum

- Give groundrules for asking questions
- Break multiple questions into bite-sized chunks
- Ask people to prioritize their questions/needs
- Meet off-line with controlling individuals; rob them of their platform



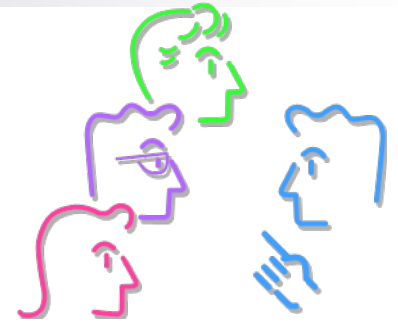


# Public Forum, con't



- Use terminology like “I respectfully disagree” to disagree tactfully
- No immediate answer? Tell them when you can find the information, write the question down, and **DON'T FLUFF!**
- Individuals expressing opinions as questions? Just thank them and move on!
- Challenging question/issue? Be brief

# Public Forum, con't



- Body language – breathe, relax, open palms and posture, look pleasant
- Watch the negatives in questions and neutralize them
- Watch inflammatory words: move to passive
- Watch tone of voice. **DO NOT MIRROR SARCASM OR NEGATIVITY.** Be pleasant and unemotional