

The Health and Adult Services (HAS) directorate is committed to a workplace culture that is based on respect. Whether working alongside colleagues or with members of the North Yorkshire public, every member of staff has a right to feel safe, valued and respected.

Managing difficult conversations with members of the public can be challenging in different ways. It can be even harder when people are upset or angry. We asked colleagues to share their Top Tips about how they manage difficult calls, interactions and situations with members of the public.

Keep calm!

The number one tip everybody gave was to **keep calm**. This can be hard, but staying calm is the best way to be able manage your own emotions and respond to someone else's.

People said:

- Focus on your breathing to stop your heart pounding and reduce any adrenaline rush
- Speak softly and keep your voice steady
- Not being defensive in your approach
- Reduce the volume of your voice as people become louder
- Stay respectful and courteous as much as possible to model the expected behaviour in a phone call.
- Remember it probably isn't about you.



Manage expectations



Difficult situations can happen because people have different expectations about what a call or meeting is about. Find ways to be on the same level as quickly as possible.

People said:

- Ask what outcomes they are wanting.
- Be honest about what you can achieve.
- If you say you will do something, make sure you follow it up.
- If call is planned, agree purpose beforehand, what will be discussed and what won't be discussed
- If it is an unplanned call, interaction or situation – start by explaining the purpose of speaking with each other.
- If not fixable in way they want, explain as clearly and simply as possible why not.

Empathise

Empathy was one of the mentioned words when colleagues were asked to describe respectful behaviour. Having and showing empathy for the person you are working can change the tone of a conversation and lead to better outcomes.

People said:

- I try to understand the person's needs and why they feel this way
- "I put myself in the customers' shoes to understand the upset they are feeling."
- Acknowledge their position for example: 'that sounds difficult' or 'I hear what you're saying'



Listen and *show* you are listening



Listening attentively to what people are saying is both respectful and critical to understanding what people need or want. Active listening is about focussing on what people are saying, not interrupting and showing that you have been paying attention.

People said:

- Listening more than speaking
- Try to focus on what is being said and listen carefully.
- “I reflect back what I think I’m hearing”
- Try to really listen and not get defensive (fight mode).
- Listen clearly and reflect back to show you’ve heard
- Use simple phrases like ‘uh, huh’, ‘OK’ and ‘I see’ to show you are actively listening.
- Try to summarise what you’ve understood e.g. ‘I can hear that you are upset / angry because of ... is that right?’ or “have I understood you correctly”

Don’t interrupt

In some cases, being able to speak about their situation and experiences and have them acknowledged can be the main reason for a person to call.

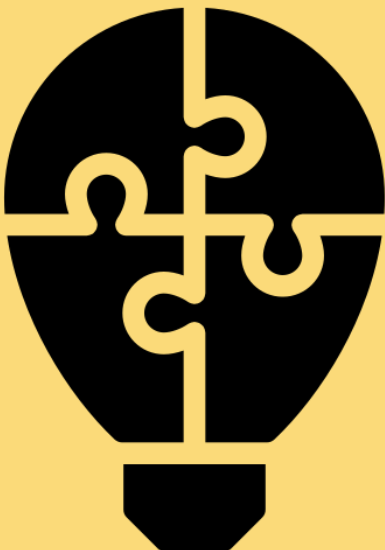
Interrupting when someone is sharing their story can make people more frustrated and create unnecessary tension.

People said:

- Allow the person to talk without interrupting.
- You may not agree with their point of view but make sure they have the opportunity to give it and feel listened to.
- If someone becomes irate or angry I stay calm and let them speak and then I wait and will offer my help and support when is needed.
- I find interrupting may make them angrier so it’s best to stay quiet and let them have their say.



Try to find solutions



Not being able to progress issues can lead to frustration for everyone. Know the options open to you and think creatively to find a way forward.

People said:

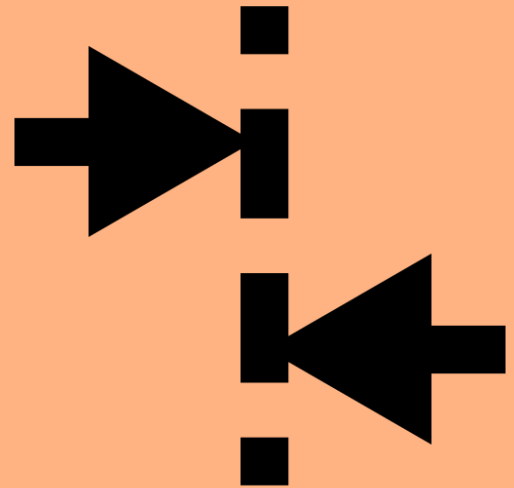
- If you get agreement then move into trying to resolve.
- Work together to come to a pass – solution – way forward
- Is this something that you can resolve with an apology and action to fix e.g. “I will get someone from correct department to call”
- Find meaningful solutions that recognise people’s circumstances – not just a ‘quick fix’
- Do not promise anything out of your control e.g. exactly when someone will respond or funding levels.
- Explain how they can challenge (where relevant) and do anything appropriate to assist.
- If appropriate follow up after a few days to check things are sorted.

Be clear where the line is

Even when people are upset or frustrated it is important that everyone feel safe and respected. Everyone needs to know there is a line, and the consequences if it is approached or crossed.

People said:

- Be clear about what comments or words are not okay
- Be firm but fair. If abusive or inappropriate language is used, feel empowered to state that it will not be tolerated.
- Explain that you are willing to listen but they must stop using aggressive / abusive or you will put the phone down.
- If they continue to be abrupt and start swearing, I advise I will terminate the call. If they continue I will release the call. I would always warn someone when releasing a call.
- Refer people to the RESPECT initiative and the need for mutual respect from all parties



Time out!



Sometimes it can be better for everyone to stop and take a short break. This can be used in a positive way to take the emotion out of a difficult conversation.

- People said:
- Offer to give them 5 minutes to calm down
- Offer to take a break and come back in five minutes. Say you will ring them back (so not cost to them).
- If the person becomes aggressive, suggest ending the current call and re-scheduling for another time.
- If meeting in person, adopt a neutral face and listen but stop the conversation and suggest reconvening at a later time.

Get help

You are never alone in your role. If you feel that you cannot resolve a situation on your own, seek help from a colleague or your line manager.

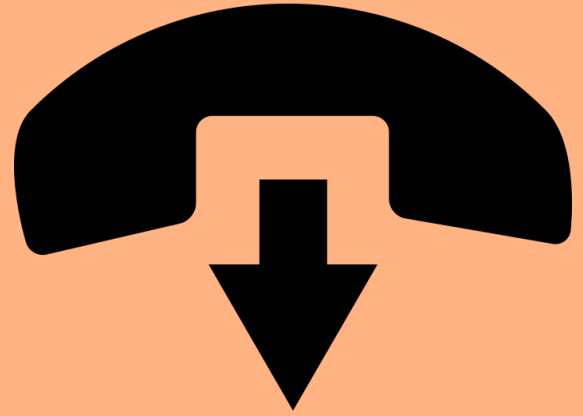
People said:

- Remember, it is not just part of the job. You have a right to be treated respectfully.
- Agree as a team to help each other in difficult situations
- Pause a call to speak with colleagues and ask for advice
- Tell the person that you need to seek advice before you can manage their situation and offer to call them back later.
- Don't be afraid to escalate a situation to your line manager - don't just accept it and carry on
- Debrief with colleagues and managers afterwards
- Remember that you have the right and permission from senior management to end a call in case of abuse.
- Put a marker in LLA for a person who is continually challenging



Terminate the call

- If a person continues to use abusive or threatening language, even after warnings, then end the call.
- People said
- If people are offensive/shouting, terminate call and advise information will be sent in the post
- Terminate the call if it gets out of control and you are unable to make progress, improve or rectify the situation.
- Make appropriate notes to record events. Share with your line manager or colleagues according to the situation.



Further resources

For more information about the Respect Initiative and further resources, check out the HAS 'Respect in the workplace' initiative intranet page and the HAS Practice Library.

