Handling Aggressive Residents

By Leslie E. Bell, Principal, Elsner Bell & Associates, LLC
Sooner or later, most borough employees will have to deal with and diffuse encounters with aggressive individuals. While challenging interactions are not all the “fault” of COVID-19, the pandemic has caused everyone to be more anxious, stressed, and fearful, which often leads to shorter tempers and quicker negative responses.

Being mindful of these external factors can help borough employees find ways to diffuse difficult situations before they escalate. On top of the pandemic, political differences and racial tensions are exacerbating the potential for conflict even further.

The concepts and tips offered below provides ideas and tools borough officials and staff may have forgotten or never thought to implement. The ability to interact with the public takes tact and diplomacy at all times.

It’s important to recognize that every individual has a natural reaction to an angry or aggressive person but a successful encounter starts with using three simple techniques:

1. **Don’t take it personally.** It’s easy to resort to the way an individual may have grown up handling conflict, but family of origin reactions often do not get to the desired result.

   In one’s work environment, it is critical to focus on the facts. Learn the person’s concerns with direct questions of what, when, where, who, etc. By obtaining the fact pattern, the employee is in a better position to solve the resident’s issue or concern before it escalates further.

2. **Be professional.** While no one likes interacting with a verbally aggressive or angry person, it’s the time to remain calm and stay in control. Reacting to an aggressive person in kind will only escalate the situation and could enrage the person further.

3. **Cooperate and collaborate.** A borough employee needs to find a way to work together with the resident, as appropriate, to resolve their issue.

   It should be an opportunity to find middle ground. The employee should put him- or herself in the other person’s shoes and find a point on which to agree, if possible.

**Courtesy, Communication**

There are many steps to take to turn the situation around when confronted by an angry member of the public.

With many borough employees doing more with less, the following are reminders that, even when busy, courtesy and good communication go a long way with residents.

Remember to:

- Listen with one’s full attention. Always look up from work or the computer and make eye contact while being responsive without distractions.

- Greet the resident. The public views their time as valuable and want to be acknowledged when they pay a visit or call to the borough office. Kindness and courtesy often calm a person down.

*continues on page 42...*
• Find a way to connect. Ask the person how they are managing in the current weather conditions, as an example. Such questions can level the playing field to start the communication.

• Ask short, guiding questions with an agitated resident. It is valuable to involve the person in the process, which can distract him or her from the anger.

• Apologize, as necessary and warranted. If that is not appropriate, borough staff should find a way to express empathy.

• Show that the employee cares. The tone of voice, body language and volume of response often sends subliminal messages that will either help to alleviate the aggression or fuel it further.

• Agree with something. The act of agreeing often puts the person in a better mood and makes them more willing to listen to what the borough staff may have to say.

• Know what can be offered. When an irate member of the public comes to request a full refund, for example, know whether the borough is authorized to do any kind of a refund, or if there are other forms of reimbursement available.

**Remaining Safe**

There are, of course, times when a resident is unreasonable and becomes more aggressive as they continue speaking. Given the external factors affecting everyone, from pandemic fears to politically polarized perspectives, it is critical that the borough manager and staff remain safe and secure when dealing with the aggressive person.

There are three breakthrough techniques to consider when no progress is made in the encounter and the resident has become more agitated and out of control. To successfully reframe the scenario:

1. **Transfer the aggressive customer.** If there is someone else within the borough who is qualified to respond to the issue, tell the resident that since they are not satisfied with the resolution of their issue, the manager of XYZ department would like to speak with them. The simple act of making a fresh start often offers the person the attention they desire.

2. **Re-set the situation.** This technique is the equivalent of taking a “time out” to allow the person to start over from the beginning. This approach often works when the member of the public vents to the point of repeating themselves.

3. **Draw the line.** It is important to remain calm and polite but clearly state that the person has crossed a line. The borough staff person will have to remain firm and resolute that it is unacceptable for the irate customer to verbally mistreat or otherwise cause an employee to feel threatened. The resident needs to understand there are boundaries that cannot be crossed, even when the person is exasperated and frustrated. This line provides the aggressive member of the public with boundaries that, when violated, will not be tolerated.

**The Golden Rule**

Borough managers and their staff members face more challenges than ever when dealing with the public. It remains a simple truth that following the “Golden Rule,” that is, treating others as an individual would wish to be treated, remains the place to start in all communication with residents.

At the end of the day, every job has a customer-service component. It is a fact that, at some point, every member of a borough’s staff either has already had to handle an aggressive individual or will certainly do so in the course of the daily work with the public.
By following the tips and strategies outlined in this article, borough staff will be armed with what they need for successful encounters with aggressive residents that diffuse and resolve the issue to all parties’ satisfaction.

About the author: Leslie Elsner Bell is a senior human resources consultant with more than 25 years of executive human resources expertise including strategic staffing, benefits and compensation, training, employee relations, and compliance. She provides a full spectrum of human resources expertise to small and mid-size organizations who require special projects or are without an in-house human resources staff. Bell received a bachelor of arts in psychology from Gettysburg College. In 2009, she was recognized as one of Pennsylvania’s Top 50 Women in Business. In January 2020, she was honored by the Rotary Club with the Paul Harris Fellowship award for “Service above Self”. Bell is an active member of the Society of Human Resources Management, York Society of Human Resources Management, Hanover Area Human Resources Association, Lancaster Human Resources Association, and Chesapeake Human Resources Association. Elsner Bell & Associates, LLC specializes in providing human resources services to small to mid-sized organizations ranging from compliance and regulatory audits to employment handbooks to an array of supervisory training topics. For more information, go to www.ElsnerBell.com.

PSAB offers an affordable Web Design Program that can get you connected to your residents, businesses, and visitors – and most importantly – promote transparency in borough government.

Our program includes design, hosting services, and customer service support.

We’ve helped East Berlin, Kingston, and Kittanning build an online presence – and we can help your borough, too.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:
Deb Janney, Senior Director of Membership Services & Risk Management
800-232-7722, Ext. 1025 | djanney@boroughs.org | boroughs.org/programs