

A Legislator's Guide

Communicating
with Distressed
Constituents



CALIFORNIA
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

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This publication was originally adapted from the following:

A Faculty/Staff Guide: Toward Enhancing Communication with Students and Helping the Emotionally Distressed Student (1989), by Sandra R. Harris PhD, Clinical Psychologist, University Counseling Services, California State University, Northridge.

A Faculty/Staff Guide: Working with the Emotionally Distressed Student (1986), Committee on Campus Mental Health, California State University, Northridge in conjunction with the Organization of Counseling Center Directors in Higher Education.

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Originally published by the California Psychological Association (CPA) in 1994.

Revised in 2000, 2022. Current revisions, 2023, by Paul Marcille, PhD.

INTRODUCTION

Constituents contact their elected officials for many reasons. When constituents feel they have been treated unfairly or are upset for any number of reasons, they look to you or your staff for understanding and to address their concerns. At other times, a constituent just wants to meet you because you are their elected official. In these situations, constituents usually know what they want, and the communication will be uncomplicated.

On some occasions, however, constituents may be distressed and will create a difficult situation for you or your staff. How you respond to an individual constituent will depend upon the nature and level of their distress.

To assist you with these situations, the California Psychological Association (CPA) is providing you and your staff with this Guide to assist you in more effectively communicating with distressed constituents. Included in this Guide are general guidelines for interacting with distressed constituents and suggestions for an appropriate response to six types of distressed constituents you might encounter.

We sincerely hope both you and your staff find this a useful resource!

SUGGESTIONS FOR ENHANCING COMMUNICATION WITH CONSTITUENTS

Legislators and legislative staff want to listen to and assist their constituents, but constituents may have difficulties communicating their needs. They may sometimes lack self-confidence in approaching an elected official or may feel inadequate when expressing their concerns. An appointment with you may be stressful, especially for the less experienced visitor to your office.

The purpose of this section is to highlight a few communication skills that may be helpful when interacting with constituents. Inherent in these suggestions is conveying understanding and interest which, in turn, will reduce tension with the constituent and neutralize stress in the interaction and make it more productive.

1. Short Welcoming Phrases

Use these words to welcome and lead the constituent into discussion: “Good morning. Thank you for calling today.” “Good afternoon, welcome to our office.” “Hello, how are you today?” “How can I help you today?” “Please tell me about the reason for your call/visit.”

2. Open-Ended Questions

Begin with what, how and why. This leads to longer more specific responses such as: “What is on your mind?” “How may I help you?” “Why have you come today?” Who, when and where are “closed ended” questions that typically elicit very brief and not very helpful responses: “Who told you that?” “When was that?”

3. Short Encouraging Phrases

These help to keep discussion going. “I see.” “I understand.” “Please tell me more.” “That’s very interesting.”

4. Paraphrasing

Rephrasing what someone says in your own words conveys to your constituent that you are listening and understanding what they are saying. You can paraphrase by using lead-ins such as the following: “If I understand correctly,” “Please help me understand, are you saying that...?”, “Please tell me if I’ve got this right.”

5. Clarifying Facts

Often this goes along with paraphrasing and helps you get a clearer picture of a vague or confusing concern. One of the best ways to clarify a fact is to say, “If I understand correctly, these are the facts as I heard them.” Asking questions beginning with “Are you saying that...” or “Do you mean that...” followed by a phrase of what you heard helps to verify the accuracy of what you heard your constituent say.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ENHANCING COMMUNICATION WITH CONSTITUENTS (continued)

6. Feeling Description

Rephrasing the emotional part of the message responds to the constituent's feelings and conveys understanding. "That sounds so frustrating." "I understand why you're so upset."

7. The Physical Setting

When interacting with a constituent in person, the setting may contribute to or interfere with communication. Actively moving away from distractions, such as moving away from a computer screen or turning off your phone, will demonstrate your interest in your constituent. Likewise, getting objects such as desks or tables out from between you reduces barriers to communication. Sitting behind your desk communicates authority but it can also create a barrier to communications.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR INTERACTION WITH DISTRESSED CONSTITUENTS

- Always appear welcoming and interested, whether when meeting a constituent in person or speaking with them over the phone. An open and receptive attitude can help to defuse an angry person and communicate that you care and want to help.
- Listen carefully and try to see the issue from your constituent's point of view without agreeing or disagreeing. Paraphrasing, clarifying, and rephrasing the emotional part of the message helps to convey that you understand.
- Acknowledge that you are interested in your constituent's concerns and want to help them find a solution. Even if you don't have a solution, expressing your interest and concern for their feelings can help.
- Offer to assist your constituent in reasonable ways; however, involve yourself only as far as you can. At times, in an attempt to help, you may become more involved than your time or skills permits.
- Strange or inappropriate behavior should not be ignored. Personal attacks, insults, vulgar language are not acceptable, and you should communicate that and terminate a conversation if it becomes abusive.

THE VERBALLY AGGRESSIVE PERSON

People can become verbally abusive in frustrating situations that they see as being beyond their control. A constituent's anger and frustration may become redirected at you.

Do...

- Acknowledge their anger and frustration. "I hear how angry you are."
- Rephrase what they are saying and identify their emotions. "I can see how upset you are because you feel ..."
- Allow them to vent and express their concerns, and then ask them for facts and details to help them find a solution.
- Inform them that abusive language is not acceptable and that you will need to terminate the call/conversation if they continue. "Excuse me, but when you yell and use such language, I find it hard to listen, and I will have to hang up if you continue to speak that way."
- When the individual calms down, help them problem-solve and address the real issues.

Don't...

- Get into an argument or shouting match.
- Become hostile or punitive yourself. "You can't talk to me that way!"
- Press for explanations or reasons for their behavior. "I'd like you to tell me exactly why you are so disrespectful."
- Look away and not deal with the situation.
- Accept abuse or threats.

THE VIOLENT OR PHYSICALLY DESTRUCTIVE PERSON

Violence, because of emotional distress, is becoming an increasing concern in the work environment. Typically, violence occurs when someone is completely frustrated and desperate and feels unable to do anything about the situation. If you are working in your office and are confronted by a potentially violent individual:

Do...

- Calmly acknowledge the intensity of the situation. "I can see you are very upset and have some critical concerns on your mind that I'm trying to help you with."

THE VIOLENT OR PHYSICALLY DESTRUCTIVE PERSON (continued)

- Explain clearly and directly what behaviors are acceptable. “You certainly have the right to be angry, but threatening me, yelling, hitting, or breaking things is not okay. Let’s please try to find another solution.”
- Stay in an open area where there are other people.
- Have a safety plan for how to deal with such situations. Establish an emergency protocol for sounding an alarm and getting help. Hopefully you will never have to employ this, but it is important to be prepared.

Don’t...

- Ignore warning signs that the person is about to explode or become violent.
- Assume you can calm the person down by yourself. Think of your safety first.
- Threaten or push the person into a corner. If you need to call for help, do it!

THE PERSON IN POOR CONTACT WITH REALITY

Such individuals have difficulty distinguishing their fantasies, fears, and perceptions from reality. Their thinking is typically illogical, confused, disturbed and possibly paranoid. They may coin new words, see or hear things which no one else can, have irrational beliefs and exhibit bizarre or inappropriate behavior. Generally, these people are not dangerous and are very scared, frightened, and overwhelmed.

Do...

- Respond with warmth and kindness, but also with firm reasoning.
- Remove extra stimulation of the environment and see them in a quiet atmosphere (if you are comfortable doing so).
- Acknowledge your concerns and state that you would like to help them. “It seems very hard for you to deal with all these things that are happening, and I am concerned about you. I’d like to help.”
- Acknowledge the feelings or fears without supporting the misconceptions. “I understand you think the government is trying to hurt you and I know how real it seems to you, but I don’t necessarily see it that way.”
- Reveal your difficulty in understanding them, when appropriate. “I’m sorry but I don’t understand. Could you repeat that or say it in a different way?”
- Focus on the “here and now.” Switch topics and divert the focus from the irrational to the rational and real.

THE PERSON IN POOR CONTACT WITH REALITY continued

- Speak to their healthy side, which they have. It's okay to joke, laugh or smile, when appropriate.

Don't...

- Argue or try to convince them of the irrationality of their thinking, as that can make them become angry and defensive about their position.
- Play along. "Hmmm, that might be possible I suppose..."
- Encourage further delusions and conspiracy theories.
- Become judgmental and tell the person to "Be Rational!"
- Expect the individual to express normal emotions.

THE SUSPICIOUS PERSON

Suspicious people are tense, anxious, and mistrustful. They tend to interpret minor slights and oversights as personal attacks or rejections and often overreact. They see themselves as the focal point of attention, and everything that happens has special meaning to them. They are overly concerned with fairness and being treated equally.

Do...

- Express compassion, without inappropriate closeness; suspicious people have trouble with closeness and warmth.
- Be patient, honest, firm, steady, punctual, and consistent.
- Be specific and clear in your communication. Repeat your responses if necessary.

Don't...

- Try to be their friend; just express your interest in helping them with their concern.
- Be overly nurturing or flattering.
- Challenge illogical beliefs; just be clear and consistent in your communications.
- Try to be humorous or joke about their suspicions.

THE ANXIOUS PERSON

Anxious people are afraid of either specific things or may have general anxiety. Unfamiliar and uncontrollable situations raise the anxiety level of such individuals. They are frequently driven by a desire to please others, and the fear of not doing so can create anxiety. Such individuals often have difficulty making decisions. They may be concerned about speaking and sharing their real concerns for fear that they will make mistakes, or that you will not be kind and accepting of them.

Do...

- Encourage them to discuss their feelings and thoughts. Often this alone will relieve a great deal of their anxiety.
- Be empathetic and reassuring when appropriate.
- Remain calm.
- Be clear and explicit.

Don't...

- Minimize their anxiety and fears or make the situation more complicated.
- Overwhelm them with too much information.
- Sound impatient.
- Make decisions for them.

THE DEMANDING PERSON

Often the time and energy given to these types of individuals is never enough. They may seek to control your time and to be very persistent in seeking your attention. They may consider your time and attention as a reflection of their worth.

Do...

- Assert your own scheduling needs. "Excuse me, I only have a few more minutes before I need to take another call." "Excuse me, but I have a meeting starting in 2 minutes and we need to wrap up."
- Use the "broken record" technique, repeating the same message. "I wish there were more I could do, but I'm afraid there is not."
- Ignore persistent demands after other strategies have been tried.

THE DEMANDING PERSON (continued)

Don't...

- Allow this type of individual to disrupt your plans, e.g., canceling a meeting or ignoring other callers.
- Chastise or lecture or in other ways give the individual more time.

OBTAINING FURTHER ASSISTANCE

The California Psychological Association (CPA) is available to you and your staff for information and consultation about handling difficult situations with constituents or other members of the public. Consultations with a member of CPA is confidential.

We are also available, in collaboration with our 19 regional Chapters, to offer training on this guide to your district offices with a psychologist from your district. Please contact us if you are interested in this for your local staff.

Psychologists are licensed to practice in the State of California to provide services for mental and emotional disorders. Psychologists have doctorate degrees requiring on average seven years of study and 3,000 hours of supervised practice.

California Licensed Psychologists adhere to the highest standards of ethics and practice as required by the American Psychological Association's ethical guidelines, CPA's Ethics Committee, and the California Board of Psychology.



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