

www.ifma.org/fmj | JULY/AUGUST 2013

US\$12.50 | IFMA

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The Art of Saying

“NO”

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The Art of Saying

NO

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Facility management professionals are challenged regularly with the uncomfortable task of telling customers, clients and staff “No.” This seemingly simple act is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of any facility manager’s job. We can each think of a situation when saying “No” caused a reaction out of line with the magnitude of the original request. As service providers, we are often charged with communicating unpopular answers, and as messengers we even have the potential to create issues by

delivering the right answer in the wrong way. Each person who is required to deliver a message needs to understand that there is a right way to say “No.” Although there is no easy fix, there is an opportunity to learn skills that will help you to manage these situations and mitigate confrontation.

It is important to understand that it is not merely the act of saying “No” that can cause problems, but the way in which “No” is said. The tone and speed of delivery can determine whether the response is perceived

as thoughtful or dismissive. We have all heard ourselves and others make comments such as: “It’s not designed to do that,” “It can’t be fixed,” “I can’t do that,” “It doesn’t work that way,” “It’s not my job,” “I don’t have time,” “That will cost more” or “It’s not in the budget.” This type of response can cause anger and frustration on the part of the customer because it communicates that his/her issue is not being addressed. The reason for this is that when these types of answers are given, the customer hears, “I don’t like you,” “I have been told to ignore

you or your department, “You are not important,” “I don’t want to be bothered with your problem” or “You’re not smart enough to understand.” What began as a quick response to an inquiry resulted in the customer feeling insulted and perceiving the person saying “No” as unsupportive. How, then, do we say “No” without causing customers to feel slighted, neglected or ignored?

Saying “No” the right way is simple to accomplish if you realize that before you communicate “No” you need to KNOW:

- K**nowledge of the job
- N**otice the issue
- O**ptions for resolution
- W**ork with management.

Knowledge of the job

Successful communication starts with the knowledge of the job you are required to do. This involves understanding what deliverables you are responsible for, as well as requirements for your team members, department, any programs or policies and where your authority or the department’s authority ends. Knowing is not limited to understanding just the delivery requirements, but also why those programs and policies were developed, what they exist to achieve and how they support the business. Whether it’s understanding why temperature set points are important or the reason behind the selection of the kitchen and office supplies, it is necessary that you understand the business objectives that these programs and policies support.

Knowing your role and responsibilities and recognizing your limitations allows you to educate the customer when problems are beyond your authority or ability. This also includes technical knowledge. When dealing with technical issues, do not be afraid to let the customer know if a request is beyond your ability or if you will need to consult with someone more skilled in that area. Your knowing,

understanding and accepting the limitations of your level of authority will allow you to accurately set expectations and allocate resources.

Notice the issue

Allow the customer to fully explain his/her issue or complaint and make sure you truly grasp what is being described. Ask clarifying questions and repeat the issue to make sure you understand completely. Take time, not only to listen to what the customer is saying, but to understand the true nature of the complaint. At that point, you can begin to determine what can be done to address the apparent and underlying issues. You can relieve frustration and anxiety simply by recognizing and validating the customer’s concerns. You may find that the root cause is actually quite different from what the customer has expressed.

When investigating the request or reported problem, stop to look at the situation, analyze the complaint and determine the root cause. Then, look at what needs to be done to remove or repair the issue. Finally, determine if the resolution can be achieved within the boundaries of existing programs and policies. Place yourself in the customer’s position and think about how you would like the situation to be addressed. When you are determining the resolution, remember that educating the customer will be part of the process. Prepare yourself to inform the customer and be ready to address any questions he/she may have.

Options for resolution

Once your knowledge of the deliverables is measured against the root cause of the problem, you can provide options for resolution. Each alternative must address the issue identified by the customer, and be within the parameters of your ability and authority. Educating the customer is crucial when delivering solutions. At this time, it’s important to explain why the original request is not achievable, how the optional resolution aims to address the issue, what the next steps will be and the timeframe for completion. Identify additional resources, such the building engineer or



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manager, who will be consulted in order to address the issue. Do not be intimidated by the prospect of telling the customer what you don't know, what your limitations are and whether you need additional support to research or complete the request. Simple and direct communication will demonstrate that the issue was taken seriously and that it is being addressed in a logical and professional manner.

Work with management and technical experts

We often neglect to inform and consult with our supervisors based on the mistaken assumption that this will somehow indicate inability on our part. However, management's role is to support your actions, deal with issues at a higher level and engage senior staff when necessary. It is the manager's responsibility to reassign work, identify additional resources and provide situation-specific mentoring. You need to understand what your management team needs and wants to be informed about, as often customers will want validation of their concerns from the supervisory level.

Informing your manager of situations in advance will allow him/her to ensure they are appropriately addressed. This can be as simple as a direct interaction between the customer and manager to show that the issue has been elevated, or if necessary the issue can be brought to the customer's manager for resolution. These types of interactions provide the needed support to the field service team, especially if that team is charged with delivering unpleasant information. Simply put, rely on your supervisors, managers and senior management team to assist in relaying information and reinforcing standards.

The other members of your team can be valuable resources when you are dealing with challenging customers. Active

communication with the team will create consistent delivery and messages, reducing the need to say "No." This communication includes consulting with subject matter experts as well as informing and updating all involved parties on any actions taken. Each team member should have access to the same information, so that all responses to questions about the situation will be consistent. While customers may not like the answer, the consistent message from every team member and management will reinforce the decision. This will inevitably strengthen the perception the customer has of you and your team.

Caution when saying "Yes"

Even saying "Yes" can be associated with additional challenges, and there are some actions that you need to avoid when giving a green light. Employees who believe they can handle situations without management or team member involvement commonly cause complications. This mentality is divisive and can be harmful to the team, as in most cases these employees create more problems

than they solve, including performing special favors outside of defined deliverables. When this occurs, the actions of the individual commit the entire team to modified delivery requirements, usually without program or policy support and often without the manpower or finances required to achieve that commitment.

How to say "No"

There are some basic tools that will help you deal with every issue and situation. The highest priority is to respect and acknowledge the customer. You can do so by taking the time to repeat the issue, validating that you understand and acknowledge the concern. While the issue may not be significant to you, it could be the most meaningful concern of the customer's day. When replying, you must focus on what can be done to address the issue. This includes providing a range of options, especially if the request cannot be directly accommodated. Identify appropriate next steps or additional resources and define the time required to resolve the issue or respond with an answer.

When delivering a message, the first step in successful communication involves maintaining a positive attitude and avoiding a shift to a negative or demeaning posture. Snide, sarcastic or malicious comments are unwarranted and unprofessional. If you begin to respond with these attitudes, stop to reconsider your response. While it is difficult enough to hold yourself



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KNOWLEDGE OF THE JOB

NOTICE THE ISSUE

Here are some basic responses that can minimize the negative reaction to “No”:

- *“I can’t do that, but what I can do is...”*
- *“That is something I can look into doing, in the future. For now we can do...”*
- *“I need to escalate this to my manager; for now we can...”*
- *“I understand that (state the issue), however the policy is (state the policy). I will bring it up to my manager and make him/her aware of your issue.” If you quote policy, make sure it is published and supported by the company!*
- *“I don’t know if that is in the budget, but I will check with my manager, for now we can...”*
- *“I will take a look at that, but right now I am working on another issue.”*
- *“I need to talk to the specialist to figure out how to address your issue.”*

WORK WITH MANAGEMENT

OPTIONS FOR RESOLUTION

in check when having a face-to-face conversation, any snide and sarcastic responses become magnified in emails. Usually sending emotionally charged emails only accomplishes angering or upsetting the receiver. When sending emails, and especially when replying to emails that may have irritated you, it is best to stop and wait for a few minutes before sending. Reread the email to try to see things from the author's perspective. In some cases, you should also have someone else review the email prior to sending, especially if it is a sensitive topic for the recipient or if you have some negative history.

A quick final note on emails: never reply a third time. If you don't have clarity after the first two attempts, the hope of reaching understanding with a third email is minimal. At that point, there should be a phone or in-person conversation to further clarify the communication. These responses should be limited to communicating the business at hand. Recognizing that there are a few

individuals who will never be satisfied regardless of the reasoning, the majority of your customers will welcome information and the attention given their request when the answers are presented professionally.

Conferring a negative response in a positive manner will not only make your job easier; it will fulfill the requirement of supporting your customers, who are the very reason the facility management role exists. The art of saying "No" lies simply in relaying information in a positive and supportive manner. **FMJ**



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Scott Offermann is a facility management professional whose more than 25 years of experience include delivering services in 37 countries and overseeing a delivery team of

providers. He has delivered facility services as a direct and outsourced provider in health care, manufacturing, distribution, high tech, recreation and call center environments.

An authority on remote and direct management, his strong leadership encourages innovation and collaboration which results in the delivery of superior business services to his clients and customers. Further, as an expert in program development, his creation and delivery of programs drives global consistency and efficiency, enhances value, mitigates risk and improves customer satisfaction.

Offermann was a presenter at IFMA's 2011 Virtual Conference & Expo and at Facility Fusion 2013. He earned his bachelor's degree at Arizona State University and is a Certified Facility Manager, Certified Energy Manager and a member of the British Institute of Facilities Management (BIFM).



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