

Excerpt from
The Customer Service Survival Kit
By Richard S. Gallagher

CHAPTER 1

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Understanding the “Uh-Oh” Moment

I AM STANDING IN FRONT of hundreds of people, microphone in hand, on the stage of an auditorium. I ask the audience a simple question, one of many I will be asking that morning. But this is the only one that instantly causes nearly every single one of hundreds of hands to shoot into the air:

“Have you ever had a customer situation that went really, really wrong?”

When you scratch the surface of any group of people who work with the public, you will hear a truly amazing litany of war stories. Physical and verbal intimidation. Outrageous demands. Letters telling your boss how horrible you are. Threats of lawsuits. Or perhaps the thing that many of us fear the most: devastating consequences for a customer that were your fault.

These are what I call the “uh-oh” moments: unplanned, unscripted, and often extreme situations. Moments where good intentions are not enough, and human nature fails us. It is in these moments that the sunshine-and-smile training school of customer service collides with the real world. They do not happen very often. Hopefully they are just a small fraction of the situations you deal with across career. But if you work with customers long enough, like nearly half of all people working today, they will eventually happen to you.

This is where this book comes in. It will not teach you how to be “nice.” It will not help you to have a good attitude. And it will not discuss basic customer relationship skills that your mother probably taught you when you were six. Instead, in this book we are going to arm you with tools to handle your very worst customer situations – tools that people like crisis counsel-

ors, hostage negotiators, psychotherapists, and others use to gain control of these situations. In the process, you will discover how to become supremely confident in *any* customer situation, and fundamentally change the way you deal with the public.

Why Worst-Case Scenarios Are Important

Worst-case scenarios can be frightening and challenging. Yet at the same time, they happen pretty infrequently for most people; I would say no more than a fraction of a percent of our overall transactions, based on my informal surveys of speaking audiences. So if this is the case, why should we bother learning to handle them? Can't we just call in our boss, or suffer through them when they happen?

I have a different view. I personally believe that learning how to handle your worst customer situations is the single most important skill you can learn in your career, and that teaching your team these skills is the surest way to succeed as a leader. Here are three reasons why:

1. These are all teachable skills, and most people do not know them until they are taught them. For example, years ago I had no idea what I might say to someone threatening suicide. Now I *do* know because of the skills I was taught when I worked on a crisis line. Once you have learned how to manage crisis and conflict, these skills stick with you for the rest of your life.
2. Learning to handle your worst situations is the key to delivering excellent service *all* of the time. It is the secret weapon that most smile-training books never talk about. Wherever I worked, it was our single biggest tool in changing the way we dealt with customers.
3. These skills change *you*. Shakespeare wrote, "Cowards die many times before their deaths,/ The valiant never taste of death but once." When you feel supremely confident walking into any customer situation, your view of your job – and life itself – changes dramatically.

Did you ever wonder why so many employees act rude, snippy, and disengaged? Why companies that seemingly want your business employ people who act like they are off in another zip code somewhere? Why entire companies sometimes fail to do the right thing?

It isn't because these people's shorts are all too tight. More often than you think, it is because they constantly operate from a defensive posture, driven by a fear of what might go wrong. They constantly have their shields up and their

swords drawn, even in the most innocent encounters, which is why pushing them to be nicer never works: You haven’t taken that core fear away.

That is why customer-contact teams I managed did so incredibly well after they learned how to manage crisis situations. I didn’t ask them to smile more often, change their personalities, or work harder. Instead, I simply taught them how to execute in the worst situations they could imagine. Then these people, who had just about every personality on the face of the earth, had the skills and confidence to make each customer feel fantastic, no matter what the situation. And yes, they also shone in a crisis.

Nowadays I speak to thousands of people a year all over North America, helping them understand and manage their worst customer situations. Wherever I go, I see the same thing. Nearly everyone, from entry-level employees to senior executives, handle serious conflict the same way – like deer frozen in the headlights – until they are taught what to say and do. Then magic starts to happen. So now, let’s look at a sample of this magic in action.

What Would You Do?

My good friend and colleague, speaker, and trainer extraordinaire Julie Kowalski had an experience that ranks up there as one of the worst service experiences I have ever heard of. I don’t think I could make up a situation as poorly handled as what actually happened to her.

Julie was planning a family vacation to Hawaii, and being a busy public speaker, she decided to order her vacation clothes from a regional store near where she lived. The store promised the clothes would arrive well before her vacation. They didn’t. And as she called, day after day, the store kept promising they would arrive “tomorrow.”

Finally, the last “tomorrow” came. Julie was waiting for the cab to the airport with her empty suitcases, and the clothes still didn’t arrive. She reluctantly took off for Hawaii, planning to buy a few things when she got there. Meanwhile, the store finally delivered the clothes later that day, dropping off exactly two of everything she had ordered and charging her twice as much as she had expected. When she arrived in Hawaii, she discovered that her credit card was maxed out. She spent a week in paradise with no clothes and no credit.

After she got home, she called the store and was told by a snippy employee that she would have to document what happened in writing. So she did, in the form of a fourteen-page letter that she had her assistant fax to the store – over, and over, and over, and over again.

Now, how would you like to have been the lucky employee who had to respond to my friend Julie?

A manager from this retailer did, in fact, call her back, and according to Julie, she nailed it perfectly. (So well, in fact, that Julie's assistant later wondered why she didn't hear any yelling or arguing after putting the call through.) These were the first words out of this manager's mouth:

"I read your letter, Julie. After everything we have put you through, I can't believe that you are still giving us an opportunity to make things right. I want to learn more about what happened, and see what we can do to repair the damage we have done here."

There is a great deal of psychology going on in an opening like this. Here are some of the things that this manager accomplished with this opening statement:

- ▶ She let Julie know that she had read her complaint, and then demonstrated it by sharing her disgust with the situation.
- ▶ She used Julie's name.
- ▶ She preemptively matched Julie's level of emotion.
- ▶ She framed Julie's response – which, remember, had consisted of angrily faxing a long letter over and over – as that of a reasonable person.
- ▶ She took a posture of serving Julie rather than defending herself.

Then, as Julie recounted her grievances, this manager clearly acknowledged and restate each of them in turn. Whether she had unusually good intuition or had been well trained (I suspect both), she succeeded in turning a potentially explosive encounter into a rational discussion.

To its credit, the store did a good job of service recovery. It refunded all of my friend's money, told her to keep the clothes for free as a gesture of apology, and promised to investigate what happened. But before any of this could happen, the road to recovery was paved by saying the right thing when the situation demanded it.

Good Intentions Are Not Enough

You may be thinking to yourself, "I am a pretty smart person. I am also a very nice person. I am good with people. And I can think on my feet. Those skills should get me through the most difficult customer situation, right?"

Wrong.

As much as I deeply respect nice people, being nice is not the same as knowing the right words to say in a crisis. In fact, my experience with employees is that these skills have much less to do with whether you are a “people person” and much more to do with how well you have been trained and coached.

Here is a pop quiz to show you what I mean. Let’s say that a customer is furious because she was not allowed in to see a major concert the night before because of a misunderstanding over whether her ticket was valid. Take a moment to write down what you would *first* say to her.

Now, answer the following questions;

- ▶ Did you use the phrase “I understand” in your response? As you will learn, this is a dated catchphrase that is as likely to enrage your customer as soothe her.
- ▶ Did you try, even a tiny bit, to explain what might have happened? For many people, this is the first club out of their bag. But you will learn that explaining things too soon serves no purpose and only makes the other person more upset.
- ▶ Did you start by offering to do something to make up for this? That may seem like a good response, but if it was the first thing out of your mouth – without making sure she feels acknowledged and asking good questions – you may actually be setting her up to escalate her demands further.

Chapter 13 presents a case study that explains how to handle this situation. For now, here is a quick summary: Mirror the gravity of her complaint, ask questions to learn what happened, and validate her statements every time she speaks. Then explore what she feels needs to be done to make this situation right and negotiate an appropriate level of service recovery.

Some of you reading this may have responded in the same way. Good for you! But many of you, no matter how nice you are, will have said things that

were ineffective or even harmful. And some of you may have struggled with what to say at all.

This is the heart of the “uh-oh” moment: When we most need to be present in a customer’s situation, the majority of us say the wrong things or turn into a block of ice. That’s because we are uncomfortable and often frightened. And more to the point, because we really don’t know what to say. A lot of bad service, especially in a crisis, happens because we simply haven’t been taught the right words to say in critical situations. Even some of the world’s biggest companies say the wrong things in a crisis, with examples as close as your nightly news.

One of the best analogies I can think of to this situation is acting. Most of us think we can do it. It looks natural when we see it. But when you observe professional actors carrying out a scene more closely, they aren’t up there being themselves. They are executing a series of well-rehearsed individual steps. They are positioning themselves at specific chalk lines on the stage, waiting for precise moments to deliver a line, and timing their moves. If you or I took the stage and tried to repeat their scenes, we would appear clumsy and amateurish – just like most of us do in critical customer service situations.

Perhaps an even better comparison is police work. When officers receive a call about a burglary in progress, the police I know don’t clasp their heads in their hands and moan, “Oh, my goodness, someone is stealing something!” Instead, they hop in their patrol car and do what they have been trained over and over to do. These officers are masterful at defusing a crisis because they have been taught to do so. And with the right training, you can learn to defuse your crises with customers as well.

Excerpted from
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What to Say to Defuse Even the Worst Customer Situations***

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