

Dispute resolution

Two simple steps: align and redirect

Question:

How do you respond to a customer who is angry about an invoice? We discussed the amount several months ago, and now he's challenging it after the work has been completed.

Response:

The most effective way to respond to a situation in which you encounter resistance is apply a two-step process I learned from the eastern martial art discipline called Aikido. Its power is in its simplicity, as there are only two steps: align and redirect.

Align is when you mirror the other party's feelings or position.

Redirect is when you want to shift the other party's focus and begin to turn resistance into resolution.

Here's an example to show you how it works:

Client Outrage: "This invoice is outrageous!"

Supplier Aligns: "You seem surprised by the invoice."

Client Response: "I sure am! When we spoke in December we agreed the project would be \$50,000 not \$67,000. This is outrageous!"

Supplier Aligns: "Phil, I value our

business relationship and want you to know that I am committed to resolving this issue."

Supplier Redirects: "Can we go back to our conversation in December when we talked about the timeline — I want to make sure I didn't miss anything?"

Client Response: "(Somewhat reluctant) Sure."

Supplier: "I think the date was Dec. 2. During that meeting, we discussed that the project would involve X and Y and you that you wanted the servers installed by Jan. 5, since this was your No. 1 priority. Once that phase was completed you wanted us to install the new security measures. Do you recall that conversation? Then on Dec. 18, you called me and said two laptops with confidential information were missing and that you needed the security measures installed by the end of that week. I asked you if you wanted us to stop installing the new equipment so you wouldn't have to pay the overtime and you said, 'No, I need those servers and new equipment ready to go by the first of the year.' You signed this change of scope plan and we moved forward. In fact, we encountered some difficulties and had to work through the weekend, which you also approved. Phil, we don't want this to be a financial hardship for you, at the same time, we have already compensated our team. Is there a way we help you get through this?"

Depending upon the issue and the emotional intensity of the situation, you might need to use the align-redirect process several times throughout the conversation.

Here are some additional strategies to help you manage resistance:

1. Maintain your emotional balance.

Resistance can feel like a surprise attack. You don't see it coming and therefore are

not emotionally prepared to respond.

When confronted with a surprise attack, some people fire back, others run away and while some make unnecessary concessions just "to get it over with." But these responses do not create a forum for developing a mutually acceptable resolution.

The best course of action is to maintain a neutral response, at least initially. That's the power behind using the align method. A simple acknowledgement of the other person's point of view can begin, or may even completely diffuse the other party's anger and allow a more civic conversation to ensue.

2. Gather information.

Ask questions to identify possible strategies for resolution. Information helps you weigh options and assess strategies. The more you learn about the other party, the easier it will be to find a mutually agreeable resolution.

Don't be deceived by the simplicity of the align and redirect strategy. It's a powerful strategy that makes the other party feel in control of the situation while you gather critical information that can help you understand how best to move forward.

If your client is emotionally charged, you might be tempted to interrupt with an explanation or counter a comment.

To the degree possible, refrain from doing so. People take offense when you interrupt them. If you want to maintain control over the situation, listen, learn and allow the other party to blow off steam.

3. Explore possibilities

Involve the client in the resolution process. For example, you might say, "If we were able to do ____, would you be

able to do ____?” This allows you to explore possibilities without making a binding commitment.

4. Offer choices

People want to feel in control. When you offer solutions, provide two or three options for the other party to consider. This will give the impression that you are flexible and want to resolve the issue. Consider these strategies as possible resolutions to the above situation:

- A payment plan in which the client pays a designated amount each month to eliminate the burden of lump sum payment.
- A discount applied to future work if

the payment is paid by X date.

- A discount if the supplier can introduce you to two people who would be potential prospects.

Once you reach an agreement, act quickly. A timely response will reinforce the value you place on the relationship and eliminate the risk of the other party changing their mind.



Christine McMahon is the owner of Christine McMahon & Associates, a training and consulting firm in Milwaukee. She can be reached at (414) 290-3344.