

KEEPING A Cool Head IN A Confrontational WORLD



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At CAI's Law Seminar this year, I heard someone say that when the pandemic first hit and everyone was stuck at home, there were about 3 days of everyone being kind to each other, and then everything fell apart and people were angrier than ever. The room at Law Seminar was filled with attendees from all over the country and everyone nodded in agreement. It seems that this was a universal experience. We all pulled together for a brief moment, then our patience for the situation ran out and our civility went out the window. Everyone firmly believes they are correct and they want what they want, right now!

I am certainly not immune from this urge and because of my career, I find myself in confrontational situations very frequently. I am an attorney that specializes in debt collection for community associations. When Boards find themselves with a homeowner (or several) that are not paying their assessments as agreed, they call me to help the Association recover the money they are owed so the Association has the funds to properly maintain what they are obligated to under their governing documents.

Many of the homeowners that are sent to my office for collections are confused and stressed about what is happening. Additionally, many have never found themselves in collections before. I do this work day in and day out and sometimes my patience can run a little short. This can all boil over into an unpleasant confrontation, sometimes from both sides. It can happen to any of us, regardless of if we are a Board Member, a homeowner, a manager, an account tech, or a business partner. It can happen at work, on the phone, or at a Board Meeting. Left unchecked, these situations can ruin your day, your mental health, or your career. When I feel a situation headed toward confrontation, I have found that there are some things I can do to not only try to deescalate the situation, but also minimize the lasting mental impact on me:

1. Never engage in name-calling, cursing or yelling. It is extremely hard to let someone else yell at you or call you terrible names without responding in kind. However, this is vital. The situation will only worsen if you engage in this way. Also, remember that everyone has a video camera with them all the time. Never say anything that you wouldn't be ok with having played in court, on social media, on the news, or anywhere else.
2. Try to understand the other person's viewpoint. Even if you know they are wrong or being unreasonable, really listen to the other person. This often helps get to the real issue, which is sometimes just below the surface of the conversation and not actually being discussed. If you can figure out the crux of the issue, it's immediately much easier to find a resolution that is palatable to both parties.
3. Regardless of what names you are called, it's probably not about you personally. This is really hard for me to remember sometimes. But, most of the time when people are mad at me, they are actually mad at the situation they are in, not at me directly. Reminding myself that it's not about me can really help me not engage and make the situation worse.
4. If all else fails, you might just be dealing with a jerk. Let's be honest, we've all been that person at one point or another. (Ask me sometime about my meltdown at a random lady in Disney World. I'm sure I am the jerk in her version of the story.) Sometimes you catch someone on a bad day. Sometimes you just catch a jerk. Regardless, this is going to happen. Keep your head and don't engage. End the conversation as soon as you can and move on.
5. After a difficult conversation or confrontation, give yourself a short break to let it go. Get up and take a walk for a few minutes. Go tell a coworker what just happened (I'm sure they have had a similar experience and can empathize and commiserate). Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. However you do it, mentally remove yourself from the confrontation and don't allow it to ruin your day.
6. Once you are calmer, learn from what just happened. What could you have done differently to help the situation? What do you wish you had/hadn't said? Learn from it so you can do better next time, and then let the situation go. Carrying around that sort of stress isn't good for you.

I would like to believe that after the pandemic, everything will go back to normal and people will all be reasonable. Unfortunately, uncomfortable confrontations with others in our industry are probably here to stay. Try some of these techniques to help you through your next one and hopefully we can all be better in the future.

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