

A Legislator's Guide: Communicating with Distressed Constituents



Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Suggestions for Enhancing Communication with Constituents.....	4-5
General Guidelines for Interaction with Distressed Constituents.....	6
The Verbally Aggressive Person.....	7-8
The Violent or Physically Destructive Person.....	9
The Person in Poor Contact with Reality	10-11
The Suspicious Person	12
The Anxious Person	13
The Demanding Person	14
Obtaining Further Assistance.....	15

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A Faculty/Staff Guide: Toward Enhancing Communication with Students and Helping the Emotionally Distressed Student (1989), by Sandra R. Harris Ph.D., 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.

By Sandra R. Harris, Ph.D. Originally published by the California Psychological Association (CPA) in 1994. Third edition, 2009.

Obtaining Further Assistance

The Iowa Psychological Association (IPA) is available to you and your staff for information and consultation about handling difficult situations with constituents or others. Consultation with a psychologist member of IPA is confidential.

Psychologist members of IPA are licensed to practice in the State of Iowa and have doctoral degrees: Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology), Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychology), or Ed.D. (Doctor of Education). Obtaining a doctorate requires an average of seven years of study and 3,000 hours of supervised practice in psychology beyond the bachelor's degree. A year of supervised postdoctoral experience is required prior to taking a national written proficiency examination. Psychologists are highly trained and are licensed to provide services for mental and emotional disorders.

IPA member psychologists adhere to the highest standards of ethics and practice as required by the American Psychological Association's ethical guidelines, IPA's Ethics Committee, and the State Board of Psychology.

Through a scientific base of knowledge, psychologists have contributed greatly to the understanding of human behavior, the alleviation of pain and suffering, and the promotion of human health and well-being.

The Demanding Person

Typically, the amount of time and energy given to demanding people is never enough. They may seek to control your time and can 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 need to attend other things.”
- Use “broken record” technique, repeating the same message: “I wish there were more I could do, but there isn’t.”
- Ignore persistent demands after other strategies have been tried.

DON’T . . .

- Allow the constituent to disrupt your plans (e.g., canceling a meeting).
- Chastise, lecture, or in other ways give more time.

Introduction

Constituents contact their elected officials for many reasons. When constituents feel that they have been treated unfairly, they look to you for understanding and to address their concerns. At other times, constituents just want 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 his or her distress. For example, a constituent suffering low levels of distress is likely to benefit from a timely and caring response from you.

To assist you with these situations, the Iowa Psychological Association (IPA) is providing you with this guide, which will help you and your staff communicate effectively with distressed constituents. Included in this guide are general principles for interacting with distressed constituents and suggestions for appropriate responses to six types of distressed constituents.

We sincerely hope that both you and your staff find this a useful resource. If you would like to schedule a training session for your office staff or receive additional copies of this guide, please contact:

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Suggestions for Enhancing Communication with Constituents

Legislators and legislative staff want to assist constituents, but constituents may have difficulties communicating their needs. They may sometimes lack self-confidence in approaching an elected official or may feel inadequate in 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 in your interactions with constituents. Inherent in these suggestions is conveying understanding and interest that, in turn, will reduce conflict with the constituent and neutralize stress in the office and for the constituent.

1. **Short Beginning Phrases**

Use these words to lead the constituent into discussion: “So, what can I do for you today?” “Tell me more about that.”

2. **Open-ended Questions**

Begin with what, how, and why: “What is on your mind?” “How may I help you?” “Why have you come today?” This leads to longer, more specific responses from the constituent. *Who, when* and *where* typically elicit very brief responses.

3. **Short Phrases**

These help to keep discussion going: “I see.” “I understand.” “Tell me more.” “This is interesting.”

4. **Paraphrasing**

Rephrasing the content in your own words conveys to the constituent that you are listening to get the message right and encouraging further elaboration. You can paraphrase by using lead-ins such as the following: “Let me understand . . .” “Basically what is happening is . . .”

The Anxious Person

Danger is a key theme in the thoughts of an anxious person. Unknown and unfamiliar situations raise the anxiety level of these people. Often, the need to do things perfectly or to please everyone creates feelings of anxiety. Anxious people often have difficulties making decisions. They may be very concerned about speaking with you, fearing that they will make mistakes or that you will not accept them.

DO . . .

- Let them discuss their feelings and thoughts. Often this alone relieves a great deal of pressure.
- Reassure when appropriate.
- Remain calm.
- Be clear and explicit.

DON'T . . .

- Make the situation more complicated.
- Overwhelm them with information and ideas.
- Use rapid-fire questioning.
- Get trapped into making decisions for them.

The Suspicious Person

Typically, suspicious people are tense, anxious, mistrustful loners who have few friends. They tend to interpret minor oversights as significant personal rejections and often overreact to insignificant occurrences. They see themselves as the focus of everybody's behavior, and everything that happens has special meaning to them. They are overly concerned with fairness and being treated equally. Feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy underlie most of their behavior.

DO . . .

- Express compassion, without inappropriate closeness. Remember that suspicious people have trouble with closeness and warmth.
- Be firm, steady, punctual, and consistent. Stay in an open area near other people.
- Be specific and clear in your communication.

DON'T . . .

- Assure the person that you are his or her friend. Acknowledge that you are a stranger but that even strangers can be concerned.
- Be overly warm, nurturing, or flattering.
- Challenge or agree with any mistaken or illogical beliefs.
- Be cute, humorous, or ambiguous.

Suggestions for Enhancing Communication with Constituents, continued...

5. **Clarifying Facts**

Often, clarifying facts goes along with paraphrasing to help you get more of the picture and to focus a vague presentation. One of the best ways to clarify a fact is to say, "Those are the facts as I see them. Don't you agree?" To determine whether you've heard the constituent's message clearly, ask questions beginning with "Are you saying that . . ." or "Do you mean that . . .?"

6. **Feeling Description**

Rephrasing the emotional part of the message responds to the constituent's feelings and helps to convey understanding: "From what you say, it sounds like you are frustrated (angry, upset, etc.)." Acknowledging the person's feelings and showing empathy are very important in establishing and maintaining good rapport.

7. **The Physical Setting**

Where the interaction occurs may contribute to or interfere with communication. Actively moving away from distractions can convey your interest in your constituent. Likewise, removing objects, such as desks or tables, between you and the constituent reduces barriers to communication. Sitting behind your desk communicates the power of a legislator's authority. If threats have been implied, position yourself near an escape and do not isolate yourself for the meeting.

General Guidelines for Interaction With Distressed Constituents

- Whenever possible, offer to speak directly with the constituent, inviting the individual to come to your office if that is feasible. Your receptivity can have a positive effect on your interaction.
- Listen carefully to your constituent and try to see the issue from his or her point of view without agreeing or disagreeing. Paraphrasing, clarifying, and rephrasing the emotional part of the message help convey understanding.
- Acknowledge that you are sincerely concerned about your constituent's welfare. Let your constituent know that you care about how he or she feels.
- Offer to assist your constituent in reasonable ways; however, don't go overboard. At times, in an attempt to reach or help a troubled constituent, you may become more involved than time or skill permits. Extending oneself to others always involves some risk, but it can be a gratifying experience when kept within realistic limits.
- Strange or inappropriate behavior should not be ignored. The constituent can be told that such behavior is inappropriate and that you cannot assist the individual when he or she behaves inappropriately.

The Person in Poor Contact with Reality, continued...

DON'T . . .

- Argue or try to convince them of the irrationality of their thinking, as that makes them defend their position (false perceptions) more.
- Play along: "Oh yeah, I hear the voices (or see the devil)."
- Encourage further revelations of their odd or delusional thinking.
- Demand, command, or order.
- Expect customary emotional responses.

The Person in Poor Contact with Reality

People who are in poor contact with reality have difficulty distinguishing their fantasies or perceptions from reality. Their thinking is typically illogical, confused, disturbed. They may coin new words, see or hear things that no one else does, have irrational beliefs, and exhibit bizarre or inappropriate behavior. Generally, these people are not dangerous. They may feel scared, frightened, and overwhelmed.

DO . . .

- Respond with warmth and kindness, but with firm reasoning.
- Remove extra stimulation from the environment and see them in a quiet atmosphere (if it is safe to do 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 their feelings or fears without supporting the misconceptions: "I understand you think they are trying to hurt you, and I know how real it seems to you, but I don't hear the voices (see the devil, etc.)."
- 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 or the real.
- Speak to their healthy side, which they have. It's okay to joke, laugh or smile when appropriate.

The Verbally Aggressive Person

People usually become verbally abusive in frustrating situations that they see as being beyond their control. The constituent's anger and frustration may become redirected toward you. Typically, this is not meant as a personal attack.

DO . . .

- Acknowledge their anger and frustration: "I hear how angry you are."
- Rephrase what they are saying and identify their emotion: "I can see how upset you are because you feel your rights are being violated and nobody will listen."
- Allow them to ventilate, get the feelings out, and tell you what is upsetting them.
- Reduce stimulation; invite the person to your office or another quiet place (if this does not compromise your safety).
- Tell them that you are not willing to tolerate verbal abuse: "When you yell and scream at me that way, I find it hard (impossible) to listen."
- Ask the person to move back if he or she is getting physically too close: "Please stand back; you are too close."
- Help the person problem-solve and deal with the real issues when the constituent becomes calmer and receptive.

The Verbally Aggressive Person, continued...

DON'T . . .

- Get into an argument or shouting match.
- Become hostile or punitive yourself: "You cannot 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 ignore the situation.
- Convey a message that you are willing to accept abuse or threats.

The Violent or Physically Destructive Person

Violence is becoming an increasing concern in the work environment. Typically, violence occurs only when the person is completely frustrated and feels unable to do anything else about the situation. The adage "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" best applies here.

DO . . .

- Prevent total frustration and helplessness by quickly and calmly acknowledging the intensity of the situation: "I can see you are very upset and really mean business and have some critical concerns on your mind."
- 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."
- Stay in an open area near other people.
- Get necessary help (other staff, police, e.g.).

DON'T . . .

- Ignore warning signs that the person is about to explode, such as yelling, screaming, clenched fists, or statements like, "You're leaving me no choice."
- Threaten, dare, taunt, or push the person into a corner.