

Sharpen Your Problem-Solving Skills

“The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.”

-Albert Einstein



BY CAROL L. BROOKS, SR/WA

During a negotiation, the fact that an owner's frustration may escalate is not, in itself, a problem. It becomes an issue only if the agent neglects to remain patient and calm. If the agent reacts negatively to the owner's emotional state or stops listening altogether, that's when the situation becomes problematic.

To help you identify novel solutions to just about any kind of problem, I've devised a seven-step strategy that can redirect a tough negotiation to a successful fix.

Set Ego Aside

The first step is to be aware of and control any emotion that may cause you to react negatively to the owner. During negotiations, be mindful of your goal—a mutually agreeable outcome. Ego has no role in gaining mutual agreement, so don't let it get in your way. Once it's set loose, it's hard to rein in.

Name the Problem

By giving the problem a name, you help identify what needs to be fixed. Describe the situation in terms of who, what, where, when, how and why. This will help make the problem clearer in your own mind. This is not a race. Rather, it is a methodical analysis of the owner's behavior, feelings and wants. These are the clues that will lead you to identifying the most viable solutions.

Use Creative Thinking

When issues arise, this is the time to be creative. Use some imaginative thinking. This exercise will open up your mind to possibilities that fall outside the norm. See if you can come up with some crazy and wild ideas, and then jot them down. If you are out of practice, you may find that thinking creatively is like trying to start your car on a cold day. At first, the engine

spits and sputters. But once it warms up, it settles into a smooth running machine. If your mind is in the spit/sputter phase, keep trying. Creativity can lead to a flow of problem-solving ideas.

Prioritize Your Options

Review your list of ideas and select the best solution. At this point, you and the owner should be working together as a team. Therefore, it's advisable to take advantage of this cooperative relationship and select the top three mutually agreed upon alternatives. Should you need them, they'll already be identified. This strategy is especially advantageous for intra-agency negotiations, where you and the agency are negotiating on behalf of the owner.

Practice

It takes hard work to change behavior, but a new method can blossom with continual practice. The more you use a new method of responding to a problem, the better you'll become at mastering it. Eventually, your new responses will become second nature, occurring seamlessly without thought or effort. So never give up. Remember that improving your problem-solving skills will enhance your quality of life in many different ways.

Reinforce Good Behavior

When you observe willing and helpful behavior in the property owner, be sure to give verbal recognition. Say

something like, “I like the fact that we're able to work together to resolve this issue.” By reinforcing their cooperative nature, you encourage them to continue that behavior moving forward. Give yourself some positive reinforcement, as well. Think of yourself as calm and controlled, and you are likely to stay in charge of your emotions, even if a conflict should arise.

Build on Your Successes

When conducting a self-assessment, it is important to stay honest and keep an open mind. Evaluate your strategy and make sure you are satisfied with the outcome. See if adjustments are needed and be sure to tailor your methods to fit your own style. As you evaluate the results, look for patterns. For example, if you have an accommodating style and this encourages the owner to go off on tangents, then think about a time when you felt in control of the situation and find a way to integrate that approach. Once your strategy starts working, build on your successes.

When we decide to change, we are making a conscious decision to improve our lives. It means we are not entirely satisfied with where we are today and that we are ready to improve things for the better. When we leave what is comfortable and transition into unfamiliar territory, it can take time. Be patient and take courage from Robert Louis Stevenson who said, “To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.”



Carol L. Brooks, SR/WA

Owner of Cornerstone Management Skills, Carol is an internationally-recognized author and lecturer on conflict management, interpersonal skills and success strategies. She has nearly 20 years experience in the right of way profession and is a Master Facilitator for IRWA courses. ©2012 Carol L. Brooks All Rights Reserved. For more information, visit www.cornerstonemanagementskills.com