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A DASH OF HUMANENESS CUTS HURT

Bettyjo Bouchey

I woke up at 6 a.m. on Thursday to catch my 9 a.m. flight. I was in my second city that week and headed toward the third. I flipped on the television and heard the news about a terrorist plot targeting planes headed to the States from England.

After listening to the list of items no longer allowed onboard, I packed my luggage accordingly and headed to the Seattle airport. To my utter horror upon arrival, I encountered masses of humanity everywhere. After checking my bag (something I rarely do), I headed toward the security lines.

People were yelling "End of the line!" and pointing toward the parking garage. After passing more than 1,000 people, I reached a woman holding a sign that read, not surprisingly, "End of the Line."

I had a sneaking suspicion I shouldn't have checked my bag.

After more than two hours in line, I missed my flight. Without an apology in sight, the "pronouncement" came: "You can take the next flight 10 hours from now, and you can thank al-Qaida for your missed flight."

If I weren't so tired and stressed out, I would have throttled the announcer.

In a sullen mood, I ventured toward the next long line: Customer Service. With an empty stomach, dry mouth and no way of reaching my destination, I was fortunate to encounter Theresa.

I mention her by name because she's the reason for this article.

Her first words were "I know it's been a tough morning, but I'm ready to do whatever it takes to get you where you need to go, and as quickly as possible." It was as if divine providence had prompted Theresa's appearance, thus saving me from beating someone to a pulp.

She knew about customer service and even more about self-preservation. Several times during our conversation, she used the hallmarks of conflict negotiation: Feel. Felt. Found.

"Mrs. Bouchey," she said, "I know exactly how you feel and I have felt the same way when I've been stranded in an airport; it's extremely stressful. I've found there is always a solution - even if not optimal - to this type of problem, and I guarantee you we are going to find one for you."

Actually, Theresa really couldn't help me very much because her airline couldn't get me to where I needed to go; thankfully another could. Nevertheless, her soothing last words were: "Mrs. Bouchey, I'm really sorry we couldn't help you today, but I really am glad that you found a way to get home. I hope this day gets better for you."

Theresa knew that good customer service is essential, not only in business, but in all walks of life. The adage "the customer is always right" is not a theorem about absolute certitude, but a call for humane treatment and service. It's applying the Golden Rule to the market economy.

As such, we need to be sensitive to the plight of others, whether we're being served or serving. Naturally as customers, we relish courteous, efficient and personal service. As service providers, we enjoy dealing with pleasant, respectful and patient customers.

When things go awry, however, customers often demand attention and service, while frazzled service providers have the unenviable task of arbitrating no-win situations between customers and enterprises. Patience, good judgment and temperaments become frayed, and we can only hope that a dash of humaneness can be mustered on both sides.

There are times that I've said to someone "Thanks for your help," while restraining myself from screaming "You should've done it three weeks ago and you're fired!" We seriously need to take stock of ourselves - as customers and service providers - and think about managing our primal inclinations toward aggressive behavior.

Yes, sometimes we need to eat humble pie to find the solution to a problem. And, when things go awry, customer service is essentially about palliating other people's dissatisfactions and inconveniences. In every circumstance, it means saying "please" and "thank you," even if these words stick in your throat.

As in Theresa's case, it meant taking a deep breath and saying "I am so sorry we had to release your flight; I can see you've spent a lot of time in that line. Let's figure this out together." Can you imagine wanting to throttle such a

consolable person?

NextGen Workbytes is written locally by and for Gen Xers learning the realities of the workplace. **Bettyjo H. Bouchey** is dean of ITT Technical Institute in Colonie and is involved with a local young professionals' group. The views expressed in this article are her own and not those of ITT Technical Institute or any of its subsidiaries.

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