

“Critical Incident Diaries”

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Retrospectively composed October 11th, 2011, concerning events occurring between February and April 2011.

1. The Lockbox

I worked in the front-line residential technical support call queue of a large privately-owned residential and business cable operator. A property manager phoned in. He wanted to get lockboxes installed in his buildings – enclosures that would prevent unauthorized access to the cable distribution wiring.

This was an example of an issue that wasn’t addressed anywhere in the proprietary knowledge base. It took my placing 15 minutes of outside calls to come to a resolution. (I remember the supervisors’ being very good at advising “Call Tier 2”, and I often wondered sardonically if they should be replaced by a recording to such effect.) When I was on the line with Tier 2, they advised me to contact a regional tech manager and they gave me his phone number.

I called that number and reached the manager’s voice mail. I left a detailed message. When I returned to the customer, I gave him the number in case he needed to contact him.

My supervisor was quick to let me know I made a mistake. After I read the last digits of the number, I heard a voice over my shoulder: “Who authorized you to give out that phone number?!” Still on the line, I didn’t answer him right away. The supervisor did not hesitate to repeat himself.

I muted my microphone. “Well, nobody did,” I replied meekly.

He came down a notch from out-and-out livid. “Don’t do that again.”

He walked away, but then the customer was still on the line, and he asked me to repeat the number. Was I to tell the customer I wasn’t supposed to give him the number in the first place? (As a customer in his place, I would have cried *bul-er*, bird seed.) Or would I repeat the number, even though the supervisor, just a few meters away, had just finished telling me not to give such things out?

I repeated the number *sotto voce*, hoping the supervisor wouldn’t hear. The hope was probably in vain, but I didn’t hear anything more about it.

What did I learn/have reinforced?

If it were my company, no mistake would have been committed – I reject the notion that people should be insulated from the customers that they are responsible to. However, even in an idealistic environment, there may be other considerations afoot. And, moreover, when you accept a wage from an employer, the expectation is that the employee will have read and understood all applicable rules and that they will ask a superior at every juncture of uncertainty¹.

¹ I believe on this point I managed to be quite a pest throughout my employment – the supervisor began to regularly answer the help queue phone with a mildly annoyed “Yes, Will?” It didn’t help that we were required to phone for authorization to call Tier 2 even when we knew it would be necessary.

Pragmatically speaking, I learned to ensure that I have the right to volunteer information before I volunteer it. We had learned to follow set procedures when it comes to customer information, but the guidelines were murkier when it comes to company information (e.g. how the scheduling of technicians works). With the latter, I tended to err on the side of openness at my peril.

2. Lunchtime

This same cable operator also provides wireless internet service in rural Nova Scotia that is heavily subsidized by the provincial government. The service is faster than dial-up, but the transceiver nodes are shared, sometimes by twenty or more subscribers if there happen to be that many in the line of sight of that node (there are six nodes on each tower, forming a ring). The throughput doesn't scale with the addition of new subscribers, and as a result there are many customers that are unsatisfied with the speed, and they justifiably complain, doing so frequently.

There are also numerous potential issues with the subscriber's own service module, both electrical and geographical, and the modules are not user-serviceable. The technicians often have limited quota in rural areas, and the front-line representatives have no alternative but to schedule "all day" appointment windows, often for days or weeks down the road. When the customers are not satisfied, quota change requests can be made via a form that sends the pertinent information to another department. This takes time to do, and it must be done while the customer is still on the line. Some customers have more patience than others.

At around lunchtime one day, I received a call from a customer who was unsatisfied with the reliability of her internet service. She complained that the technicians had come several times, but nothing had been resolved. She sounded like this:

"So [smack] what [chomp, smack] are you going to do [smack, chew] to make me happy [smack]?"

My reply: "Could I trouble you to refrain from eating on the phone?"

She immediately hung up. I saved my notes and closed her account window.

The next day when I came to work, my supervisor had this customer's account open and asked me if I remembered this call. She phoned again specifically to complain about me. They had to reduce her bill in order to placate her. The incident would be going as a "verbal" on my human resources file.

What did I learn/have reinforced?

I believe the caller correctly perceived my question as passive-aggressivity, and although it was in direct response to her aggressive-aggressivity, that by no means excuses it. Even though she was rude by civilized standards, I needed to begin by addressing the issue for her call instead of confronting her behavior. In an ideal world, I would be able to say, "Please don't smack and chew on the phone." In the real world, I should instead be evasive and say, "I'm sorry – I'm finding it difficult to hear you. Is there some kind of noise on the line?" I also need to consider the fact that many people may only be able to call in when they're on their lunch break.