

Carers' Self Advocacy Toolkit

Mind your language



Mind your language

When we are upset or angry it is natural to want to hit out at the person we think is responsible for the situation. This is the 'fight' response that our evolution has given us. In our modern society, it is no longer acceptable to literally 'fight' and so this response is usually expressed by getting verbally angry. Therefore verbal feedback can very easily become personal and we talk in 'musts' and 'shoulds' and 'oughts' to express our anger and fear. Language can become very black and white (and blue!) at these times.

When a discussion develops this way, it actually closes down our brain's ability to negotiate practical compromises – leaving us feeling exhausted and very frustrated. It also jeopardises our relationships with those we are reacting to.

Have a look at this conversation between the niece of a lady in a care home and a care worker.

carer "My Aunt's cashmere cardigan she likes isn't in her drawer. Where is it?"

care worker "I don't get paid enough to worry about that!"

carer "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Now tell me where it is, or I'll tell your line manager."

care worker shrugs her shoulders and leaves the room

Commentary

What was going on in that conversation? Below is a suggested commentary on what happened in this exchange.

carer "My Aunt's lamb's wool cardigan she likes isn't in her drawer. Where is it?"

Firstly, it's easy to sympathise with the carer. Her Aunt's favourite – and expensive - cardigan has gone missing, which is upsetting.

"Where is it?" this language is quite disconnecting – it encourages the listener to respond in a defensive way which cuts off good will and rapport of the care worker very quickly. The carer almost accuses the care worker of losing/stealing the cardigan! Personal accusation makes the care worker feel hostile.

care worker "I don't get paid enough to worry about that!"

This language is disconnecting and frustrating and makes the carer more annoyed!

Carer “You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Now tell me where it is, or I’ll tell your line manager.”

“*You should be ashamed of yourself.*” This is a judgmental ‘ought’ and ‘ashamed’ is a very strong emotion and again is targeted at the care worker in personal terms. “*Now tell me where it is, or I’ll tell your line manager.*” the carer threatens the care worker by going to her boss.

Care Worker shrugs her shoulders and leaves the room

This comment about going to her boss finishes the care worker off and she abandons the conversation altogether. The incident ends without any more information of offer of help into resolving the issue and has also created a bad atmosphere

So, how could things have been done differently?

carer

“Hi, I was just looking through my Aunty’s drawer for her favourite cashmere cardigan. I can’t find it anywhere, do you know where it might be? She really likes wearing that one.”

The carer asks politely and provides a bit of background to the question i.e. why the cardigan is important to her Aunty. It’s easier for the care worker to ‘buy in’ to what the carer wants i.e. to find the cardigan.

care worker

“I don’t really look after her clothes. It might have gone to laundry”

The care worker doesn’t feel annoyed or attacked – this helps her come up with a more helpful response

carer

“Please could you check, I’d really appreciate it.”

The carer asks courteously.

care worker

“OK, I’ll speak to Jane and let you know before you leave.”

The care worker is more likely to find out the information

Of course is a made-up script but illustrates some useful points about how to maintain the co-operation of another person.

Some points to consider

- Try and leave judgments like ‘ought’, ‘should’, ‘must’ out of your negotiating
- Make your complaints, requests or explanations non-personal
- Try and avoid ‘black and white’ language like ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and words like ‘terrible’ ‘scandalous’ ‘cruel’ etc unless something very serious has happened
- If you can, describe an incident/situation as they would appear to an impartial observer, without emotions (see the satellite on Being Objective)
- Don’t make accusations unless you have the evidence to back it up