

**Organisational Psychology
Consulting**

Keeping Positive in Demanding
Times

Helping Customers and Yourself

Contents

CONTENTS	2
INTRODUCTION	3
REDUNDANCY AND ITS IMPACT ON PEOPLE	3
SEEING A POSITIVE WAY OUT	4
HOW TO HANDLE THESE CUSTOMERS	5
APPROACH THE CUSTOMER WITH EMPATHY	5
LISTEN TO THE CUSTOMER	5
CHALLENGE THE CUSTOMER	5
ENCOURAGE CUSTOMERS TO WORK OUT FOR THEMSELVES WHAT THEY NEED	6
USE YOUR LOCAL LABOUR MARKET INFORMATION APPROPRIATELY	6
KEEP THE INTERVIEW POSITIVE	6
PROTECT YOURSELF FROM EMOTIONAL STRESS	6
YOU CAN ONLY DO YOUR JOB	6
KEEP THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE	6
BE RESILIENT	7
FINALLY	8
FURTHER INFORMATION AND LINKS	8
ORGANISATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS CONTACT DETAILS	8

Introduction

The Organisational Psychology Consulting Team has received reports that staff in Jobcentre Plus are sometimes having difficulties in listening to new customers' accounts of their circumstances, having recently been made redundant.

Understanding where customers are coming from can help staff to listen to customers objectively. Separating the emotion from the facts of the situation will in turn reduce any stress felt during the encounter.

This guide gives staff:

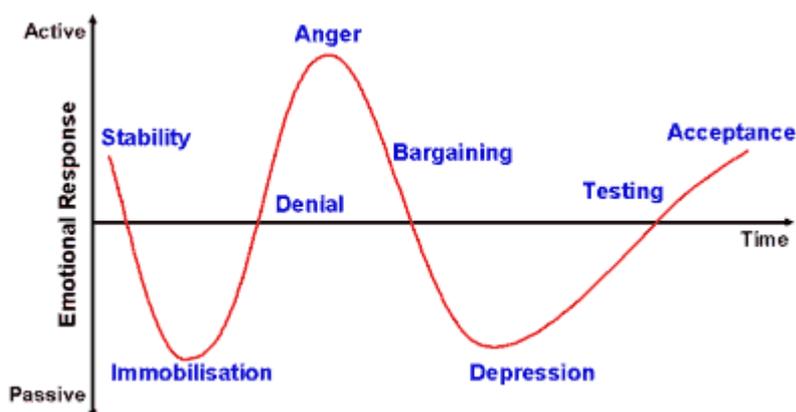
- Information on some of the effects of redundancy and how they, as Jobcentre Plus advisors, can best help customers see a positive way forward.
- Helpful hints that staff can use for themselves to remain positive in these demanding times.

Redundancy and its impact on people

There are some particular characteristics of newly redundant customers, which are sufficiently general for staff to be aware of when working with a new customer. However, these may not apply to each individual.

1. Newly redundant customers may experience a greater loss of self-esteem, confidence, and sense of control over their lives because the decision to leave their job was taken out of their hands.
2. Similarly, if their experience of redundancy is negative (there are those who are relieved to have been made redundant!), a newly redundant customer may grieve for their job and all that it allowed them to be and do.

Grief follows a similar pattern regardless, but the intensity of the grief will differ depending on the cause. The most commonly known grief cycle was developed by Kübler-Ross and identifies different stages of grief:



Shock -	Initial paralysis at hearing the bad news
Denial -	Trying to avoid the inevitable
Anger -	Frustrated outpouring of emotion
Bargaining -	Seeking a way out
Depression -	Realisation of the inevitable
Testing -	Seeking realistic solutions
Acceptance -	Finding the way forward

These phases do not necessarily come in order, nor will everyone go through all of them, but people will experience some of them, until they find a way out of the situation.

You can't change the situation for the customers, they need to do that for themselves, but what you can do, through your job in Jobcentre Plus, is to help **change what people think about their situation to enable them to find 'their way out'**. In turn, this will give them a sense of control back over their lives and boost their self esteem and confidence.

Seeing a positive way out

The way the customer thinks about themselves and their situation may make it hard for them to visualise the way back into work. They may strongly feel they won't find another job or that it is pointless to try on the basis of the way they see their personal circumstances, and the world of work, and so they don't try.

The danger is that you may get "bogged down" in pursuing the detail of any problems the customer may be experiencing. It is more constructive to focus on how the customer views their situation and how this can be changed to help the customer to develop a positive outlook.

The standard interview process, Work Targeted Interviewing (WTI), helps you to avoid the trap of focussing on problems. WTI applies to newly redundant customers in the same way as any other customer. And WTI applies even if time is short.

The time WTI takes can vary, particularly at the evaluation stage. In some interviews, if you have little time, adjust what you do to fit the time available, but ensure you always

1. Know what the specific work goal is

Defining the purpose of the interview with the customer from the start engages them and commits them to the interview and thus helps to keep them focused on the agreed outcome of the interview.

2. Include an element of evaluation, even if it is only one or two questions.

Evaluating is probably the most important stage, and the part where you, as the interviewer, have an opportunity to make a difference. If you miss out evaluation, you risk making no difference and no progress.

The whole interview is focused on helping the customer to work through and discover avenues of work for the future.

How to handle these Customers

Approach the customer with empathy

This gives the customer some breathing space where they can air their feelings and explain their situation.

Empathy is ‘the ability to feel and describe the thoughts and feelings of another person’.

It is not sympathy. Sympathy is a form of agreement with the customer’s feelings and judgement on how you would feel in the same situation. There is a risk that being sympathetic can make someone feel worse about their situation or that you misunderstand them, e.g. some customers may have been relieved to not be working where they were, but are worried about the future.

In other words, empathy removes your beliefs and feelings from the equation, freeing you up to focus on the content and facts of the customer’s situation. Facts, whether pleasant, unpleasant or even horrific, are neutral. How we address those facts with our attitudes, values and previous experience dictates our behaviour and perception of those facts.

This is an important concept to grasp. It means that whilst you may not be able to change the facts of a customer’s situation and circumstances, you can help the customer to work out for themselves how they can change the way they view those facts. This process and change of thinking will help the customer identify and generate realistic opportunities for the future.

Listen to the customer

Take notes and show them that you are listening; there is often a crucial message behind the customer’s words. Demonstrate you have listened by summarising what the customer has said.

This gives the customer control over their situation and builds rapport. It is this rapport – trust – that is crucial to moving forward and will often extend you some leeway when you need to focus on the process and challenge the customer’s views and beliefs to find the next steps.

Challenge the customer

If and when an issue appears to be a problem you need to acknowledge it and get the customer to think about the solution to it. Keep in mind that other professionals may be appropriate to help with those solutions, e.g. doctor, CAB, or counselling, so highlight these.

Remember as well, newly redundant customers have a work history and skills and experiences from working. Challenge them to realise their wealth of specific and transferable skills and what they can offer future and different employers.

Encourage customers to work out for themselves what they need

This way, when suggestions are made by the adviser, they can be geared towards what the customer believes they need – and what they are motivated to work on. This is more likely to gain their commitment.

Use your local labour market information appropriately

Include your Labour Market & Recruitment Advisor in supporting you to understand the areas of work that are shrinking in your area and those opening up. Newly redundant workers are less likely to find work of a similar nature in the locality, since many colleagues doing similar jobs will have been made redundant.

Keep the interview positive

If the customer is struggling to keep the interview positive and forward moving there are a few things you can do to bring the conversation back round.

1. explore with the customer what they did well in a difficult situation, e.g.
 - How have you been managing?
 - That sounds really tough, what has helped you get through it?
2. then give positive feedback to encourage the customer, how ever small the example, to show them that they handled the situation positively
3. and relate this back to their skills, knowledge and abilities that will help them through this time of unemployment.

Protect yourself from emotional stress

You can only do your job

With all the constraints put on your time and an increase in numbers coming into the office due to 'rapid reclaim', in addition to the economic downturn and post Christmas increase in claims there can still be quality to what you are doing. If you focus on and do your job to the best of your ability then you are helping the customer enormously, much more than if you just listened and sympathised with their problems.

Similarly, if you are not able to provide an ideal service to customers, focus on what you and the customer have achieved, rather than agonising over what you were unable to do. If you are able to stay positive it will instil confidence in the customer too.

Keep things in perspective

Try not to get caught up in the details of the customers' problems. This is not to say that you cannot listen to them blow off some steam, but do so with empathy and

- Stick to the facts, don't embellish them
- Separate "what is" from "what might be"

Then identify and highlight the positive things the customer has done and help them to see how they can take them forward.

Remember too, that how you would feel in their situation may be very different to how they feel. A customer's situation may well be temporary.

Be Resilient

Resilience is what allows people to cope and come through difficult and stressful situations in life. The research into resilience was inspired by the way some people coped with losing everything in war time Europe whereas others fell apart. What was it that gave the former the strength to carry on? Resilience is the positive capacity of people to cope with stress and catastrophe!

Crucial to resilience is how you view and think about a situation. Accurate thinking and beliefs is the key. You need to tune into your own thinking and beliefs, and challenge these in order to produce positive and proportional reactions to the situation and thus boost your resilience.

1. Beliefs

Beliefs, or values, are what drive us, they reflect the way we think things should be e.g. 'what matters most is love/money/my job', 'being emotional is a sign of weakness' or 'all people are equal'. These beliefs are so important to us that they dictate our behaviour, positively or negatively.

To boost resilience, be aware of your beliefs and their implications for your behaviour, challenge them regularly to ensure they are accurate and realistic in the world and be flexible, i.e. see new ways of looking at things.

We dent our resilience by rigidly applying our beliefs to the world, twisting the facts to match our beliefs and only focus on those things that confirm our beliefs.

2. Thinking

Thinking, what you are saying to yourself at the time, is what drives reactions to all situations and encounters, and your thinking is driven by your beliefs. However, we all make errors in our thinking that can lead to negative reactions when they weren't necessary. The main errors to be aware of are:

- Jumping to conclusions
- Applying a biased and narrow view on the facts, rather than seeing the wider picture
- Exaggerating or minimising, rather than seeing the situation for what it is
- Taking it personally when it is not (intended to be)
- Generalising, rather than recognising a situation as specific

To boost resilience learn to recognise your thinking in difficult and stressful situations and check this thinking to make sure you are being fair, accurate and proportionate. Once you notice what you are thinking you can decide how helpful it is to you and what to do with it (e.g. change it or let it go), the thoughts may still come, but you can react in a new way.

Finally

This is about taking control of how you feel and react in difficult and stressful situations. Believe in yourself, that you are in control of the situation and your reactions to it. By doing this you can let go of the stress, focus on providing a professional service to customers and leave work at work.

Further information and Links

Effective Stress Management Pack

Part 1

http://intranet.gps.gov.uk/1/corp/sites/hr/lifeevents/problems/wellbeing/tools/information/dwp_d041195.pdf

Part 2

http://intranet.gps.gov.uk/1/corp/sites/hr/lifeevents/problems/wellbeing/tools/information/dwp_d041196.pdf

Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) – Including Work Targeted Interviewing (WTI)

http://intranet.gps.gov.uk/1/jcp/guidance/bus_del/a-z/Quality%20Assurance%20Framework%20-%20Advisers/index.asp#

Keeping Safe

http://intranet.gps.gov.uk/1/corp/sites/hr/nonpolicy/ohsd/managingincidents/dwp_m2_73758.pdf

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