DEFUSING ANGER

A Primer on Peacemaking

BY MEGAN MCCLURE

It’s a scene not unfamiliar to many legislators and legislative staff. An angry constituent walks through the door upset with his tax bill. He feels targeted and wants justice. His voice gets louder and louder as he becomes more agitated.

Or a legislative staffer gets fired for menacing behavior that would not stop despite many warnings. As she is escorted out the door, she yells to her colleagues that she wishes they were all dead.

No one goes to work anticipating a violent or negative interaction, whether it be with a member of the public or a co-worker. Jane, a legislative librarian who asked that we not use her real name, sure didn’t. But one afternoon encounter changed all that.

“On a warm sunny day in June, not too long after the terrible incident at Columbine High School in Colorado, a very tall, thin man walked into the library wearing an oversized black trench coat,” Jane says. “Immediately the two of us in the library sensed that something was dark about this person. He was muttering how the government had inserted some sort of antenna into his head, and was tracking him, and making him do violent things he didn’t want to do. He was angry and agitated and said he was trying to overcome the impulses ‘the feds’ were forcing on him. I knew we had panic buttons, but I was concerned that the capitol police would come into the library, with guns drawn, and upset him even more.

“So, I tried to stay calm and assist him by showing him resources on our shelves, while assessing my location in relation to him and staying out of arm’s reach and making sure I had an escape route. When he finally left the library, I immediately called capitol police.”

What would you have done? Jane kept her cool and the story ended safely. With some planning and self-awareness and by following some tried-and-true techniques you probably learned as a child, you might dramatically reduce the chances of an uncomfortable situation escalating into a violent one.

These tips come from a presentation given by Dan Billings, director of security for the Pennsylvania Senate.

[1] Be Prepared

For Boy Scouts, this means ensuring you’ve got the supplies and know-how needed for any adventure. For legislative staffers, it means establishing a workplace violence plan in case your best efforts at deescalation fail. You’ll need to know what to do next, where the emergency button is, what actions to take in various scenarios.

Being prepared also means following the safety regulations and policies of your office and legislature. Get to know your capitol security staff, how best to contact them and how they will respond.

The three biggest barriers to being prepared are believing that nothing will ever happen to you, fearing colleagues will think you are being alarmist and procrastinating.
“Plan now and hope you will never need your plan, but feel confident that your plan gets you home safely,” Billings said.

**Do Unto Others**

Treat others as you would like to be treated if your roles or situations were reversed. Consider how upset you can get when things don’t go as you planned. Often, people come to the capitol to protest some wrong they feel they’ve suffered. Give them your full attention, don’t be distracted or impatient, and be honest. Most people simply want someone to listen to them, even if you can’t solve their problem. Listen carefully and show some empathy to ease the tension.

Remember those “I” statements? Use them. “I hear what you are saying.” “I understand that you are frustrated.” “I know how trying that can be.”

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“Allow people to voice their concerns,” Billings said. “It’s what we all want.”

**Keep Calm, Carry On**

Your natural reactions when confronted with a difficult situation are fight, flight or freeze.

Even though your adrenaline will rise, try to defuse the situation early. Be sincere and accurate; don’t mislead or lie to get a difficult person to go away. The longer it takes, the more frustrated the person may become and the more difficult it will be to deescalate.

Calm confidence tends to undermine aggressive behavior. If the person is feeding off a crowd, try to get them to a more private location, but one that can be monitored by colleagues.

And, by all means, Billings said, “Don’t say, ‘Just calm down,’ or ‘Please be quiet.’ That’s the same as saying, ‘I bet I can crank you up even more.’”