Communication and Professionalism Lesson 2

Effective communication skills combined with a professional attitude are easily the most important skills you'll need when interacting with customers. They'll help you collect information about the problem, diffuse difficult situations, and get the customer working with you instead of against you.

Use Proper Language

Whenever possible, you should avoid jargon, acronyms, and slang. The movie series "Through the Wormhole," hosted by Morgan Freeman, covers some pretty complex topics. Here, respected scientists on the show explain complex scientific theories in easy terms about using a proper language. They use terms and analogies that just about anyone can understand, and it's clear that they are really trying to help viewers understand.

If you want to ensure that customers understand what you're talking about, you need to use language that they can understand. Imagine that a system was having problems due to dust buildup within the case and around the CPU fan. After cleaning it out, you could tell the customer, "The BIOS was reporting a thermal problem from the CPU causing intermittent reboots. The internal cooling devices weren't able to regulate the temperature due to foreign debris, so I used an ESD-safe device to remove the excess particles."

Or, you could say, "It had a lot of dust built up, so I cleaned it out."

If you give the first explanation, the customer might not understand and might think that you're just full of yourself. Hearing the second explanation, the customer will understand and might even ask what to do to prevent it from getting so dirty.

Technician communicating to customers properly

Maintain a Positive Attitude

Maintaining a positive attitude is an important part of troubleshooting and working with others. You will run into problems—that's unavoidable. However, how you respond when you run into these problems is entirely your choice.

From the customer's point of view, they are coming to you because they have a problem they can't solve. They might be frustrated and even angry. However, they are not angry at you; they are angry at the situation. As long as you remain positive, you have a much better chance at getting them to remember that you're there to help.

Listen and Don't Interrupt Customers

When you're working with customers, it's important to take the time to listen to what they're saying and not interrupt them. Give them time to explain the problem. The customer might not know what is important and what isn't important. However, giving the customer time to talk and listening to what they have to say will help you get a better idea of the problem.

After listening, it's useful to restate the issue or symptoms. This lets the customer know that you have been listening and that you understand the problem. Sometimes, you might need to restate the issue a little differently to clarify it, or you might need to ask questions to get more information.

When asking questions, it's often useful to ask open-ended questions. An open-ended question is any question that can't be answered with a one-word response such as yes or no. For example, "Can you explain the problem?" or "What type of symptoms are you seeing?" are open-ended questions.

Technician listening to customers

Communicate Status

After you have an understanding of a problem, you'll have a good idea of how long it'll take to resolve it. Some problems are relatively easy to fix and can be resolved in minutes. Other problems can take much longer. For example, if you need to order new hardware and wait for it to arrive, it could take days or weeks to complete the repair.

Most people are reasonable, and by communicating the status, you can help set their expectations. If you tell them it will take a week or longer because a part needs to be ordered, most people will understand. They might not be happy with the situation, but they'll understand. However, if you don't tell them anything, they might expect it to be fixed within minutes and will get more and more frustrated as the days drag by.

In addition to communicating the status, consider providing additional information, including the following:

- **Options**. Based on the problem, there might be different repair or replacement options available. If there are options, let the customer know so that the customer can decide based on his or her needs.
- **Documentation on services**. If your company has specific documentation for services, ensure that you provide it to the customer.
- **Follow-up**. A simple call to the customer at a later date can help you verify that the customer is satisfied. If they aren't, you'll have an opportunity to fix the problem. If they are satisfied, this follow-up helps build rapport, showing that you care.

Technician documenting his work

Dealing with Difficult Customers or Situations

Not all customers calm down; this is sad but true. How you respond to these customers can make the difference between the customer becoming angrier and an adversary, or calmer and a collaborator.

There are a few things you can do in these situations, including the following:

- A**void arguing or being defensive**. Under no circumstances should you argue with a customer. That will only make the situation worse.

- **Do not minimize a customer's problems**. Customers don't come for help for problems that they know how to solve. It might be a simple problem for you because you're knowledgeable and experienced, but it's best not to minimize the impact on the customer. A little empathy goes a long way.

Technician dealing with difficult customers

- **Avoid being judgmental**. If you take a judgmental attitude toward customers in general, this is likely to come across in your dealings with customers. You'll often end up with an adversarial relationship with customers without understanding why. For example, some technicians use cutesy phrases camouflaging their dislike of customers. I've heard technicians refer to a problem as an ST1 problem (pronounced as S T one), or an ID 10 T problem (pronounced as I D ten T). What they mean is that the customer is as dumb as a stone (S T one) or is an idiot (I D 10 T). You can feel when someone is talking down to you or acting in a condescending manner. Other people can feel it when you're doing it to them.

It's valuable to remember that customers do not start out being angry with you. They might be frustrated or angry with the situation, but not with you as a person. However, if you respond to the customer's emotions instead of to the problem, the customer can end up becoming angry with you.

It's possible that you are doing all the right things but the customer is not calming down and is not giving you the information you need to solve the problem. In that case, most organizations have a method of passing the customer off to someone else. In some cases, this is done by referring the customer to a manager or, sometimes, passing the customer to another technician who might be able to get the customer to calm down. Managers will often have training for how to deal with these customers and will use forceful, assertive language to get unreasonable customers to calm down.

Be Culturally Sensitive

A culture has a set of attitudes, values, and practices that are shared among people within that culture. Some language and communication techniques can be completely acceptable in one culture but quite offensive in another culture.

For example, if you flick your hand from under your chin outward, it means very little to many people living in the West. However, do this to someone from Europe and you might have a fight on your hands. Being culturally sensitive means that you recognize that there are differences among cultures and that you respect those differences.

Technician being culturally sensible

Respect Customer Materials

When you assist customers at their work area, they'll often have work materials open and accessible. This could include open files or emails, and papers on their desk or printer. You should respect the privacy of the individual and not read through the material.

If material is in your way, you might want to hand it to the customer. For example, if you're called to work on a printer and it has printouts marked as confidential, hand these to the customer as you begin your work.

Rebooting systems often solves many problems, so you might choose that course of action. Let customers know that you plan on rebooting a system so that they have a chance to save and close any files they're working on. Rebooting without saving files could result in the loss of the customer's data or recent work.

Sample customers material

Be Professional

Successful technicians regularly demonstrate common professional behaviors. These are many of the same behaviors that you would want professionals to demonstrate when you are the customer. Some of these include the following:

- **Be on time**. If you tell customers that you'll be there at a certain time, they'll be waiting. If something is holding you up, contact the customer and let them know.
- **Avoid distractions and interruptions**. This includes not taking personal phone calls. If a co-worker contacts you for help or assistance, offer to help them when you're done with the customer.

Technician taking personal calls

Responding to Prohibited Content/Activity

In the course of your job, you might occasionally run across content or activity that is prohibited. Prohibited content and activity is anything that is against the law and anything that is counter to an organization's policy.

It could be an action on the part of an external attacker or by an employee. Within the realm of information technology (IT), this is often referred to as a security incident. Some examples include the following:

- Unauthorized applications. Many organizations prohibit users from installing applications on their systems, but you might find an unauthorized application running on a user's system.
- Unauthorized drives. Some organizations restrict the use of USB flash drives as a security precaution. Other times, any types of external drives are prohibited.
- Unauthorized access. This includes unauthorized individuals in secured areas of a building or the unauthorized access of sensitive data.
- Any types of attacks. Attacks commonly come from external sources but can also come from a malicious insider.
- Online activities. Some online activities might be illegal and/or counter to the organization's policy. For example, gambling during company time is very likely prohibited.
- Illegal pictures or video. Offensive pictures and video might be more than just inappropriate in a workplace; they could be illegal, depending on the content.

Technician checking the system for prohibited content

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES for PC Tech

Laboratory Activities

1.01 How Computer Tech Should Be
1.02 Effectively Communicating
1.03 Preparing for the Technical Interview
1.04 Integrating Safety into the Workplace
1.05 Safeguarding Your IT Future - Becoming a Professional

Chapter Analysis and Written Test

Lab Activity 1.02 **Effectively Communicating**

A successful IT technician must posses a good communication skill. One of the keys to professional communication is being able to listen well as duties are being assigned to you, so that you can produce the results as expected.

Learning Objectives

The plan is to have a classmate to play the role of the client, and you to play the role of the PC tech. Work through the scenario in a live person-to-person role playing of the situation, just as if it were real.

At the end of this lab, you'll be able to

- communicate more effectively
- help discern when it's best to talk and when it's best to listen

Lab Materials and Setup

The materials you need for this lab are
- blank drawing paper and pencil
- a clock with a second hand, or a timer
- a sufficient number of folding chairs for all the students involved in the exercise
- Computer Hardware Servicing Worktext

For the setup, arrange the chairs back to back in pairs around the room, with about five feet between each set of chairs.

Let's Get the Lab Started

In this activity, you'll listen as your partner speaks to you and you'll write down whatever he or she tells you under a tight timeline. The goal is to help you work under pressure while remaining professional at all times.

Step 1 Students should pair up. Each pair of students should designate one person to be the PC tech and the other to be the customer and then write their respective titles on the top of their papers.

Step 2 The instructor should start the timer and ask the designated customers to say the first five technology-related problems that come to mind; they have 20 seconds to do this. As the customers speak, their respective partner techs should write down what they say, in the order stated. An example might be system fails to boot, no wireless connection, printer not printing properly, no picture on the monitor, etc.

Stop the timer at 20 seconds.

Step 3 The PC techs write a brief solution to the five words or phrases just spoken by the customers. They have three minutes to complete this and must address them in the order received. Stop the timer at three minutes.

Step 4 The PC tech and customer groups face each other for one minute and share their information. Then, each pair presents their problems and solutions to the class, in turn. They have two minutes to present their solutions. The other groups should sit quietly and listen. After all groups finish, the instructor will give feedback to each group as to how they could communicate better. Students should be allowed to participate in the feedback as well.