Customer Service Notes for wic
Working with Difficult Participants

We know that it's unrealistic to expect all your interactions with participants to be pleasant and go smoothly. In fact, you will need to help some participants who are difficult to work with.

There can be a variety of reasons why participants may be difficult. One reason is because the participant is struggling and facing many personal challenges. In this instance, asking the participant to comply and complete certain paperwork may cause the person to lash out at you. If this occurs, it's important to remain calm and not take the anger personally. Also, do not become a social worker and offer personal advice beyond the scope of your role. If needed, there may be other agencies you can refer the person to.

You may also encounter participants who are demanding and want things that are not possible. For example, suppose a participant is adamant about getting an appointment a week from Thursday. You check the schedule and see that your office is completely booked that day. In situations like this, offer alternatives when possible, and tell the participant what you can do. You could say, "I wish we could see you next Thursday, but we are completely booked. What we can do is see you the day before in the afternoon or the day after in the morning." By offering options, the participant doesn't just hear "No," but instead sees that you are trying to work with her.

There are also participants who don't follow instructions. It could be because they don't see the importance of following instructions, or are just forgetful. Sometimes, by letting the participant now why something needs to be done, the participant may be more likely to comply.

All the above scenarios can result in participant conflict. Sometimes, simply smiling, being pleasant and demonstrating empathy can dispel the conflict. If a participant is really upset, use de-escalation techniques such as demonstrating empathy, being non-judgmental, using positive body language, shifting into neutral, and active listening.

Using the above de-escalation techniques may help participant realize that you are not looking to get into a "battle" with them, and instead you are there to help them.

Questions for Reflection
1. Do you not take it personally when working with a difficult participant?
2. Do you use de-escalation techniques to reduce conflict from participants?

Learning Dynamics
Investing in People ™
Celebrating 40 Years

www.learningdynamics.com
1-800-3SKILLS