Working With Difficult Passengers

by Linda Diebert and Margaret Ness

Every day of our lives, we interact with a variety of people. Because we are unique individuals, we handle life in different ways. Some of us are easygoing and able to ask for what we need in a positive, assertive manner.

However, there are others who are unable to ask for what they need and those who use difficult, disruptive behavior as a primary means of communication.

Some passengers have physical, mental or emotional disabilities that may impact behavior. Dealing with personal challenges in addition to life’s everyday ups and downs may result in angry or inappropriate behavior.

Others passengers may be angry, rude or nasty for no apparent reason.

Whatever the cause, professional drivers must handle these difficult situations daily. How drivers manage difficult passengers will impact the success of your organization, its service safety, efficiency and overall customer satisfaction.

There is no single solution that is directly applicable to every situation. When an incident occurs, there are complex issues, quick assessments and actions that drivers must take to maintain the overall safe operation of the vehicle and passengers. Nine times out of ten, the driver’s initial reaction can diffuse or escalate disruptive behavior.

Shared Responsibility for Preparedness

How do we minimize the impact of difficult passengers? Dealing with difficult passengers is the joint responsibility of the agency, drivers and others who interact with customers. All are responsible for ensuring that disruptive passengers and other incidents are consistently handled with caring, sensitivity and professionalism. An often overlooked component of preparedness is educating transit users on the service parameters and expectations of passengers.

The Agency—Transit agencies that prepare professional drivers to successfully manage difficult passengers and situations give their drivers an arsenal of tools for unexpected situations. First, the agency needs to be sure that operating policies and procedures clearly define lines of responsibility, authority, and communication protocol in difficult situations. Then the agency must ensure that every driver, dispatcher and operational support staff understand the policies and has an opportunity to practice applying the procedures in a variety of situations.

Trainers must ensure that agency staff (driving and non-driving), know the difference between agency policies and procedures. In general, policies are the definition of how a transit system will respond to a given situation. Procedures clearly define the steps to implement the policy.

In addition to policies and operating procedures, agencies are responsible for providing its drivers with comprehensive training opportunities such as:

- Defensive Driving
- Passenger Service and Safety (PASS)
- Disability Sensitivity and Awareness
- Drug and Alcohol Awareness
- Emergency/Bus Evacuation Procedures
- Working With Difficult Passengers
- Required Documentation Practice
- Universal Precautions
- First aid/CPR

There are a variety of training methods for many of the topics listed above. When trainers prepare lesson plans, they need to be aware that adults have a variety of learning styles, some more effective than others. According to studies, adult learners retain 20 percent of what they hear, 10 percent of what they read and 30 percent of what they see. Conversely, adults retain 80 percent of what they say and 90 percent of
what they say and do!

Using a variety of training methods will result in long-term retention of information. When driver training specifically addresses disruptive passengers, situational role-playing is the most effective technique. However, it is also the method that can cause participants (and sometimes the trainer) the greatest anxiety. It is imperative that trainers create an atmosphere that values questions, encourages checks for understanding, and uses mistakes as opportunities to learn. It is also the agency’s responsibility to maintain training records and hold periodic in-service “refreshers” for new and seasoned drivers.

**The Driver—** Once the agency has provided training and practice, the driver has the responsibility of understanding all policies and procedures and how to apply them in a variety of situations. When an element of training is not clear, drivers must be assertive about asking for clarification or retraining. This typically happens after an incident occurs. To be as prepared as humanly possible, drivers must maintain focus during an incident, apply what is learned in practice situations and ask questions afterward if anything about the incident is unclear.

Professional drivers need to assess their individual readiness to drive on a daily basis. A bad or stressful incident before work impacts the driver’s state of mind. Agencies and passengers expect drivers to be focused and prepared for work. Drivers are responsible for:

- Understanding/applying agency training, policies and procedures
- Physical readiness
- Emotional control
- Communicating clearly
- Knowing route(s) and passengers
- Being aware of weather, highway conditions, construction, etc.

**The Passenger—** In a comprehensive customer service program, passengers need to be aware of policies that may effect their service. What happens when a specific customer impacts others with difficult or inappropriate behavior? At what point, for example, does the “right of service” to a disruptive passenger impact the safety and comfort of other passengers? What service can passengers expect? Is asking a driver to take out the garbage a reasonable request? Is it fair to expect a bus to wait for a passenger for 15 minutes?

Agencies should distribute passenger policies to users and expect drivers to consistently enforce them. Clearly defined expectations will reduce passenger frustration and potentially disruptive behavior.

**Communication**

The single most effective tool in managing difficult situations and passengers on board vehicles is communication. Assertive communication is direct, honest, spontaneous and appropriate.

Assertive communication is based on mutual respect and understanding. Drivers who use principles of assertive communication willingly engage in self-expression and encourage self-expression by passengers.

The two key elements of effective communication are the ability to express oneself in a direct, respectful and straightforward manner and to be an active listener. Effective communication skills can be learned and should be an integral part of transit driver and staff training; however, it is more difficult to train a driver to be a good communicator than it is to train a good communicator to be a driver. Transit systems should consider making the ability to communicate a critical skill in the selection and hiring process of its drivers.

While it is desirable to hire individuals who are personable, outgoing and even-tempered, it is the responsibility of the agency to provide drivers with an “advanced” set of skills to help the driver prevent and cope with potentially difficult situations.

Let’s take a look at each of these concepts and apply the basic principles to typical situations that occur on board.

- **Assertive Communication/Behavior**
- **Active Listening Skills**
- **Disability Awareness**
- **“Person-First” Language**
- **Managing Anger**

**Assertive Communication—** The language of assertive communication begins with the use of “I” statements. Assertive behavior is not aggressive behavior. It avoids the use of “you” statements. Suppose you have a passenger who will not buckle her seat belt. Which method of communicating by the driver is more likely to elicit the desired behavior?

a) “The transit agency has a policy that states all passengers must wear a
seat belt. I must follow agency policies. I also want to get you to your appointment safely and on time. Therefore, I need you to buckle your seat belt so I can continue on the route.” or

b) “You never buckle your seat belt and you know the agency policy. If you don’t buckle up, we’ll just have to sit here until you do.”

Assertive behavior is not aggressive behavior. The rule of thumb is to use “I” statements and language that you would appreciate hearing.

Active Listening— The second part of assertive communication is active listening. Listening is perhaps the most needed and often the least practiced communication skill. In recent years, training employees in customer service skills has fueled a multi-million dollar revolution in organizational development.

Companies are teaching employees how to listen to customers. Active listening includes skills that convey recognition of the other person’s situation and feelings. In order to do this, drivers need to listen to and understand the true meaning of what passengers are saying, not just hearing their words.

Techniques for active listening include:

- Paraphrase or restate in your words what you heard.
- Ask clarifying questions.
- Make eye contact with the passenger.
- Use nonverbal cues such as nodding and facial expressions.

Using the previous example, if your passenger simply doesn’t like seat belts, she will appreciate your efforts to understand her position and will be more likely to comply with your needs if you listen actively.

For example, a passenger who normally buckles up and is suddenly refusing to put on the seat belt, may actually be trying to tell you something else. Perhaps she is upset you were late or may be afraid of what she may learn at the upcoming doctor appointment. Or perhaps a friend of hers was one of the rare people hurt in an accident because of wearing a seat belt.

Using active listening skills, the driver tries to understand what the real problem is, while starting the need to buckle-up. The passenger may still choose not to buckle her seat belt, and, as the driver, your only choice may be to calmly “agree to disagree” and move forward with agency protocols/policies.

Disability Awareness— Another strategy for effectively managing potentially difficult situations is to train drivers to be sensitive and responsive to passengers with disabilities. Drivers who are sensitive and understanding of the needs of passengers with disabilities are better prepared to head-off potentially difficult situations. The goal here is to treat others as you wish to be treated.

Person-First Language— The most basic place to begin is with language. All transit staff employees need to use person-first language. Simply put, person-first language refers to the individual with a disability before referring to their disability. Using terms such as “handicapped” or “wheelchair bound” dehumanizes the individual and tends to categorize him/her on the basis of disability. Saying “individual with a disability” or “person in a wheelchair” not only acknowledges the person, it also dispels the notion that the person is “bound” to a wheelchair. Wheelchairs are liberating, not confining!

Sensitivity Toward Disabilities
In addition to person-first language, agencies must train drivers to correctly interact with passengers who are disabled. A good overview of sensitivity toward individuals with disabilities is found in CTAA’s PASS training. A few other basic rules include:

- Always ask a person if they would like assistance; don’t assume.
- Treat a person’s wheelchair as part of their body space. Don’t touch or hang on it.
- Speak directly to the person with a disability rather than as a third party or to a third party about them.
- Remember to make eye contact and lower your body (sit if possible) to speak on eye level with individuals in wheelchairs.
- Be considerate of the extra time it might take for a person with a disability to speak or move.
- Treat adults as adults.
- Be neither patronizing nor reverential.

Managing Anger
Anger is a response to an event over which the individual may or may not have control. The anger may be driven by events completely unrelated to the present event. Some of the most challenging on-board issues for drivers are situations involving angry passengers.

Every individual has an “anger threshold.” A situation that makes one person’s behavior explode may only elicit a sigh from someone else. A driver’s goal is to manage the issue and diffuse the passenger’s anger.
Let’s suppose you are running 30 minutes late because another passenger was ill and you had to call for an ambulance. The other passengers on board are annoyed, but understanding of the circumstances; however, when you arrive at your next stop, the individual boarding is furious. Which driver response will diffuse the boarding passenger’s anger?

1) “Hey man, we had a passenger who was ill and we had to wait for an ambulance—just chill-out!”

2) “I can understand your feelings and you have every right to be upset. I apologize that we’re running so late. We had a passenger who was ill and we had to wait for an ambulance. I’ll be glad to call dispatch and have them call your doctor’s office to explain that you’ll be late.”

The example above is fairly straightforward; however, it’s much harder in practice to say the right things when an out-of-control passenger is angry and in the driver’s face. While a driver cannot control the feelings of an angry passenger, s/he can employ some techniques that make a passenger feel heard and help diffuse his anger. Drivers can do this by following these guidelines.

- General demeanor—calm, listening, non-threatening, understanding of issue;
- Tone of voice—keep voice low and steady; speak slowly, paraphrase, identify with the passenger’s feelings;
- Language—use “I” statements such as, “I can see that you are very upset about.....”; 
- Body language—maintain eye contact, nod agreement, hands quiet;
- Maintain personal control—if the driver loses his/her temper, nobody benefits and it will escalate tension.

Neither the driver nor other passengers should put up with verbal abuse, profanity or threatening behavior. However, it is still important to remain calm. If a driver feels that a passenger poses a danger, s/he needs to call immediately for help or police intervention. All incidents should be documented in accordance with agency policy.

**Summary**
When an agency makes sure that its policies and procedures are understood by staff and passengers, it is far easier to create and maintain a service partnership based on fairness and consistency. Passengers count on well trained professional drivers who will manage customer service on their behalf. Drivers count on the organization to provide quality training and support when difficult passengers or situations threaten the safe operation of service.

Any truly successful transit system has drivers with good customer service skills who know how to deal with difficult passengers. Few people have these skills naturally. Most of us must learn them. Hands-on, interactive training is essential. Resources that can help an organization’s success are listed below.

**Resources**


*Passenger Service and Safety (PASS)*—a video and manual produced by the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA). Training must be conducted by a certified trainer.


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