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How to sail through a difficult conversation

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"When you answer that compliance line, you never know what you are going to get. Like drawing a lottery, you never know what number will end up in your hand," one of my compliance team members shared during a departmental meeting. "The person on the phone could be crying, cursing, yelling, or screaming at you. It is so debilitating, emotionally draining, and mind-boggling when you get those types of calls." I am sure this can resonate with many compliance professionals that handle complaint calls. Although we have a 24/7 compliance hotline operated by a third-party vendor, my team and I still receive a fair number of phone calls made directly to the compliance department.

Talking to a person about their complaint is never an easy task. The reporter could be nervous or agitated, and tensions may be high when an angry reporter is describing everything that your organization did wrong. The truth is, people don't come to the compliance team just to have a nice conversation, although it can be more friendly and cordial than it actually is. They contact compliance because they have a complaint to file or a concern to share. Understandably, they are upset or even furious, and they would undoubtedly like to have their concerns addressed as soon as possible.

Sitting across from such an individual or being on the other end of the receiver, how would you manage these somewhat uncomfortable circumstances and obtain important information from the individual without further upsetting, irritating, or intimidating the person? In fact, it takes certain skills and techniques to tackle these challenging situations. This article aims to provide some effective communication strategies to help our fellow compliance professionals sail through difficult conversations with reporters.

Recognize challenges

To solve a problem, we must first acknowledge it and possibly make sense of all the obstacles and barriers associated with it. Before plans can be devised accordingly, the first step would be to recognize the challenges in communications with reporters, especially in complex situations involving multiple issues. Compliance representatives' personal perspectives, trust-building efforts, and accurate identification of issues can all play a role during the course of interactions with reporters.

Overcome internal bias or prejudice

People often make judgments about others based on what they see and hear, such as a person's gender, age, position, or the individual's accent. Internal bias or prejudice could play a part in people's thought process. What's more, a reporter's attitude and emotions can affect and shape compliance professionals' judgment of the matter, perception of the individuals, and reaction to the reporting, in that human brains are constantly observing, digesting, and analyzing information, including sounds, images, and any factors surrounding the issues. Naturally, the compliance professional may be more sympathetic toward soft-spoken reporters than aggressive ones, even though the latter may truly have valid concerns. It would be impetuous and imprudent to draw any conclusion at the preliminary information collection stage. Therefore, it is imperative to keep compliance's mission in mind without assuming complaints are annoyances and nuisances and make a conscious effort to not take sides during the initial information intake process.

Foster mutual respect and cultivate trust

The other practical challenge is fostering mutual respect and cultivating trust with reporters. It's easier said than done. When there is a prior work relationship established between the parties, it is much easier to build and enhance that mutual trust and respect. However, when dealing with a stranger, people tend to be more skeptical and incredulous, including reporters. This will inevitably require compliance to make additional endeavors to form basic trust with the reporter in order to obtain relevant information. Also, compliance may need to adjust its probing styles, tones, and approaches to accommodate reporters' level of comfort. Understanding this can help compliance improve its communication with reporters and increase the chance of obtaining valuable details.

Identify the issues involved

Identification of issues may not be as simple as it seems, for concerns can be disguised as inquires, questions, or casual chats. Some complaints are just a manifestation of an underlying problem and root cause, such as a lack of trust or communication. In addition, a reporter's concerns may contain many different aspects involving a wide variety of specialized areas (e.g., clinical care, billing, harassment). There may not be any clarity at the beginning as compliance is collecting information from the reporter. After all, we are not know-it-all talking encyclopedias. Keep in mind that it is okay that you do not have all the answers or solutions right then. In fact, it may take a lot more investigative effort before all the dots are connected and issues revealed.

Furthermore, reporters' emotions and demeanors can also be part of the challenge that could skew the real issue. For instance, an agitated or frustrated reporter may describe the accused as "giving a mean look" or "having a bad attitude" without providing examples to support such claim. Unfortunately, there is no clear criterion on whether an act constitutes "a mean look" or falls under the definition of "a bad attitude." Therefore, compliance needs to set subjective opinions aside when documenting and investigating.