How to Enrage Hotline Callers (1)

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As regular readers will know, I’ve been addressing issues of how to manage Computer Incident Response Teams for more than a year. In my last article in the series, I summarized some simple guidelines for running a telephone hotline. This article is a little addendum that applies to any technical-support hotline. It’s a list of the Forbidden Responses that I formulated in teaching my own staff and students at John Abbott College in the Technical Support Program.

(1) “No one has ever complained about this before.”

This comment is usually uttered in a smarmy, contemptuous tone implying that there is something wrong with the caller. Obviously the caller must be wrong, deluded, ignorant or just plain stupid since the responder seems to believe it is impossible to be the first to report anything. Under this theory, no one would ever report problems and technical support’s job would consist of being paid to play with computers all day without actually having to do anything useful.

No, the proper response to a new problem is an enthusiastic, “Thanks for reporting this! Maybe we can help other people from having the same problem.”

(2) “I don’t have time for this now.”

Excuse me, but your failure to manage your time effectively is no excuse for not doing your job. Setting the caller’s expectations on response time is perfectly reasonable; rejecting the call is not. When a caller has a problem, it’s the entire team’s responsibility to get it solved. An appropriate response is to take down all the relevant information and to ensure that the right resources are put on the job.

(3) “Why don’t you try calling . . . ?”

No, it is not the caller’s job to figure out which person is responsible for a particular aspect of technical support. Once a call is received and the dispatcher has assigned it to a responder, the responder must personally ensure that the call is routed to the correct person if the details make it clear that a reassignment makes sense. The responder stays on the line until the transfer is complete; for example, suppose Albert gets a call he can’t handle because he lacks the technical training or resources required. He can respond to with, “OK, hang on, Sally, I don’t have the right equipment here, so I’m going to transfer you to Bill for this…. [connects Bill] .... Bill, here’s Sally with a problem on the hypercanthic utroxilator that you’ve been working on lately; Sally, Bill will continue with the problem you’re having utroxilating your hypercanths.” Only then, with the transfer complete, would Albert ring off the call. To complete the cycle, Albert would call the dispatcher to update his profile so that no other calls about hypercanthic utroxilators would be directed his way.

More in the next column.
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