



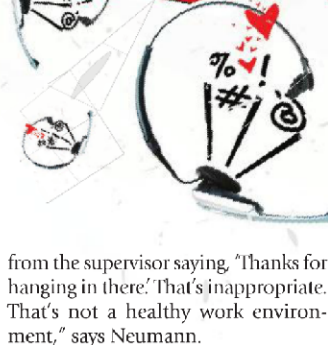
using 'kid gloves' when handling them or being nicer to them. Never do they say, 'Oh wow, that was a terrible experience for you.'

It's important to distinguish between a difficult customer, which all call centre workers should expect, and an abusive customer. Workers should receive training on how to de-escalate difficult situations and do so in practice, but when someone is being abusive, workers should simply be able to say, "Caller, I'm not going to take this abuse. Thank you very much and goodbye," says Neumann.

"When you have someone that calls in and makes derogatory remarks like 'What colour panties are you wearing?' or 'I hope you get cancer and die,' those types of things, there's no doubt that individual should not have to tolerate that and have the ability to hang up," says Neumann.

When a worker is faced with an abusive call, managers need to support them, says USW.

"In many cases, the supervisor expects the worker to basically sit through this until the call is complete and in some cases, we have heard the worker may get a pat on the back



from the supervisor saying, 'Thanks for hanging in there.' That's inappropriate. That's not a healthy work environment," says Neumann.

USW is recommending call centre employers train managers on how to support workers who are verbally abused. Ravary agrees training outside of what managers receive during their orientation or when they are first promoted would be beneficial.

"I think not being on the phones you forget what's happening when you're on the front-lines of the phones, so I think it's important for the managers to have training on that more than just once or twice," she says.

While Admiral does not have specific training for how to support workers who have been victims of abuse, it does have stress management

“Caller, I'm not going to take this abuse. Thank you very much and goodbye.”

training for managers about how to cope with employees who are stressed in any situation, says Cable.

The USW is also recommending call centre employers issue a warning and flag callers who have a history of harassing workers. This is something Admiral practices. The company has had situations where it decided to only communicate with an abusive customer in writing, so no one had to be subjected to verbal abuse, says Cable.

And at Rogers, some customers have been banned from calling in.

"While rare, there are instances where we've blocked customers from calling our call centres because of repeated inappropriate interaction with agents. It's something we take seriously and monitor closely," says Garas.

Admiral has also denied repeat abusers use of its services — something that USW is also recommending.

"In those extreme cases — and those typically tend to be the more aggressive or racist — we wouldn't want that kind of customer on our books anyway. So we have, in the past, either cancelled or refused to renew them for that reason," says Cable.

One example of this was about 10 years ago when Cable worked in the Admiral office in the U.K. A very difficult, aggressive and racist customer threatened to go to the office and physically harm a staff member.

"They were a couple hundred miles away but it was still technically

possible for that to happen," she says. "It ended up going to our CEO at the time and he spoke to him and told him we wouldn't renew his policy and we would cancel him with immediate effect. So, we take it pretty seriously."

But if this type of situation were to occur in Canada, the USW would like to see it reported to the police, as well as all instances of violent or sexual threats.

"I think it's an obligation of the employer because this goes towards a safe environment in the workplace. They have to hand that over to the authorities. You just cannot condone being silent on that," says Neumann.

As part of the Hang Up on Abuse campaign, the USW will be meeting with call centre employers to "ensure that each and every call centre in Canada" has a policy that lays out the union's recommendations, says Neumann.

But there may be some pushback due to the common corporate motto: "The customer is always right."

"I understand that every customer is important. I think that's a business model they have. I can understand why: These are people calling in, they are a provider of some sort and the customer is obviously very important, but, having said that, they also have to take a stand and recognize their employees should not have to go through the abuse that is taking place," says Neumann.

Having a strong, supportive corporate culture is key in eliminating the abuse call centre workers endure — something Admiral has figured out.

"One of our mottos is 'People who like what they do, do it better.' In order for them to like what they do, they need to feel safe in their environment. No one is really going to enjoy their job if they feel they are subjected to that type of abuse," says Cable. "We, as a leadership team, will do whatever we can to make sure they feel safe, supported, secure."

This type of work environment is something Ravary would like to see at call centres across the country. She is hoping employers will start making changes so things get better for employees who are dealing with abuse. As it stands now, a lot of people in Ravary's circle experience abuse from callers and, as a result, are depressed, are on medication and need to take leaves of absences.

"You kind of just wake up in the morning and you just dread it," says Ravary. "Depending on the day before, sometimes I wake up in the morning and I have to go to work and I start to cry before I have to leave, and my husband's like 'Why are you doing this to yourself?' But you make good money and you have benefits and you have to think about your family."

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