



Neutral Language and Conflict Resolution Guide



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In the fast-paced world of hospitality, communication can either fuel a fire or extinguish it. Language plays a critical role in shaping the atmosphere and driving team performance.

Your words set the tone for collaboration, conflict resolution, and overall kitchen culture.

Using neutral, constructive language during conflicts will help to defuse tension and create an environment where respect, trust, and teamwork are valued.

Discover how to handle conflicts effectively and foster a positive kitchen culture with these simple strategies.

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How Words Escalate or De-escalate Conflicts

In a kitchen, every word counts. A simple comment, said in the heat of the moment, can spark unnecessary conflict.

The opposite is also true: thoughtful language can make for smooth and peaceful conflict resolution in restaurants.

Example:

Escalatory language:

- ✗ “Why didn’t you get that order right? This is basic stuff.”

De-escalatory language:

- ✓ “I noticed the order was off—let’s walk through it together so we can tighten it up for next time”

By using language that centres around the issue, not the person, you invite problem-solving rather than defensiveness, allowing for a quicker resolution.

De-escalation

Phrases & Techniques

So, how can you ensure you're using neutral language in conflicts? Here are some key phrases to use when things start to heat up in the kitchen.

Instead of:

"You always do this wrong."

"You're always late for your shift."

"I told you this already!"

"You should have known better."

"That's not my responsibility."

Say:

"Let's review this process together and see where it went off track."

"Let's figure out how to get you on the line, on time."

"Let's go over it one more time so we're both clear."

"Let's figure out what we can do to make sure this doesn't happen again."

"Let's tag-team this and get it handled."

These shifts in language represent a change in mindset. Instead of assigning blame, you're focusing on collaboration and problem-solving, key components of any effective team.

Handling High-Pressure Situations

Scenario-Based Strategies

The kitchen is a high-pressure environment, and stressful situations will happen. The way you handle conflict in these moments can set the tone for your team. Here are a few common high-pressure scenarios and how to use neutral language to defuse tension.

Scenario 1: The Mistake in Service

Escalatory language:

- ☒ “This is going to ruin everything! How did this happen again?”

De-escalatory language:

- ☒ “Alright, something slipped. Let’s get it back on track—I’ve got your back.”

The first response invites panic and stress, while the second keeps things calm, focusing on the solution.

“

Always use a *respectful tone*.
Shouting is only necessary
when someone's miles away.
Otherwise, kindness and
clarity work best.

Chef Frank Jakobsen,
Unilever Food Solutions Denmark.

”

Scenario 2: Tensions Between Team Members

Escalatory language:

- ✗ “Enough! You two need to sort this out, or I’ll take both of you off the station.”

De-escalatory language:

- ✓ “I see there’s some tension here. Let’s take a step back and figure this out calmly.”

By remaining neutral in conflicts, rather than making threats, you maintain control of the situation while showing that you’re invested in a peaceful resolution.

“

Be clear about what the problem is but not in a mean way. People do not respond to aggressive communication.

Chef Fhred Batalona,
founder and owner, Barangay

”

Scenario 3: A Major Mistake During Service

Escalatory language:

- ✗ “How could this happen now? We’re behind, and you’ve just made it worse!”

De-escalatory language:

- ✓ “We’ve got this—we’re in the weeds, but I’ll jump on expo to help clear the queue.”

The first phrase is emotionally charged, likely to make the situation worse. The second focuses on teamwork and the solution, without pointing fingers.

Cheat Sheet: **Phrases & Tips to Use Now**

General Tips:

- ✓ Keep your tone calm and neutral.
- ✓ Avoid using absolutes (like “always” or “never”) which can feel accusatory.
- ✓ Focus on the issue, not the person.
- ✓ Encourage collaboration and problem-solving.
- ✓ Maintain non-threatening body language.

De-escalatory Phrases:

- ✓ “Let’s figure this out together.”
- ✓ “How can I support you in fixing this?”
- ✓ “Let’s take a step back and think this through.”
- ✓ “Let’s tighten the system so this doesn’t repeat.”
- ✓ “I know the heat’s on. Stay sharp, stay cool, we’ve got this.”

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