

## Case Study 4: De-escalating a Conflict Between Two Patrons Over a Study Room

### SCENARIO:

I reserved a room for 12:00, asked the person who occupied the space to leave and the occupant started getting confrontational. They were starting to pack up, but kept yelling at me. I went with patron who reserved the room. Occupant was packed up, and still in the room. She proceeded to yell at the person who reserved room and me. I informed occupant that if a room is reserved at a specific time that, it needs to be vacated. She kept yelling that the person didn't want the room. The reserved patron quietly stated that she said she didn't want any confrontation. I told the occupant that I am sorry if there was any misunderstanding, however if she would please vacate the room this way the person who has it reserved could start using it. They proceeded to yell saying that she needs to tell me something. I told her that she can come out of the room and speak with me quietly (motioning to the door and stepping aside (I was already outside of the room, never made it past the door) so she had room to come out. She exited the room, continuing to yell and disrupt patrons. Asking me where an empty room is. I let her know that she can use a room if it is unoccupied and not reserved for that time. If it is reserved (sheet on next to the door) then she will need to quietly vacate the room. She continued rambling on and yelling while going to another (nearby) study room.

### RESPONSE:

This scenario is a great one to use the AEF model provided in the Power Point presentation.

### **ASSESS:**

- **What is going on here?**

This is an obvious policy violation and on one level should be treated as such. You as the staff member have the right and perhaps the obligation to address this infringement. However, in asking “What is going on here?” a question that should come to mind is, “Is there mental health behavior involved?” To see this patron as only oppositional and not try to get at the “why behind the what” could be short-sighted and even problematic for all parties involved.

- **What is my role? Who else can/should help?**

Your role as staff member is to enforce policies and procedures and this is an obvious policy infringement. Some questions to consider if you were approaching the upset patron:

- 1) Is it safe for you to engage with this patron alone? Would bringing “backup” escalate the patron?
- 2) Who is available and needs to be “on call” in case the situation escalates beyond something that you can handle?
- 3) Where should the other patron be? It seems clear that they were uncomfortable. Is it necessary that they be next to you? What are the implications of this choice?

- **What space is the encounter occupying?**

In thinking about space, it is wise that you as staff member do not get caught in the study room with the escalating patron. Standing outside the door is a good decision. Asking the patron to exit the room and chat with you is recommended, but finding a space elsewhere in the library with the least amount of disruption for other patrons is in order.

### **ENGAGE:**

- **How do I respond with calm, welcoming, yet firm verbal communication?**
- **How do I respond with calm, welcoming, yet firm nonverbal communication?**

The first rule of de-escalation is remaining calm. This might be difficult to do, given the circumstances, but it can make all the difference in how volatile the patron gets. “Being calm” means “appearing calm,” so think about a not-too relaxed, yet open stance. Maintain eye contact and do not engage in any sudden approaches.

Ask the patron her name. If she doesn’t give it to you, don’t push too hard. Asking for her name in this case might be construed as a tactic to “turn her in to the authorities,” so be conscious of the tone you use in this ask.

In this case, the patron did not allow you, but the goal is for you to get her to talk calmly with you about her concern. Even when it is clear that the patron is “in the wrong,” you can acknowledge her humanness by remembering that she has a concern and needs to state it to you. Give her the space to do so. When you hear the concern, don’t remind her of the rule violation, but paraphrase it: “So it sounds like you are frustrated because you have to leave, and you didn’t know that the rooms had to be reserved?” It is easy to get into a power struggle here because you know you are “in the right.” Note here, though, that the patron did come around to realizing that she was in the wrong by asking where another study room was. Despite her ranting as she was exiting the room, de-escalation can be construed here.

- **How do I keep myself safe?**

The narrative above gives a reminder and some suggestions about how to keep safe in this encounter: Make sure you maintain distance from the patron. Do not touch her. Try to get the other patron removed from the situation. Have an “escape plan” in mind if necessary. Know the protocol for security intervention if there is one at the facility. Finally, know when an encounter is not worthwhile. The person remained calm enough that the staff member did not have to remove themselves from the vicinity, but that should always be an option on the table.

### **FOLLOW-UP:**

- **How can I ensure that the problem is resolved?**

There may not be any follow-up procedures that are needed here, as long as the patron found another room to occupy that was not reserved. A good question to consider is, “Should I engage with her again when she is calmed down?” If this patron frequents the library often, a follow-up conversation might be a consideration. Could this encounter be an opportunity to build a relationship with the patron so that future incidences like this one are less likely to happen?

- **How can I debrief/take care of myself after the encounter?**

Don’t underestimate the effect this situation might have had on you. Though it seemed to be resolved, there are lots of emotions that “reared their heads” here: Anger, fear, frustration, exhaustion. Take a break from your station if possible. If not, take the time to debrief the experience with a colleague or supervisor as soon as possible. The goal here should be less “venting about the patron,” although there is a time and place for that, and more “venting your emotions.” It is not in your best interest to get other librarians on your side and against the patron. That approach will likely perpetuate the feelings you have. Rather, see it as an opportunity to release the emotions that came up for you as a result of the encounter.