

## Quick Guide: When and how to say “enough”

It is not unusual these days for people to use “bad” language, personal insults, and belittling phrases when they are frustrated, under pressure themselves, or don't feel things are being done quickly enough. This especially happens at the telephone where a caller's verbal attack can be highly offensive and may overstep acceptable and manageable boundaries of anger. So here are the **top ten tips** for handling verbal aggression on the telephone:

1. **Don't home in on the language issue** too soon, or we run the risk of creating another issue: an already enraged caller who thinks we are “telling them off”.
2. **Separate the “issue” from the “person”**. Try to concentrate on the facts and cause of the caller's problems, rather than how they are saying it.
3. **Avoid using “red rag” phrases** like “Tantrums, tantrums”; “When you've calmed down...”; “I don't get paid to be insulted”.
4. **Be careful that your own assumptions and sensitivities** don't lead you to make incorrect judgements, eg “It's because I'm not a partner”; “It's because I'm a woman”; “It's because I sound young”.
5. **Make sure they know who you are**. It is easy to be abusive when they are dealing with a faceless person over the phone but harder to lash out at a *person*. So make sure you personalise the encounter by giving them your name, following this immediately with a reassurance that you would like to resolve the situation for them.
6. **Use their name to personalise the conversation**. But be careful about using people's first names: stick to their more formal title unless you know it is acceptable to use their first name. And don't **over** use it!
7. **When the verbal aggression becomes extreme or prolonged**, state firmly and positively what you *can* do, and what you are *willing* to do. However, link it to what they are doing which is unacceptable. “Mrs Elliott, I can help resolve this for you, however please will you stop shouting.”
8. **If nothing changes**, emphasise this point again, restating what is not acceptable to you. “I'm trying to resolve this for you, Mrs Elliott, but I cannot while you continue to shout.”
9. **Finally, warn the aggressor** of what you will do if they don't stop their unacceptable behaviour. “Mrs Elliott, I am not prepared to be spoken to in this way and will put the phone down if this continues.”
10. And **do it** if they continue.

(With apologies to Mrs Elliott)

**Compiled by Des Whitehorn**