

# THE CONFLICT LADDER

HOW TO PREVENT AND MANAGE CONFLICTS



**BFA** HANDEL



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## WELCOME THE WORLD OF CONFLICT!

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The purpose of this leaflet is to provide retail employees with insight into conflicts and conflict management, so they can improve their experience of handling customer conflicts.

The central point is how to manage conflicts at an early stage so that they don't escalate and become hard to resolve, and also how to manage conflicts where a customer might be angry from the outset. The leaflet can be used by management, employees, and members of the Health and Safety Organisation.

The leaflet is part of the teaching materials that can be found at [www.traphed.dk](http://www.traphed.dk). The resource contains an annotated PowerPoint presentation, five short films on conflict situations, role-play and more. It's been developed to enable a business to organise and provide a 2-3 hour course in conflict management.

# 1. CONFLICT SITUATIONS WITH CUSTOMERS

Working is supposed to be enjoyable. A good day is when customer relations are good.

Conflicts with customers, on the other hand, can ruin your day, and being able to handle conflicts is therefore key. This applies to conflicts that arise because you're unable to give the customer back their money for a returned product, because the queue is long and the customer is in a hurry, because a product is not in stock, and other conflicts that might arise for various reasons.

In this leaflet, we'll teach you about conflicts and provide you with tools for managing conflicts with customers at work.

**Learning how to manage conflicts with customers is the same as learning how to manage all other conflicts in life...**

**Every conflict is similar in the way it might arise and escalate, and the way it might be defused.**

## WHAT IS A CONFLICT?

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There are multiple definitions of what a conflict is. Our working definition is:

**A conflict is a disagreement in which one or more parties become emotionally involved**

- ✓ **Disagreement**  
In a conflict, there's always something the parties disagree on
- ✓ **One or more parties**  
Two parties might be in conflict, even though only one of them experiences the situation as an actual conflict. If a customer is angry and hostile, you're in conflict with them no matter how you experience the situation.
- ✓ **Emotional involvement**  
What separates a disagreement and a conflict is that at least one of the parties becomes emotionally involved. In a disagreement, you're able to accept each other's opinion and discuss it back and forth. However when one party, or both parties, takes what the other party says or does personally and reacts with anger, irritation, sadness and so on, a conflict arises.

## CONFLICTS ARE PART OF LIFE!

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Avoiding conflicts altogether is nearly impossible. One must therefore accept that there'll always be conflicts – including when it comes to customers. Knowing what can be done about conflicts with customers is therefore key.

Conflicts are about people and emotions. To become better at managing conflicts, it's necessary to understand what conflicts are and what might happen in a conflict situation. One must also learn how to react and act accordingly when a conflict arises. To succeed, it's important to:

- ✓ **Talk openly about conflicts in everyday life**
- ✓ **Practise – it takes time and effort to learn how to manage and resolve conflicts**
- ✓ **Accept that you can't always succeed at managing conflict – and that's **OK****



## BLAME, AVOIDANCE, OR OPEN DIALOGUE

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Reactions in conflict situations vary from person to person and from conflict to conflict. There are three fundamental reactions:

1. Blaming/attacking the other party
2. Avoiding the conflict
3. Greeting the conflict with open dialogue.

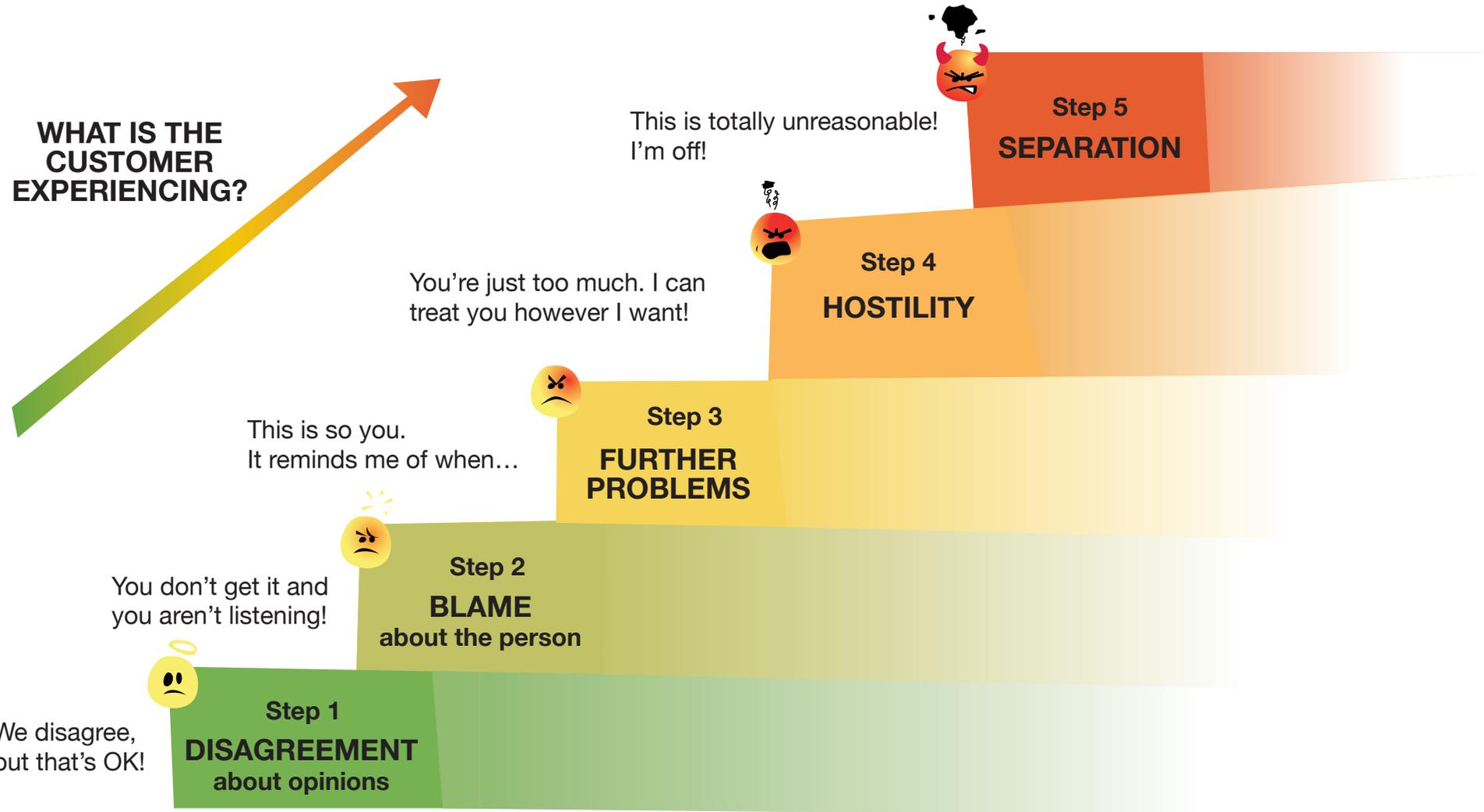
**To manage and resolve conflicts, the situation has to be met with open dialogue. If not, conflicts might escalate and take a turn for the worse – no matter whether you're blaming/attacking the other party or avoiding the conflict.**

**The Conflict Ladder** describes how a conflict might escalate if one blames/attacks the other party. See page 6.

**The Conflict Avoidance Ladder** describes how a conflict might escalate if one party avoids the other party. See page 9.



# THE CONFLICT LADDER



## 2. THE CONFLICT LADDER

The Conflict Ladder can be used to understand how a conflict might escalate and what steps can be taken to defuse it.

It's important to understand that any given conflict will always escalate and take a turn for the worse if no party takes the initiative to actively defuse it.

It's much easier to deescalate a conflict in the lower steps (2-3), but much harder if it reaches the upper steps (4-5).

Detecting and managing a conflict at its earliest stages is therefore essential.

**Conflict escalation can't always be avoided, but it will certainly occur if no one attempts to defuse the conflict.**

## THE STEPS OF THE CONFLICT LADDER

The Conflict Ladder consists of five steps, and the higher the step, the greater the conflict escalation.

A conflict might start as a disagreement in step 1 and then escalate one step at a time in the dialogue between you and the customer. However, you might also find that a conflict skips some steps altogether or starts higher up on the ladder.

Most often, the customer goes through all the steps, but you might not experience it in the same way. The escalation might have taken place before you've even met the customer. For example, if the customer has a preconceived notion of not getting their money back for a returned product, they might already be agitated before meeting you.

**Step 1: Disagreement (about opinions).** It all begins with a disagreement. If the employee and the customer discuss something without becoming emotionally involved, there'll be no conflict. At this stage, being in disagreement with the employee is therefore OK for the customer. **Pay attention to the fine line between disagreement and disagreement turning into conflict.**

**Step 2: Blame about the person.** The situation has developed in such a way that you're no longer 'going for the ball, but instead going for the player', meaning it's become personal and you're blaming the other party for the conflict not being resolved. At this stage, the customer will feel that the employee isn't listening to them and isn't trying to understand their situation.

**Step 3: Further problems.** The conflict now escalates and further problems come into play. For example, the customer might think of other people who've had similar problems with the same store or other annoyances about the store, and the customer might not always express these thoughts out loud.

**Step 4: Hostility.** Now the conflict is uncomfortable for both parties, and unpleasant things are said and done. The parties no longer regard each other as human beings for better or worse; instead, they lose any sympathy for each other and react by treating the other party however they see fit. They say and do as they please. The employee now experiences the customer verbally attacking them. On rare occasions, the customer might get physical.

**Step 5: Separation.** At this stage, the parties can no longer stand each other. Either the customer leaves the store, or the employee might have to throw them out due to unacceptable behaviour. The customer feels that getting the employee to listen to them and understand them is an impossible task and they might therefore just as well leave the store.

## WHAT IS THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCING?

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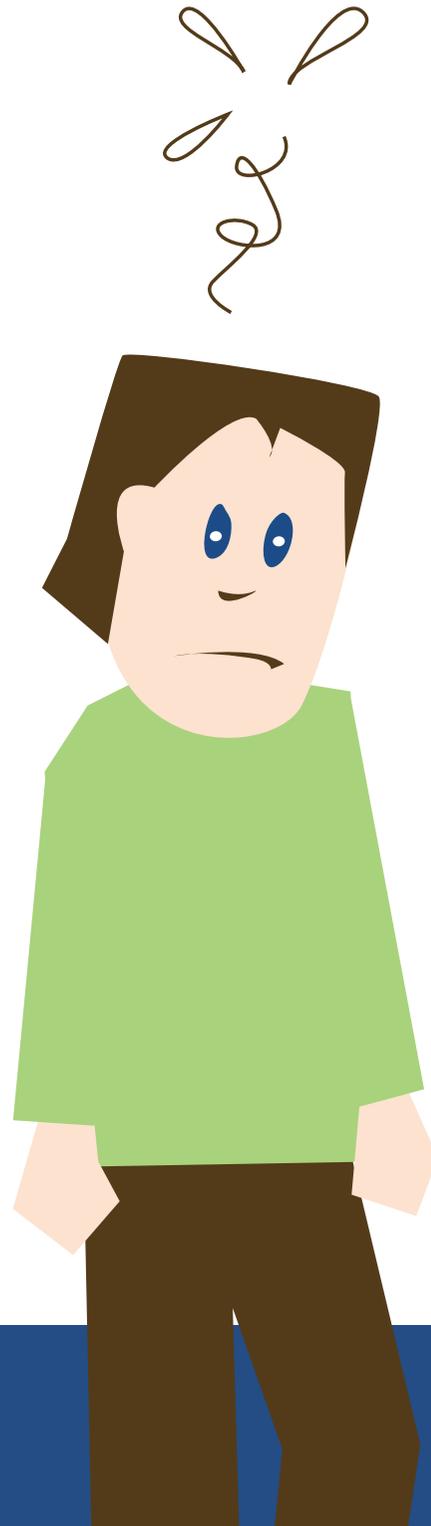
And why is the conflict escalating despite you explaining the store's rules to the customer, or explaining why the store is unable to deliver on time?

**A customer in conflict, and who is also emotionally involved, can be unreasonable and no longer seeks to resolve the conflict, although they may think they do.**

**The situation has turned personal. The customer feels blamed and not listened to. The customer will not listen to you and will easily misunderstand your words.**

### **An agitated customer might:**

- ✓ not listen.
- ✓ not understand sound arguments.
- ✓ need to tell their side of the story.
- ✓ be calmed by being listened to and understood.



## **THE CONFLICT AVOIDANCE LADDER**

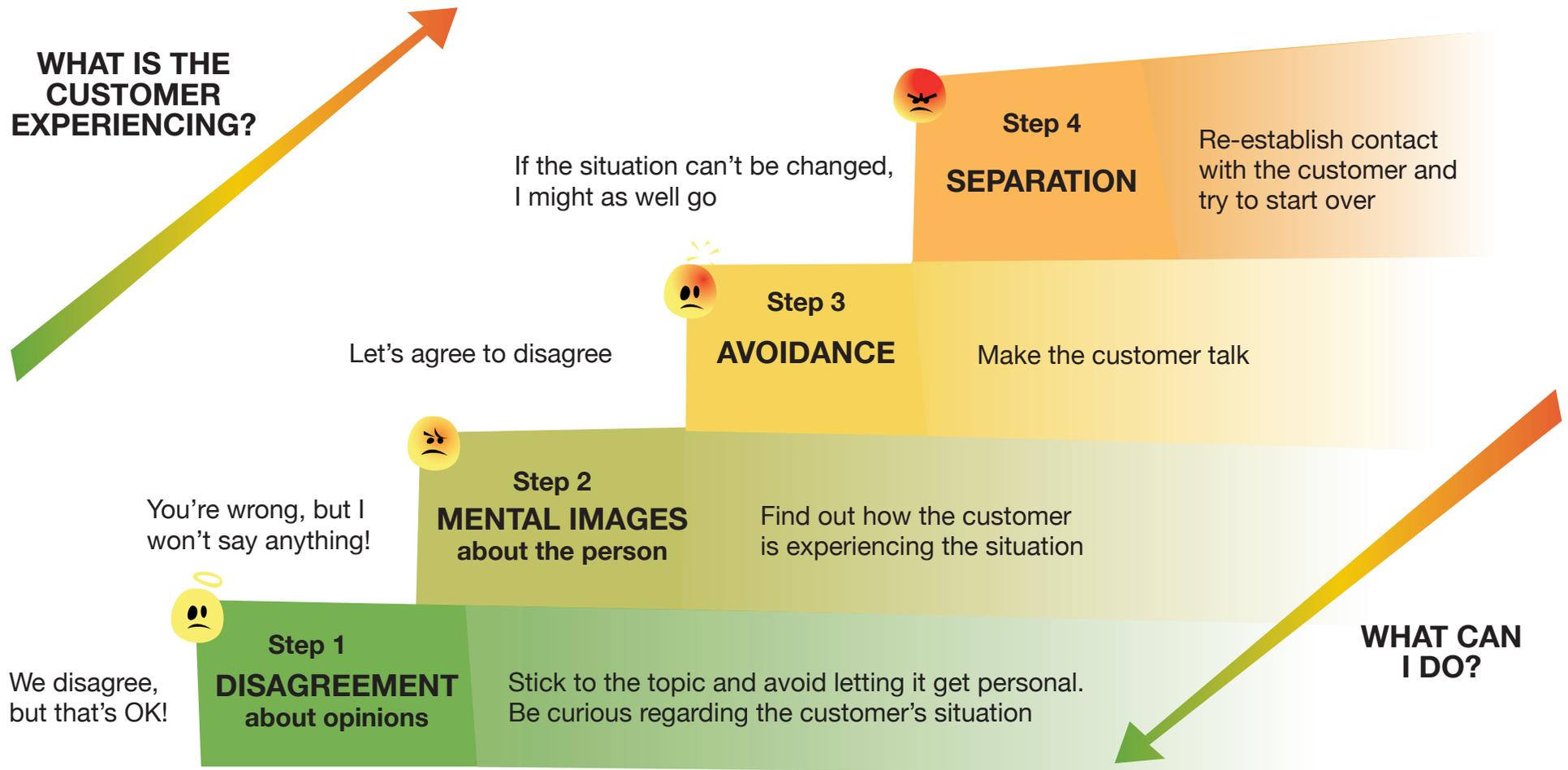
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It's not always the case that a customer in conflict reacts with anger, blame, and personal attacks. The customer might also be conflict avoidant.

A conflict avoidant customer doesn't like disagreement or a tense atmosphere. The customer might also have the misconception that conflict management is all about turning the other cheek, and therefore they will avoid the conflict and give up.

The conflict avoidant customer, however, does have their own way of showing dissatisfaction. Even though you might not have been yelled at, the situation can still leave you with a feeling of not having done well enough or that something was not right. It's therefore relevant here to know how to manage a conflict with the conflict avoidant customer.

# THE CONFLICT AVOIDANCE LADDER



## THE CONFLICT AVOIDANCE LADDER

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The Conflict Avoidance Ladder describes how a conflict with the conflict avoidant customer might escalate:

**Step 1: Disagreement about opinions.** Just like with The Conflict Ladder, there's no conflict yet. Pay attention to whether the customer is pulling out due to disagreement.

**Step 2: Mental images about the person.** The customer has now become emotionally involved and reacts by saying almost nothing. The customer instead forms mental images of the employee and the situation. The customer has an ongoing inner dialogue instead of discussing things with the employee.

**Step 3: Avoidance.** The customer has now reached the conclusion that there's nothing to be done or that the best course of action is avoidance. The customer pulls out of the conflict and agrees with the employee.

**Step 4: Separation.** The customer has avoided – but not resolved – the conflict and “flees” from the store.

But how do you detect a conflict with the conflict avoidant customer? Look for the following signs:

- ✓ The customer is not looking at you.
- ✓ The customer's speech is low or barely audible.
- ✓ The customer doesn't respond, responds with only a few words or responds with incomplete sentences.
- ✓ The customer seems sad, unhappy or worried and doesn't argue the case.
- ✓ The customer is indecisive.

## 3. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT TOOLS

You need tools to manage conflicts so you can react differently in conflicts with customers. Here you'll find tools for managing customers who react with blame and customers who react by avoiding the conflict.

**Only resume the argument when you sense that the customer is no longer emotionally involved**

### WHAT CAN I DO?

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#### Calm the customer

It's important to understand that when you're in conflict with the customer, it's **not** about resolving the problem or arguing about what started the conflict. Instead, it's only about calming the customer so they're no longer emotionally involved.

#### Get the customer back to Step 1

You **can't** discuss the problem with the customer before you're both back at Step 1 of The Conflict Ladder where there's no emotional involvement. You need good contact and mutual understanding, making it possible to further discuss the problem without blame and personal attack.

When you're emotionally involved, you don't think clearly or rationally.

The length of time it takes to deescalate back to Step 1 will vary from conflict to conflict.

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## Be curious – ask questions

What you can try is to be curious about the customer's situation. Find out what the problem is and why it's arisen.

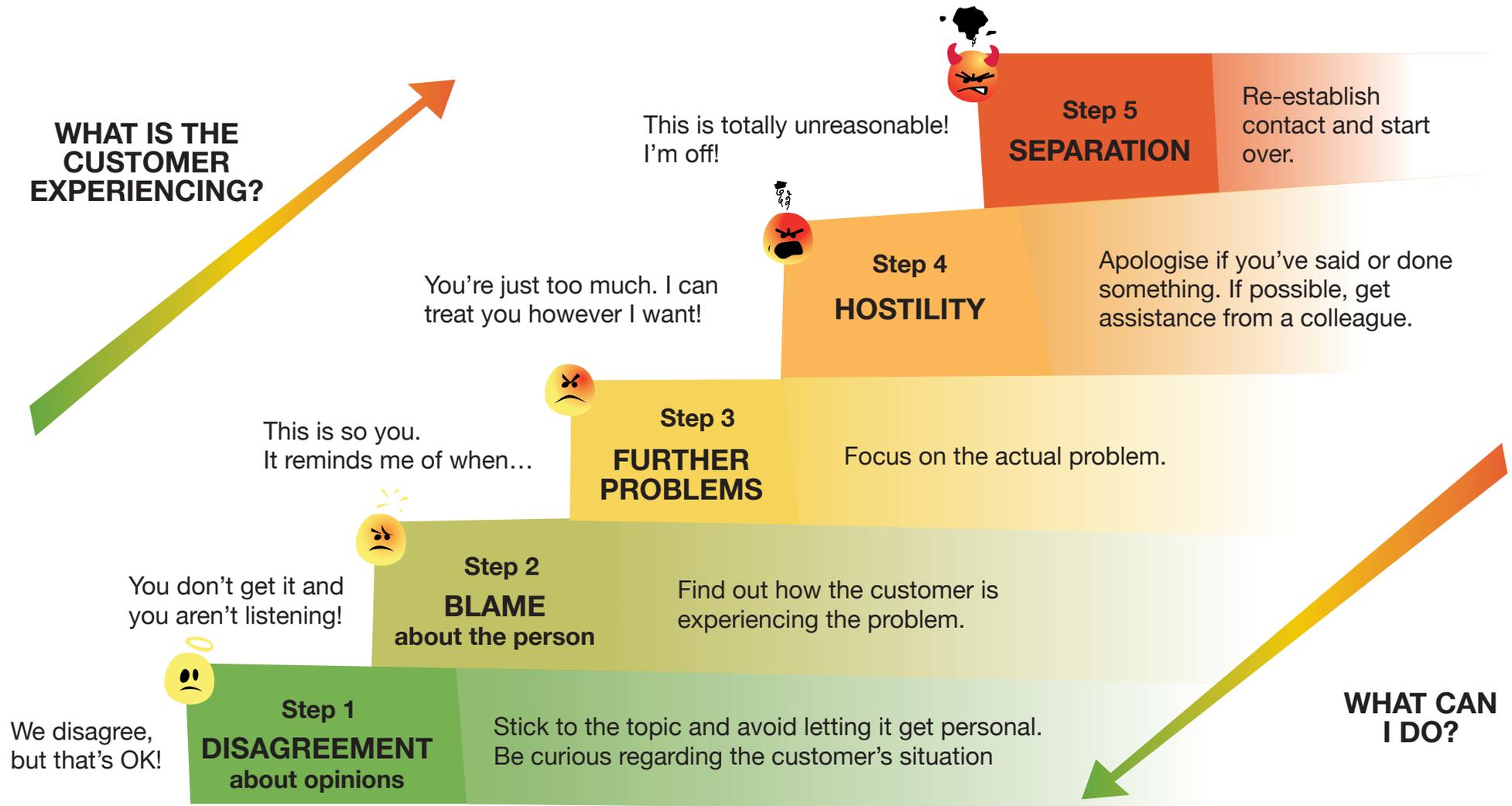
### Listen

When asking the customer questions, show them that you're listening and that you understand what they're saying by:

- ✓ Looking with interest at the customer while they speak
- ✓ Nodding and replying with a “yes”, “hmm”, “OK”, or similar while they speak
- ✓ Using the phrase “I understand”
- ✓ Asking about specific parts of the customer's story and having them expand on those things
- ✓ Repeating (some) of what they say to confirm your understanding of it



# WHAT CAN I DO AT EACH STEP OF THE CONFLICT LADDER?



## WHAT CAN I DO AT EACH STEP OF THE CONFLICT LADDER?

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**Step 1: Disagreement about opinions:** Prevent the disagreement from turning into a conflict. The customer is not emotionally involved and is able to listen and understand, but they also need to be listened to and understood. Avoid saying and doing things that might annoy or agitate the customer, for example, interrupting them or doing other things while talking to them. Allow the customer time, and tell and show them that you're listening and trying to understand. If you focus on the problem, you're not as easily annoyed.

**Step 2: Blame about the person:** The customer has now become emotionally involved, i.e. annoyed, agitated and so on. Be curious, ask questions and let the customer explain how they're experiencing the situation. Show that you're listening and trying to understand. Keep in mind that you don't have to agree, but you have to be respectful and accepting of what the customer is experiencing. Avoid trying to explain your point of view or correcting the customer or pushing your explanation before you're back at Step 1.

**3: Further problems.** Avoid discussing other problems that the customer might bring up. It complicates and might

escalate the conflict. Don't ignore the problems that the customer brings up, but you need to keep them focused on the actual problem at hand. You might say things such as "we can talk about the other problem afterwards, but for now let's stick to the problem we're discussing".

**Step 4: Hostility:** You might be met with hostility in a customer conflict if the conflict has escalated. Or you might experience this if a colleague calls you over during their customer conflict, or if the customer was agitated from the outset.

- 1. The customer conflict has escalated.** Moving on from this step on your own can prove difficult, as both you and the customer have become deeply emotionally involved. If you're capable of calming yourself, you can try to manage the conflict. However, pay attention to what's happening with yourself. Do you think the customer is the biggest idiot you've ever met? Did you say or do something nasty? Assume responsibility and apologise. For example, tell them: "I'm sorry that I...". Remember not to assume responsibility for the entire conflict. If you feel that you're too emotionally involved, calling for assistance from a colleague might be a good idea.
- 2. A colleague has called for your assistance, or the customer was agitated from the outset.** Focus on the fact

that it's not about you. Don't see the customer as the problem, but instead see the problem as being difficult. If you don't think you can manage the conflict, you could either serve the customer and listen to their angry complaint, or you might be able to put a stop to their behaviour. For example, say: "I don't want you yelling at me and calling me an idiot. It makes me uncomfortable. If this conversation is to continue, I need you to calm yourself and adjust your tone". For the best effect, tell them this without anger or blame in your voice.

**Step 5: Separation:** Try to calm yourself, re-establish customer contact and bring the customer back to the store for a new chat. Or call for a colleague to take over. Or accept that the conflict is unresolvable, and that's OK. Not all conflicts can be resolved.

It's important to recognise the difficulty of resolving a conflict at this stage. The customer views the situation as hopeless and must experience a fundamental shift in the dialogue if contact is re-established. This change should bring hope of a better conversation. For example, if you as an employee have been annoyed, be friendlier this time around, or if you've said or done something unpleasant, apologise for this.



## HOW DO I ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS?

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Formulate your own questions and practice... See the examples below for inspiration.

**Step 1:** "I want to understand what's happened. Try to explain it to me..."

**Step 2:** "I can hear that you expected a different outcome. What can I do to help you?"

**Step 3:** "It sounds as though you've had some unfortunate experiences here. Is it alright if we finish this first?"

**Step 4:** "I'm sorry that I... That was not OK. I was a bit frustrated with the situation. Let's try again? You told me that you..."



**Step 5:** “Sorry. Hold on. I’m very sorry you feel like leaving without us resolving this. I think I need to understand your situation a bit better. Do you want to give it another go?”

You can easily formulate multiple questions for each step. A question isn’t necessarily aimed at one step only, but can be used with all steps.

If you’ve had a positive experience managing a disagreement or a conflict with a customer, it’s useful to write down what worked in terms of what you said and did, as it might be a great help for another time.

## WHAT DO I DO ABOUT THE CONFLICT AVOIDANT CUSTOMER?

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The conflict avoidant customer doesn’t say a whole lot and withdraws from discussion. To openly face the conflict, you’ll need to engage in dialogue with the customer.

The conflict avoidant customer is afraid of conflict. Remain calm and welcoming, so the customer feels safe. Just like with the customer who reacts with blame and attack, you need to ask questions, listen and show that you’re trying to understand.

### Questions for the conflict avoidant customer could be:

- ✓ “It seems like you disagree. What are you thinking?” (Step 1)
- ✓ “What do you think of what I said?” (Step 2)
- ✓ “What would a good solution to this problem look like to you?” (Step 2)
- ✓ “What are you in doubt about?” (Step 2)
- ✓ “Before you said...Can you expand on that?” (Sep 3)
- ✓ “I don’t think we found a proper solution to this problem. Want to try it one more time?” (Step 4)

## 4. NOT ALL CONFLICTS ARE RESOLVABLE

### It takes times and willingness to resolve a conflict

#### ✓ You don't always have the necessary time at hand...

You don't always have the necessary time it takes to ask the customer questions and give them time to explain their experience. For example, you might be at the checkout in a supermarket and the queue is long. Sometimes a simple question is enough, but at other times, it takes longer than the time you have available.

#### ✓ You don't always have the necessary energy to resolve a conflict...

Conflicts are about emotions – your own emotions included – so it's not always the case that you have the necessary energy to be angry with a customer. If you already know this, then call for a colleague's assistance as quickly as possible before the conflict escalates to Step 3, 4, or 5.

#### ✓ The customer is not always willing to help resolve the conflict

Perhaps the customer has had a bad day and is already agitated when entering the store. Perhaps listening to their story can help. Perhaps nothing works.

If the customer threatens you, is aggressive or crosses the line in any way, you'll have to figure out if the customer is able to enter a dialogue. Try to be curious and ask questions as described above. You might say: "You seem very upset. Why are you upset?" Remember to say this with interest and without blame. Pay attention to their response. If it's impossible to engage in dialogue with the customer, you must say so. For example, tell them: "I think this situation is very uncomfortable, and I want you to leave the store" or "I will get a colleague to assist us".

When it comes to the customer who makes personal attacks or calls you names, you must first find out if you have the necessary energy required to ask the right questions, or if what the customer has done is so out of line that you need to say so immediately. For example, say: “I don’t want you calling me xxx, and I want you to leave the store now” or finish your sentence with “I’ll get a colleague to assist us”.

Handling these types of customers is difficult, but the better prepared you are, the easier it is. If you feel confident, you’re sending the customer a clear signal, and the situation will affect you less. Prepare the right questions and formulations and speak to your workplace about how to handle these situations.

When it comes to a customer who’s intoxicated, mentally ill or in some way out of it, you can’t manage the conflict using these tools, as dialogue is impossible.

## GET ASSISTANCE FROM A COLLEAGUE

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If a conflict is difficult to manage, you can seek assistance from a colleague.

Make agreements with your colleagues about how you’d like them to assist you with potential conflicts, for example:

- ✓ Ask a colleague to take care of the other customers.
- ✓ Ask a colleague to help the customer and assist you in managing the conflict.
- ✓ Ask a colleague to offer their assistance if they ever see you in conflict with a customer.

If you see a colleague in conflict with a customer, stay nearby so that the colleague is able to ask for your assistance if needed.

## WHAT IF THE CONFLICT CAN'T BE RESOLVED?

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Experiencing an unresolved conflict might need to be processed by talking to one or more colleagues.

When discussing an unresolved conflict with a colleague, use the same tools as when managing a customer conflict.

- ✓ Help your colleague understand what happened and be curious and ask questions about how your colleague experienced the situation.
- ✓ Be respectful and accepting of your colleague's experience of the situation, even if you disagree.
- ✓ Make sure you and your colleague stick to the specific case, and don't bring other issues into your chat.
- ✓ Avoid making it personal. For example, don't imply your colleague might be at fault for the conflict.
- ✓ When your colleague has told you about the experience and has calmed down, try talking to your colleague about what the customer's perspective of the conflict might have been.

- ✓ If necessary, remind your colleague that not all conflicts can be resolved and that's OK.
- ✓ You might end the chat by asking if there's something your colleague wishes they'd done differently. Allow your colleague time and space to think of examples, and ask questions like: "What would you do differently next time..."

It's important to stay neutral and impartial when talking to your colleague – even if the customer isn't present. Avoid escalating things by taking the customer's side. Avoid comments, such as "Is that true? It's so typical for customers to think that they can..." or "No way, that's way out of line".

Instead, acknowledge your colleague's experience of the situation and say: "I can understand it's been difficult".

## 5. GOOD ADVICE ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

- ✓ Recognise that you're in a conflict situation as soon as possible. Pay attention to the fine line between disagreement and conflict in Step 1. A lot can be won by managing the conflict in its earliest stages.
- ✓ Put conflicts and conflict management on the agenda in your store. Talk openly about what to do or what you might find difficult regarding customer conflicts.
- ✓ Don't regard the customer as troublesome (don't take what the customer says personally), but rather the situation as troublesome (remain objective).
- ✓ Try to understand first – then be understood secondly.
- ✓ Practise asking the right questions.
- ✓ Don't believe you know exactly what the customer means and thinks. Ask twice if necessary.
- ✓ Talk about what's happening. Say out loud how you're experiencing the situation – without blaming the customer.
- ✓ Be factual. Say only things that the customer can also accept as fact. Anything else can be misunderstood or be understood as blame.
- ✓ Make sure it's not you versus the customer, but rather you and the customer versus the problem. "What can we do to...?"
- ✓ Accept it if you don't have the necessary energy to manage the conflict and, instead, ask a colleague for assistance before the conflict escalates and becomes difficult to manage.
- ✓ Practise all customer situations – the "easy" ones, too!

## GOOD ADVICE ON COMMUNICATION

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Communication is all about how you act, what you say, and what you signal with your body language.

### How you act

- ✓ Are you upset, angry, agitated or annoyed? Seek assistance from a colleague.
- ✓ Do you regard the customer as difficult to handle? Instead, regard the situation as difficult to handle.
- ✓ Be curious. Ask lots of questions.
- ✓ Be empathetic and listen. Avoid thinking about what you want to say next.
- ✓ Focus on understanding what the customer means. Don't solely judge the customer on what they say.
- ✓ Respect and accept the customer's experience of the situation – even if you disagree.
- ✓ Be engaged. Own the situation and show the customer that you want to find a solution.

### What you say

- ✓ Use short sentences and ask short questions. It will make you less susceptible to being misunderstood.
- ✓ Use the questions you've written down previously.
- ✓ Listen – don't interrupt.
- ✓ Don't answer until you fully understand the customer's message and the situation.
- ✓ Remain positive and welcoming when it comes to your wording. Don't say "why?" or "I don't think so", but rather "can you expand on that..." or "I want to understand..."
- ✓ Speak only for yourself. Use "I" rather than "you", which can sound as though you're blaming them. Say "I disagree that..." or "It's incorrect to say that..."
- ✓ Say what you must – but avoid blame. "I need the receipt if you're to get the money back" is better than "You can't have your money back unless you have the receipt".
- ✓ Use humour if appropriate – for example, at Step 1 – to ease the situation.

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## Your body language

- ✓ Remain calm with both your feet on the ground. Show you're at ease.
- ✓ Face the customer with open arms. Show you're open.
- ✓ Maintain eye contact with the customer. Show you're interested and have good intentions.
- ✓ Smile. Show you're positive.
- ✓ Going to the other side of your desk might help. Show you're welcoming – however, be aware that this might be seen as aggressive if the conflict has escalated.





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In this committee employers and employees work together to provide guides, pamphlets, training materials etc. to support the co-operation for a better work environment in the retail industry in Denmark.

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## THE CONFLICT LADDER

### HOW TO PREVENT AND MANAGE CONFLICTS

This leaflet is made to provide retail employees with insight into conflicts and conflict management, so they can improve their experience of handling customer conflicts in shops.

Learn more about managing conflicts with costumers, the Conflict Ladder, conflict management tools, why not all conflicts can be solved and what you yourself can do to prevent and defuse conflicts with costumers.

The leaflet is part of a more comprehensive teaching material that can be found at [www.traphed.dk](http://www.traphed.dk).

