



PFC by Phone: Dealing with Manipulative Callers

While manipulation is considered to be a problematic way of relating to others, it is important to note that manipulative behavior is a common and natural occurrence and not necessarily intrinsically “bad”. Although it needs to be managed on the lines, it is understandable. For example, callers can often feel vulnerable and may wish to gain some control over a situation by attempting to get a volunteer to reveal information. They may also be curious about a volunteer and harmlessly wish to connect with them further by exchanging more personal information. It is impossible to know a caller’s true intentions for the manipulation so it is necessary to always work against it. For example, it is important to avoid sharing personal details or identifying information. For everyone’s safety it is crucial to refuse agreeing to do anything for a caller outside of the call.

The majority of the time, manipulation can be managed and conversation on the line can continue as normal. However, in some circumstances, a caller’s manipulative behavior may exceed regular amounts or become a caller’s primary purpose of their call. The following information can serve as a guideline for how to respond to such situations.

Response Protocol:

1. **When dealing with manipulation, make sure to deflect questions and neither confirm nor deny any statements they may make about you.**
 - a. Tips on Deflections:
 - i. Keep answers as 1) brief, 2) general, and 3) uninteresting as possible. Do not admit to any identifying information.
 - ii. Immediately follow up with a question to recenter the conversation on the caller.
 1. Example:
 - a. **Caller:** “Do you have kids?”
 - b. **Volunteer:** “*I have been around kids a fair bit. How about you?*”
 2. Example:
 - a. **Caller:** “What do you think about the Liberal Party?”
 - b. **Volunteer:** “*I don’t know much about them. What do you think?*”
 3. Example:
 - a. **Caller:** “Are you an accountant?”



- b. **Volunteer:** *“Our volunteers come from a variety of backgrounds.”*
 - iii. At times, an observation or question can replace an answer:
 - 1. Example:
 - a. **Caller:** *“I work out every day. Do you work out?”*
 - b. **Volunteer:** *“It sounds like exercise is important to you.”*
 - iv. When callers want direct life or legal advice, 1) reflect their feelings back to them (only works if they have given you something to reflect), 2) ask an Open Ended Question, and/or 3) remind them that they know their situations best.
 - 1. Example:
 - a. **Caller:** *“Do you think lying in this situation is okay?”*
 - b. **Volunteer:** *“It sounds like you are unsure how you are feeling about this question.” / “Seems like you are facing a difficult situation.” / “That sounds like a tough question. What do you think?”*
 - 2. Example:
 - a. **Caller:** *“Should I leave my husband when I get out?”*
 - b. **Volunteer:** *“What do you think would happen if you did?” / “Seems like you’ve given this a lot of thought. What are you leaning towards?”*
 - 3. Example:
 - a. **Caller:** *“What should I do for work?”*
 - b. **Volunteer:** *“You know yourself better than I do... What have you thought of doing?”*
 - v. When in doubt, “I don’t know” / “I’m not sure” is often a great and universally applicable deflection that pairs well with Open Ended Questions or invitation to pray.
2. **If a caller is not responding well to deflection, clearly share with them that you are unable to provide that information with them.**
 - a. Useful lines may include:
 - i. *“We generally do not talk about ourselves but I am here to listen and pray with you.”*
 - ii. *“I am not able to answer that for you. [insert deflection]”*



- iii. *“We are a confidential service so I am not able to share that type of information with you. [redirect]”*
- iv. *“If you want to know more about us, you can speak with your chaplain about the details of PFC by phone.”*

3. As a very last resort, you may address the manipulation and re-state PFC by Phone’s purpose.

a. Useful lines may include:

- i. *“I feel as though you would like me to discuss things with you that are outside the bounds of PFC by Phone’s purpose: to provide spiritual encouragement and prayer.”*
- ii. *“I am afraid I won’t be able to answer these types of personal questions. We are a spiritual encouragement and prayer service.”*

4. If the caller persists, feel free to end the call.

a. Useful lines may include:

- i. *“It sounds like you are looking for a service I cannot provide you with. I am going to let you go.”*
- ii. *“Feel free to call back when you are feeling ready.”*
- iii. *“This is an inappropriate use of this service. I am going to let you go.”*

Dealing with Aggressive Callers

Aggression and intimidation are forms of manipulation. While volunteers certainly hope to be supportive and loving in the face of aggression, it is NOT the job of the volunteer to withstand verbal abuse or subject themselves to harm. Volunteers should absolutely feel comfortable ending calls with callers who are intentionally mistreating the service or causing the volunteer significant discomfort. It is also critical that callers understand that aggressive and intimidating behaviour is outside the boundaries of the service and will not be enabled. While it may feel harsh to end calls with prisoners while they are in a heightened emotional state of anger, it ultimately does not help callers to be encouraged to persist in inappropriate behavior and not face consequences. The following can serve as a guideline for how to best respond to callers utilizing excessive aggression or intimidation on the calls.



Response Protocol:

1. **Utilize de-escalation tactics to attempt to diffuse the situation**
 - b. Pillars of defusing hostility
 - i. Remain calm
 - ii. Encourage client to talk
 - iii. Listen openly to what they say
 - iv. Show that you are understanding
 - v. Reassure the person
 - vi. Help him/her save face – give the person options for how they might want to deal with something.
Source: Goldstein and Rosenbaum, 1982
2. **If a caller is not responding to de-escalation, or if the volunteer is feeling uncomfortable continuing the call, it may be necessary to end the call.**
 - c. In a calm and compassionate manner, inform the caller that aggression directed at a volunteer is an inappropriate use of the service and that you are required to let them go.
 - d. Highlight that they are welcome to call back when they are ready to use the service for what it is designed to do: provide conversation, spiritual friendship, and prayer, in an effort to encourage prisoners in their spiritual journey.
 - e. Useful lines may include:
 - i. *“This is an inappropriate use of our service. I’m going to have to let you go now.”*
 - ii. *“I am going to let you go to give you some time to think and clear your mind. Goodbye.”*
 - iii. *“It sounds like you are not ready to talk right now.”*
 - iv. *“It seems that you are looking for a service that we do not provide.”*
 - v. *“Feel free to call back when you are feeling ready to talk.”*
3. **If the caller expressed a plan to harm themselves or another person, follow up the call by immediately contacting PFC, in accordance with the PFC by Phone De-escalation Plan.**
 - f. Refer to the provided telephone directory and instructions to call PFC immediately.
 - g. If PFC is not available and it is urgent, call the mental health nurse at the institution (also found in the telephone directory).



Additional Tips & Best Practices

1. Silence is NOT a bad thing

- a. We often feel uncomfortable with silence and can feel the need to fill it. Silence can actually be a great way to build rapport with a caller and to allow them space to process and think. It is a tool that should be used frequently and consistently, vs. avoided.
- b. How to embrace silence appropriately:
 - i. Do not try to fill silences. Give the caller space to talk.
 - ii. Do not expect conversations on the PFC by Phone line to flow exactly like your everyday conversations. You may often be speaking to someone you have never met, let alone spoken to. Silence is a natural by-product of this type of phone-line relationship.
 - iii. If a silence is uncharacteristically long, offer encouragement to the caller and let them know that you will be there for them when they are ready to talk.

2. Get comfortable with Open Ended Questions

- a. Open Ended Questions allow space for the caller to explore their thoughts/feelings and for the conversation to flow in a meaningful direction.
- b. Avoid Open Ended Questions revolving around “Why.” These types of questions can often come across as judgmental or imply wrongdoing, guilt, or mistake.
- c. Examples of Open-Ended Questions:
 - i. *“What does that feel like?”*
 - ii. *“How is that going?”*
 - iii. *“Where would you like to begin?”*
 - iv. *“How is that for you?”*
 - v. *“How do you feel about that?”*
 - vi. *“Can you tell me what that means to you?”*
 - vii. *“How would you like things to be?”*
 - viii. *“What do you imagine?”*
 - ix. *“What have you thought about doing?”*



- x. *“What do you think that would be like?”*
- xi. *“Can you tell me more about that?”*
- xii. *“What’s that like?”*
- xiii. *“What can you think of?”*
- xiv. *“What’s most important to you now?”*
- xv. *“What do you see as your next steps?”*
- xvi. *“Has anything worked for you in the past?”*
- xvii. *“What did you think when that happened?”*
- xviii. *“Would you like to tell me more about that?”*
- xix. *“What do you mean by that?”*

3. Reflections help the caller work through their own thoughts and encourage understanding in the volunteer

- a. Paraphrasing and reflecting the feelings of a caller can make it easier for a caller to come to terms with their situation and find the right solution.
- b. This skill creates a supportive environment by demonstrating that you are listening and trying to understand things from the caller’s perspective.
- c. Examples of Reflections:
 - i. *“Seems as if that upset you.”*
 - ii. *“It sounds like you’re excited about that.”*
 - iii. *“I hear you saying that you’re disappointed.”*
 - iv. *“I get a sense that you’re unhappy with {insert}”*
 - v. *“I imagine that was a painful experience for you.”*
 - vi. *“I get a sense that you’re anxious about taking that step.”*
 - vii. *“I get the feeling that you’re feeling drained.”*
 - viii. *“It feels as if you’re pretty angry about that situation.”*
 - ix. *“Am I right in saying you’re feeling annoyed with {insert}?”*
 - x. *“It seems like that’s worrying you.”*
 - xi. *“So, it’s kind of scary for you.”*
 - xii. *“It sounds like you’ve been working hard at that.”*
 - xiii. *“I get the feeling you think that was unfair.”*
 - xiv. *“I am hearing that you’re feeling a lot of frustration right now.”*