

# Occupational Health Management™

*A monthly advisory for hospital-based occupational health programs*

## Listen to complaints when pursuing a fleeing client

You must act as the client's advocate when trying to bring him or her back into the occupational health program, says **Georgia Casciato**, a health care business development consultant in Downers Grove, IL. That means listening very closely and doing whatever it takes to correct the problems.

Casciato offers these tips for approaching the client who seems unhappy with your occupational health program:

**□ Give the client permission to complain.**

Once you sense there is a problem, call the client and say something like, "It's come to my attention that you're unsatisfied with our services in some way. My role is to make sure our customers are satisfied, so it's important for me to know how you are dissatisfied. I love hearing good things about our service, but I really need to hear the bad things even more so I can fix them."

It is important to open the conversation in that manner to let the client know that you want to hear the complaints. Otherwise, some people will be reluctant to voice their dissatisfaction and will just avoid the subject. Soften the moment by saying that it's OK for them to hit you with both barrels.

But then stop talking. Allow the client some time to say what's on his or her mind. Remember that this part of the conversation will go a long way toward making the client feel better about your program. Even before you do anything to correct the problems, the client will feel better once you have listened.

If it seems that the discussion may be prolonged, you should offer to visit the client to discuss the matter in person.

**□ Listen; do not argue.**

Listen carefully, take a lot of notes, and go to painstaking lengths to make sure you understand what the real problem is. When the client gives you a statement, respond with several questions to make sure you understand the statement. Avoid arguing in any way. Do not be defensive, and do not contradict the client even if his or her version of events seems incorrect. A good response is to say, "We'll look into that."

"The client needs to see you as an advocate, someone who's going to come in and understand the problem and then go get it fixed," Casciato says. If you need to involve someone else from

your program, make sure they also are not defensive or argumentative. It is best to have you serve as the direct contact with the client so that you can be sure the message is delivered in the proper way. Clinicians are naturally going to be a little defensive about the quality of service they offer, so they should not relay information directly to a disgruntled client.

**□ Consider bringing someone else along.**

If you are visiting the client, you may want to bring along someone else from your program to aid in the discussion. This person should be someone who can directly help with whatever is making the client unhappy, and that probably is not another salesperson. A better choice might be the director of the program, a case manager, or a senior administrator who oversees the occupational health services. "It can help to include someone who really has the authority to implement changes," she says. "This can signal to the client that you're serious about addressing the problem."

**□ Never bad-mouth your own staff.**

Even though you need to be supportive and avoid arguing, do not go overboard and say negative things about your program's staff. You owe them that much respect, and bad-mouthing them is just not professional, Casciato says.

**□ Solve the problem and report back.**

Once you have listened to the client, that is half the battle. But you still need to go back to your program and address the shortcomings in your service. Once you have done so, you should report back to the client and explain briefly why the problem occurred in the past and what you have done to correct it. Avoid making excuses. If you failed to deliver on your promises in the past, admit to that and explain why it won't happen again.

**□ Provide a safety net for future problems.**

To show that you really care about the client's satisfaction, you should provide a way for him or her to contact you directly if there is a recurrence of the problem or any other dissatisfaction. The best way is with a pager or cell-phone number. Every salesperson should carry a pager or cell phone and encourage clients to call with any concerns.