



C&FS EAP serves many employees who work directly in their communities, in client homes and at community centers throughout Erie County and the Southern Tier. This month, we spoke with Thomas Ess, Emergency Preparedness Coordinator and Associate Vice President at People, Inc., to discuss how staff can keep themselves safe in any situation, and how anyone who works directly with clients can connect positively with them.

1. Know before you go.

While it's not always possible before the first meeting, try to gather as much information you can about the client's situation **before** going into the field. What is the history of your organization's contact with them? What are the client's concerns or unique challenges that you may have to address? "If you're aware of potential issues that could lead to conflict or escalation, you may be able to address them before they become a problem," Ess recommends.

In any situation, you should also prepare for your personal safety. Know your routes: how you're getting there, where you are going to park, and what landmarks you're using to identify your location. Have backup navigation in case your online navigation can't connect. Ess stresses the importance of knowing your surroundings: "If you plan ahead, no matter how positive or negative the situation may be, you are prepared to handle it."

2. Keep it personal (but don't take it personally)

While you may not see yourself as an authoritative figure, or you may not have the ability to address the larger concerns of your client, it's always helpful to remember that when you are dealing with a client who gets upset or angry, it's often not personal. "You represent more than yourself," Ess reminds us. "You are bringing with you the whole of the organization—its rules, regulations, and reputation." The client will likely associate you with their preconceived idea of what the organization does or any conflict that they are facing with your organization. "You become a target because of where you work, not who you are as a person."

3. When conflict arises, focus on de-escalation.

There are many ways to de-escalate a situation successfully. One important strategy is to stay calm and use language that communicates understanding, not conflict. "Have specific phrases planned that show your understanding for the client's situation: 'I can see you're really upset' or 'I'm sorry that you're experiencing this' will help the client be heard and allow for better communication to begin." Avoid phrases that will make the client more frustrated. "Has hearing 'Calm down!' ever made *you* relax?" Ess asks. "Probably not."

By empathizing with your client, you're not agreeing with the environment the client is in or the client's actions. However, your empathy is a first step towards building trust and starting the relationship on an equal footing. "Our words matter a lot," Ess says. "Just by being clear, calm, and in control, we can make all the difference in building safe and productive relationships with clients in our community."

If you feel impacted by the work that you do within your company and the clients you serve, remember that EAP is a free and confidential benefit that can help you work on short term solutions to manage any stress or impact you might be experiencing. Call 681-4300 to get set up with an appointment today.