

# Handling Difficult Calls: Master Moves for Telephone Ninjas

Make sure your calls go smoothly from start to finish.

**By Kate Zabriskie**

**S**ooner or later you're going to have to field a tough phone call. Luckily, there are some proven moves for handling difficult calls and doing so in a way that keeps callers happy. These three specific moves, when used with precision, can improve interactions with challenging callers.

## MOVE ONE: Set the Stage from the Start

The first tactic is designed to help you end calls with long talkers when the conversation gets to the point where there's no additional business to be done. Because you can't always identify a long talker at the beginning of a call, it's a good idea to start most of your interactions using this move.

“You need a different move to draw calls to a close.”

Here's how it works. Begin by thanking people for calling and letting them know you're glad to hear from them.

*Mrs. Smith, I'm so happy you called. How's your morning going? Allow for a minute of chit chat. Well, I'm sure glad/sorry to hear that. What is it that I can do for you today?*

Your expression of interest at the start of a conversation shows people you don't see them as a burden. Long talkers almost expect you to rush the conversation and try to escape. But when you don't follow that pattern, they tend to be pleasantly surprised, and they have less of an urge to keep you on the line.

Showing genuine interest is a win-win for you and your callers. Does this mean you should be prepared to spend an extra 20 minutes with everyone who dials in? No. You do, however, want to be compassionate and kind. The extra niceties shouldn't take but a minute or two. What's more,



“By repeating the complaint, you show you’re listening.”

if you master them, you’ll find that your call lengths will decrease.

## MOVE TWO: Use “No” Know-How

From time to time, your answer will have to be “no.” How you communicate this message has a lot to do with how palatable it is. Here’s how to employ “no” know-how, with the backdrop of a retirement home.

**Scenario:** A car is in a person’s preferred parking space, and there is no assigned parking.

Choice One: *Mr. Jones, there are no assigned parking spaces.*

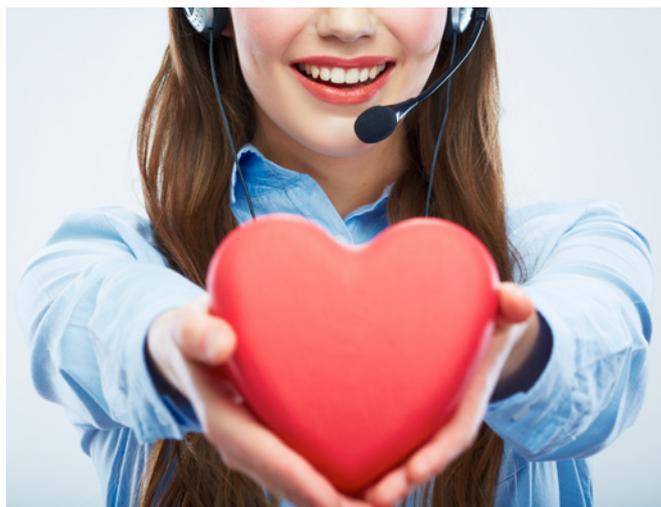
Choice Two: *Mr. Jones, I hear you. I’d love to have an assigned parking space myself. Let me take a look at the regulations. Please give me a minute. Pause. Mr. Jones, the regulations don’t provide for assigned spots. I know you like your spot, and I wish I could tell you it was yours and only yours, but I wouldn’t be telling the truth if I did. At this point, you have to hope your favorite parking place is empty when you want it because it can’t be reserved.*

The second choice is preferable because while the “what” is the same, the “how” makes a big difference. Here are some reasons why option two is a better response:

- First, you’re repeating what you’ve been told; never mind that you already know there are no assigned spaces. By repeating Mr. Jones’s complaint, you show you’re listening.
- You’re agreeing that having an assigned space is preferable. Agreeing with the statement shows you connect with the caller’s desires. It doesn’t mean you’re going to change the rules.
- When you pause before breaking the bad news, you show you’re serious about the question, *and* you shift the focus from yourself to the regulations. You’re communicating that the disagreement is between the regulations and the caller and not the caller and yourself.
- Finally, you end by reinforcing that you understand Mr. Jones, and you wish the answer were different.

## MOVE THREE: Choose the Best Closing

When you’re interacting with people in person, you can use body language to suggest it’s time to move on. But during phone interactions, you don’t have the luxury of body language, so you’ll need to use a different move to draw calls to a natural close. Although these ideas aren’t as simple as saying, “Mrs. Green, I’m picking up my purse,” they’re close. Let’s look at three closings, each tailored to a certain kind of caller.



## More Communicator Moves

For more communication strategies, check out these articles (NonprofitWorld.org):

**Be a Better Leader by Being a Careful Listener** (Vol. 37, No. 1)

**Eight Steps to Managing Conflict** (Vol. 20, No. 4)

**What the Heck Are You Trying to Say?** (Vol. 34, No. 2)

**Why Feedback Is the Key to Your Success** (Vol. 35, No. 3)

**How to Fix Communication Breakdowns** (Vol. 29, No. 1)

**Option 1:** *Mrs. Jones, I certainly have enjoyed talking to you, and I don’t want to tie up your afternoon. Let me go ahead and make a note that you called about this, and then I’ll let you get back to your day.*

**Option 2:** *Mr. Smith, I’m sorry I wasn’t able to give you the answer you were hoping for. I certainly prefer it when that’s not the case. Before we hang up, is there anything else I can answer for you?*

**Option 3:** *Mr. Allen, you’ve certainly shared a lot with me (repeat the facts). Is there anything else I need to ask before I hang up and start researching the answer?*

Option 1 would work well for someone in need of service and a friend. Option 2 is a good choice for situations where you have to say “no” and want to reinforce the idea that you’re empathetic. The third closing is a winner when you have callers who repeat themselves.

Fielding calls is part art and part science. Keeping these ideas in mind will go a long way toward mastering the right moves. 

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