

Defusing Client Disagreements

by Mary Coolman

It was a Saturday morning, and I had planned to spend the day getting some overdue bids out. But when I answered the phone, I heard the strained voice of one of my clients saying, "Please, come over. My husband and I have been arguing about the kitchen cabinets for two days."

These are words any contractor hates to hear. In this case, the cabinets were on order, the deposit had been paid, and delivery was expected the next week. No matter what happened, I knew it wouldn't be a peak experience. It would probably cost money or make for an unhappy customer, or both. But I had to handle the problem immediately, because delays would be costly and could jeopardize the whole job. I shut off the computer — the bids would have to wait.

Their Turf

As contractors, this kind of situation is one we have all faced, or will face sometime. Our clients have an argument over some aspect of the job, and we get dragged into the middle of it. Usually, they have been battling for some time; there have been shouting matches, stormy silences, possibly tears. Even though the problems often run much deeper than a disagreement about product choices or design elements, we, as contractors, are the ones who are called upon to cool the situation down or face a job going bad.

When you are pulled into the middle of this kind of argument, you walk into a hostile environment. No one involved really wants to be there. It's not a stroll

in the park, but if you can deal with it successfully, you'll gain a reputation as someone who can work with customers. Not only will you save the job, you'll turn your clients into strong advocates and you'll gain referrals.

Here, in rough order of implementation, are 12 tips I have found useful in this predicament. Properly employed, these tactics will defuse the confrontation and you will emerge a hero.

- 1 **Meet with all parties.** Make sure that both clients agree to the meeting and that both attend. It doesn't work if one person refuses to sit and negotiate.
- 2 **Meet promptly.** You need to meet with your clients as soon as possible after the call or the situation might blow up. To avoid distractions, try to set a time for the meeting that won't interfere with mealtime, children's homework, or other routine activities. Some distractions are inevitable — the phone, the doorbell, friends stopping by — but don't let anyone use them as excuses to postpone the meeting.
- 3 **Allow enough time.** Make sure there will be enough time to settle things in one meeting. You don't want to leave anything unresolved, where it can fester. You also want to make sure both partners can stay for the whole meeting; it won't work to have one party leave in the middle.

4 **Listen, listen, listen.** Allow each person to let off steam, one at a time, but keep him or her on track. There may be flare-ups, but just listen and don't offer any comments yet. You'll get your chance.

5 **Get agreement on something minor.** This helps to focus the source of the argument and keeps any dissatisfaction your clients are feeling from spreading to other parts of the job. If the issue is design, for instance, suggest some areas they might be able to agree on. "Can you both agree that the window should be moved?" you might ask. "Are you both happy with the location of the sink?" These simple agreements will soften the combatants, and help them be more civil with each other. That will prevent them from ganging up on you.

6 **Write it down.** Whenever you reach an agreement, no matter how small, make a written note of it. Read the note back to your clients and make sure they both agree with what you've written.

7 **Confirm the scope of the job.** After you have established some harmony, determine whether or not your clients want to continue with the whole project or just a scaled-back portion. Sometimes an argument can bring out a hidden agenda, and it's always better to redefine the job now, if necessary, than to risk another disagreement after the work is complete and final payment is on the line.

8 *Suggest compromises.* You may need to take the lead in suggesting alternatives. Try to find solutions that make sense to both parties. Push for agreement, then nail it down in your notes.


9 *Ask for a drink of water.* This may sound silly, but sharing food and drink is a social activity that serves to relax everyone. If you mention that your throat is dry and ask for a drink of water, your clients will probably jump to accommodate you, usually

with apologies for not offering something sooner. This simple act of sharing will reinforce the spirit of accommodation and compromise that you are trying to achieve.

10 *Be thorough.* If you have a loose end, make a note of it and be sure to come back to the issue before you leave. You don't want to leave anything unresolved.

11 *Be clear.* Clean up any remaining minor disputes or ambiguities.

Review your notes about all agreements before you leave the meeting.

12 *Formalize your meeting notes.* When you restart the job, incorporate the notes you made during the meeting into the formal job documentation. This may require writing a change order that revises the scope of the work or adjusts costs, or both. 

Mary Coolman, ABID, is a certified professional building designer and former remodeling contractor in Pasadena, Calif.