

2.9. Strategies for managing unreasonable arguments

The principle underlying the strategies and script ideas for managing unreasonable arguments is about 'declining or discontinuing' involvement with a matter. This involves politely refusing to do something or stopping doing something for a person who has raised a concern or is asking for an action to be taken or a decision made. As soon as it becomes apparent that a concern is groundless or a request is unreasonable, you should decline or discontinue service. If unreasonable arguments are mixed with reasonable arguments, the strategy should be to refuse to deal with the unreasonable portion.

Unreasonable arguments are sometimes associated with mental illness. Dealing with people with a mental illness requires extra sensitivity, although their conduct can generally be dealt with in the same way as anyone else.

When dealing with people with mental illness, it is important not to immediately dismiss an issue as being delusional. A delusion (or psychosis) does not preclude a legitimate issue of concern. Staff who receive expressions of concern that they suspect to be delusional should take time to ask specific questions about any evidence they have to support their concern/claim. At the same time, extra care should be taken not to fuel or encourage people who are clearly delusional or have concerns that have no legitimate basis, as this is likely to give the person false hope about what you can do for them.

See – 3.4. Guidance on disability and mental illness.

For information on mental health services in your area, please contact or refer the person to the following:

- Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636 (www.beyondblue.org.au)
- Lifeline: 13 11 14 (www.lifeline.org.au)
- WayAhead (Mental Health Association NSW): 1300 794 991 (www.wayahead.org.au)

In emergency situations, contact your local mental health team or community health centre.

2.9.1. Insists on the importance of an issue that is clearly unimportant or trivial

Do not take up/continue with issues that there is no practical purpose in pursuing.

Explain that issues are not taken up unless they are supported by evidence and are sufficiently serious. For example, the issue of concern should:

- raise a substantial new issue
- be supported by clear evidence that suggests that the event/issue happened.

Explain that clear evidence could include:

- copies of official documents
- photographs
- video footage
- other material that shows or tends to show that what they are complaining about occurred.

Tell them firmly and confidently that it is the organisation and not them who must decide on the importance of an issue – that is the resources it will dedicate to it, etc.

In giving a person such a message, it is never a good idea to use words such as ‘unimportant’, ‘trivial’, ‘frivolous’, ‘vexatious’ or ‘not in good faith’ as the person will be insulted/feel disrespected, which will only inflame the situation.

Advise that any further correspondence about the particular issue is likely to be read and filed without acknowledgement, unless it meets the threshold above.

Note: You should be careful not to disregard new issues that are substantially different from the original issue and that do warrant further action.

2.9.2. Invents allegations from the smallest piece of unsupported information or sees cause and effect links where there are clearly none

Avoid being drawn into hypothesising, catastrophising, conspiracy theories, unproductive arguments and personal attacks.

Acknowledge the person’s point of view, but advise that you have reached a different but equally valid viewpoint and are sticking to it.

Make firm and final statements so that there is no more room for continued arguments or ‘ammunition’ for the person to raise more issues and prolong the discussion unnecessarily.

Make sure your responses are brief, yet polite.

Ask that they provide clear evidence to support any claims or allegations – otherwise they will not be considered.

Describe the type of evidence that your organisation will accept and consider – try to identify things that relate to their particular issue.

Be upfront and honest from the outset and do not say or do anything that will give them false hope about whether their issue will be taken up or their likelihood for success.

After you close the matter, do not respond to further communications about that issue – unless it raises a substantial new issue or evidence or provides new information that warrants further action.

2.9.3. Raises bizarre or incomprehensible issues

Speak to the person in the same tone as you would to anyone else and treat them with respect.

Listen carefully to what they are saying and avoid arguments.

Ask questions and check for evidence. Sometimes a person may be delusional, but may still have a legitimate issue of concern. The ability to provide evidence or point to factual information will be the key. You might say:

- *To take this further, we would need clear evidence like photos, documents or medical certificates*
- *Sometimes people think something wrong has happened, but there isn’t any evidence. I can only suggest that if you do get some evidence you send it to me.*
- *You’re explaining your concerns well, but without any clear evidence I can’t follow this matter up.*

Reflect back to them what they are saying without agreeing:

- *So you say aliens are following you.*

Acknowledge emotions, both theirs and yours.

- *I'm feeling frustrated listening to you, so I can only imagine how frustrated you must be feeling about this.*

Empathise with both their lows and highs.

- *I can see you're feeling really bad about this/you're feeling really happy about this.*

If it appears that your organisation can assist them, explain what can and cannot be done to help them – without fuelling their arguments.

If it appears unlikely that your organisation can take up the issue, see whether the person may be able to come up with a solution of their own.

- *Is there any other way you may be able to achieve this/make sure this doesn't happen again ...?*

2.9.4. Interprets facts or law in ways that are clearly irrational or unreasonable and insists their interpretation is the correct one

Acknowledge their point of view, but clearly state your own and stick to it.

If reasoning with the person does not work, refer them to another forum where they can raise their issues – such as the courts if it is a matter of legal interpretation or a Minister or MP if it is a policy or political issue, if appropriate.

2.9.5. Makes false or unsubstantiated accusations of biased, unethical, illegal, inconsistent, or partial decision-making when things do not go their way

Advise them that you/your organisation can only consider clear and verifiable evidence when making decisions on a claim or issue.

Tell them clearly, firmly and transparently that complaints about you/your colleagues will not lead to a change in the decision that has been made or the outcome reached in their matter, unless there are clear and substantial grounds for it.

Keep records of all contacts and communications with the person for future reference, including conversations where they argue bias.

Some people may demonstrate an inability to accept personal responsibility – and instead blame others (such as the case officer/organisation) for things that they clearly bear no responsibility for. Never accept responsibility for things that you/your organisation are not responsible for.

Do not get caught up in conversations about what other people/organisations have done, unless this is the subject of a matter that is within your/your organisation's jurisdiction.

Avoid asking questions that are focused on the past – keep it in the present and talk about the task at hand and things that need to be accomplished in the future.