

# COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

When did property management become so challenging? Owners and managers who have been in the industry for many years remember simpler times. Successful resident retention programs now require management personnel to combine legal, psychological and marketing techniques to try to resolve conflicts that inevitably occur.

Trying to understand the source of conflict can be a good start. It seems that the hectic pace of our lives today has created an environment in which there is more potential for conflict. In spite of many labor-saving devices and enhanced communication technologies, landlords and residents alike are frequently hurried and impatient. Additionally the trouble with the economy (and the resulting loss of jobs, home foreclosures, etc.) is creating a lot of additional stress for people everywhere. The economy is also negatively impacting the rental housing industry. Vacancy rates have been on the rise and it is becoming more and more difficult to fill vacancies and to retain current residents.

Multi-Housing unit living provides an environment where it is common to have a neighbor above, below, and to each side of a rental unit. Because of this and today's ever present societal stress there are more and more complaints about problems caused by other residents...noise, cooking odors, cigarette smoke, etc. Media reports about lawsuits and activist groups have created unrealistic expectations regarding residents' rights and have fostered a negative environment reducing the chance for cooperation between resident and management when conflicts arise.

It seems that there is a general desensitization to violence in society today. Somehow, many people have gotten the idea that it is normal to act-out in anger. This increases the potential for physical violence and therefore, it is important for management to have resources and training regarding the de-escalation of emotion and reasonable resolution of conflict.

Many residents feel restricted in their options and believe that they are not seen as individuals. They think that management is trying to control them. The truth is, property management requires a certain amount of control ...but it can be exercised in

such a way that residents can feel that their opinions count and that the control exercised is at least tolerable. The foundation of a cooperative atmosphere can start at the beginning of the landlord-resident relationship. Careful thought should be given to the content of the rental agreement and property rules. They should be reasonable so they can be explained without an apology or defensiveness on the part of management personnel. The rules should be specific enough to be understood. They should be signed and a copy provided so that residents are less likely to try to use the excuse that they “didn’t know” what was prohibited. Address the breaking of rules promptly. If a person does not get away with a violation the first time, he or she is less likely to “test the limits” of management’s tolerance. Enforce the rules consistently. Doing so will underscore the importance and fairness of the rules. Management should document violations in writing so that there is proof of the reasonableness of management’s actions. Such documentation can be useful, both to help convince the resident and in an eviction, if it becomes necessary. If legal action is threatened be prepared to follow through...otherwise no one will take future threats seriously.

Management should have an “open-door” policy - let residents know management is trained to deal with and invites the discussion of problems. If you are authorized to make decisions, make it clear...if not, state that you will convey important information to the decision-maker and that a response will be provided within a reasonable time frame. If residents feel that they can talk to someone and resolve issues quickly and reasonably, management may have the opportunity to take care of a small problem before it evolves into a large one. The longer one feels frustrated and ignored, the more likely it is that they will become irate and difficult

When conflict arises, listening is a good first step. After the resident has a chance to vent, there are several methods of response to consider. There are common, recurring conflicts in resident landlord relationships. Management training programs that include role-playing with regard to common conflict scenarios can help managers feel more prepared to deal with problems. A positive strategy in dealing with these situations is to use the “feel, felt, found” method. The response to a complaint can be: “I understand how you feel, I have felt that way myself, but I have found that\_\_\_\_\_.” Such a

technique can blunt hostility by establishing a mutuality of understanding between the resident and the manager. Sometimes management can suggest several choices, all of which are ok with management. Or, it may be helpful to ask what suggestions the other side has for resolution. It is always important in these situations to de-escalate emotion, remain outwardly calm no matter what. The louder and faster the other party talks, the quieter and slower you should talk if you want to gain control. Of course, if someone is rude, hostile or obscene, let them know that the discussion must remain businesslike. Always suggest that they put their concerns in writing. If you are not ready to make a decision tell them you will take the issue under consideration and get back to them in writing. Finally, if a resolution does not appear to be readily achievable on-site, consider getting third party help from your attorney.