



Thriving Under Fire: Turn Difficult Customers into Business Success

By John Faisandier

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Reviewed by Peggy Cook

'Thriving Under Fire: Turn Difficult Customers into Business Success' describes a training course delivered to a small cafe and

restaurant business which has good food but poor customer relations. It uses the human dramas that arise within the cafe walls as the basis for training the staff in turning difficult customers into business successes.

John Faisandier, the trainer, comes into the cafe and makes a timely connection with the owner, Sophie. Sophie confides that she finds many of her customers difficult. John assists her to understand that for the business to thrive she needs to keep her difficult customers coming back. They discuss Sophie's desire to "not take it personally when people are upset", to "know the right things to say" and to "help her staff" when dealing with difficult customers. Sophie is highly motivated. In two weeks time a food critic is expected for an evening meal. This is her chance to make the big time. Together John and Sophie set learning goals and Sophie's original "I don't like courses" attitude changes to one of "When can we start?"

This is the beginning of the TUF: Thriving Under Fire programme at Sophie's cafe. John delivers concepts and techniques that Sophie and her staff find immediately applicable in their communications with difficult customers. They learn to understand their emotional responses, how their brains process emotion and cause them to be upset. They learn that the games they get hooked into cause them to feel bad, to blame their customers, and they learn to communicate well and stay positive.

The book is well organised. Each chapter presents a separate concept that builds on the previous one. Key concepts are drawn from psychodrama, transactional analysis, cognitive behavioural therapy, neuro linguistic programming, systems thinking, yoga and personal growth. The emphasis is on building on strengths and framing experiences in a positive light. The language is clear and has a conversational tone. Difficult concepts are made understandable with clear explanations, illustrative situations and diagrams. Intense, painful emotions are made bearable and comprehensible with a common sense

approach that explains how to think about them and suggests what to do. A review at the end of each chapter succinctly covers the main points of the teaching. The notes and reference sections at the back provide extensive information for further reading.

I enjoyed reading John's concise explanations of familiar concepts from transactional analysis, such as the drama triangle, the parent, adult, child ego states and I'm Ok You're Ok. I enjoyed his description of a practical application of psychodrama with the salt, pepper, serviettes and sugar on the café table. I appreciated how he made his explanations easily comprehensible for his audience.

This book is a rich goldmine for psychodramatists who practice in organisations. Like the book itself, the TUF course is well structured to engage an organisation's staff. It provides the training purposes, sets goals and describes ways to involve participants in very useful developments such as getting to know and understand themselves and others, and learning useful communication skills. The course covers a wide range of practical topics including communicating with mentally ill, drunk or drugged customers. These are areas that are not discussed enough in organisations and the business world.

Trainers too will benefit from this book, being provided with the opportunity to revisit familiar concepts viewed in a new light. Because the TUF course addresses many aspects of customer relations they may find something new to think about. Training course participants will benefit from reading about their new learning and relating it to customer relations in small businesses or organisations. Newcomers to communication skills and management practices will find it helpful because there is plenty of scope for recognising oneself and one's responses in universal situations. Finally, skilled communicators and the emotionally aware are likely to find this book refreshing.

Questions about the wider applications of TUF cannot go unasked. I was provided with just such an opportunity while traveling in South America with a tour group for five weeks. I enjoyed thinking about the ways in which the tour leader's poor customer relations impacted on the group and on my partner and me. This group leader clearly did not understand the notion of 'keep them coming back' as the best way to increase business. On being unable to hear the programme outline one day because the leader spoke quickly and softly, we asked for clarification. The group leader's voice became hard. It was obvious that she was annoyed at having to repeat herself. She had little empathy for her clients. I saw her as a *punitive parent* and I found myself feeling rebellious. "I'm ok, you're not ok" resonated for me.

Later, I heard an unhappy couple complaining about their accommodation. Had the tour leader been able to engage with them at an emotional level, they would have experienced her acknowledgement and felt that they had been heard. But again she found it difficult to enter the world of her clients. She told the couple that they should have complained earlier and in so doing embarrassed them in front of the group. They became hostile and alienated. By the end of the tour the climate of hostility and blame was well established, the group had disintegrated and two separate subgroups had emerged.

Rereading 'Thriving Under Fire' on my return, I reflected that this group leader was

probably overwhelmed by her emotional responses. She had no understanding of how to respond in a way that would build the tour group and consequently her responses fragmented it.

Analysing 'the other' is one thing, but thinking about my own contribution to poor group dynamics is much harder work. In hindsight, I realise that warning bells had rung early in the piece. I had noticed that the tour leader did not listen to what I said and instead warmed up to competing with me. This early observation produced uneasiness in me, a twinge of anxiety, and perhaps I thought "She is not ok". I did not know how to respond so I put it aside and things got worse in the tour group. The question is, how do I learn to pay attention to that internal uneasiness and think about communicating well when I am anxious? In the disorder of everyday life it is difficult to hang on to the concepts and techniques that we know will work. When we are overwhelmed by anxiety and isolation how do we make sense of our experience, think about what we really want and respond as adults? We could have done with a TUF course on that South American tour!

This brings me back to John's first conversation with Sophie in the TUF: Thriving Under Fire programme at her cafe. The contract he made with her created the productive framework for the work that followed. There was a clear purpose, to keep focused on the challenges of communicating with difficult customers. Sometimes it takes more than a cup of coffee to assist people to deal with the really hard issues in their businesses. To keep coming back to learn about the tough emotions in themselves and to stop blaming others, to grow up, is a life-long task.