

2.13. Dealing with anger through effective communication

2.13.1. Understanding and recognising complainant anger

In complaint handling, anger is an understandable – and to a certain degree acceptable – emotion experienced by frustrated and disappointed people. Being shocked and unprepared when you face a disappointed person’s anger is generally unrealistic.

However, anger becomes problematic and unacceptable when it escalates into verbal abuse, hostility, threatening behaviour or violence. When it is expressed in these ways, it must be dealt with swiftly and decisively using the suggested management strategies in 2.11 and 2.12 – Strategies and scripted responses to managing unreasonable behaviours.

As people who deal with concerns raised by members of the public, it is essential that we understand and recognise the signs of anger in the people we deal with (and within ourselves) so that we can respond to it (or control it) in the most effective and productive ways possible.

Some of the more common signs and expressions of anger include:⁵

- raised voices when the person has generally used a more restrained communication style with you previously, yelling, slurred speech or chanting
- accusatory, dominating or even sexually explicit language
- using words that are intended to intimidate or to achieve a particular result
- harsh or overly sarcastic humour
- combative or inflexible behaviour
- irritability, anxiety or short temper
- redness in the face or flushed appearance
- hostile facial expressions – including lowered eye brows, direct prolonged eye contact when this has not been the person’s eye contact pattern with you previously, narrowing or rolling of the eyes or flared nostrils
- visible muscular tension in the face, neck, hands, scalp or back – clenched fists or jaws, grinding teeth
- intrusive behaviour such as entering into other people’s personal space when they previously have maintained more distance from you, or entering areas of the office that are off-limits or they have not been invited into
- exaggerated gestures and finger pointing or waving when the person has not previously used these expressive styles with you
- the onset of dominant body posture and positioning
- persistent sweating, heavy breathing or loud sighing
- the onset of restlessness and repetitive movements – including pacing around, tapping their feet continually, constant repositioning in a chair or standing up frequently
- physical aggression – including throwing paper, shoving things or pounding the table.

5. Department of Human Services (Vic) 2005, *Staff safety in the workplace: Guidelines for the protection and management of occupational violence for Victorian Child Protection and community-based Juvenile Justice staff*, Victoria, p 25. Copyright © State of Victoria, Australia. Reproduced with permission of the Secretary to the Department of Human Services. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.

You will note that a number of these ‘signs’ of anger are physiological. This is because anger is one of the most physically arousing emotions that human beings experience. It can block our judgement and affect our ability to reason, problem solve and process information – making it very difficult to communicate in productive ways.⁶

In complaint handling, this usually means acknowledging and addressing a person’s anger before you can effectively deal with their substantive issue of concern. You will also need to recognise your own triggers for becoming angry and develop ways to manage them as well. Ultimately, it is your responses to the person’s anger and your communication style that will be the significant determinant in whether your interaction with an angry person escalates to crisis point.

2.13.2. Using the CARP method to defuse a person’s anger

CARP is an acronym developed by Robert Bacal to help address anger. CARP can help you to sequence and time how you defuse anger and hostility. It stands for:

- **Control** – control the interaction and your anger.
- **Acknowledge** – acknowledge the person’s anger and give them an opportunity to ‘let off steam’.
- **Refocus** – refocus the conversation on to the substantive issues.
- **Problem solve** – find solutions for dealing with those issues.

The order of CARP is very important, in particular leaving the problem solving to the end. If you try to problem solve or refocus too quickly, you are likely to find yourself explaining the same thing over and over again – because the person will persist in wanting to tell you about their story and how angry, frustrated or disappointed it has made them. If this happens, go back to acknowledging their feelings and emotions and rework your way back down the sequence.⁷

2.13.3. Communication strategies for avoiding or minimising the triggers for anger, conflict and unreasonable conduct

In addition to the CARP method, the suggestions in the table that follows are designed to promote optimum communication and lessen the triggers for conflict and unreasonable conduct. They are divided into two columns:

- **Dos** – things that you can do to facilitate non-confrontational communication and build your relationships with the people you deal with.
- **Don’ts** – things that tend to lead to conflict and unreasonable conduct and should be avoided during interactions with the people you deal with.

These suggestions can be used in your interactions with all the people you need to deal with, not just those whose behaviour you find difficult.

6. Lerner J et al, ‘Like fuel in the fire: How anger impacts on judgement and decision making’ http://content.ksg.harvard.edu/lernerlab/pdfs/fuel_in_the_fire_litvak_lerner_tiedens_shonk.pdf Accessed on 21 September 2011.

7. Bacal, R 2010, *Defusing Hostile Customers Workbook*, 3rd edn, Bacal & Associates, Casselman, p 28.

DO	DON'T
<p><i>Acknowledge their emotions and give them a chance to let off steam. You might also say:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I can see how strongly you feel about this</i> • <i>It sounds like you are very unhappy/angry about this</i> 	<p><i>Don't allow venting if it might encourage unreasonable conduct or will go on for longer than five minutes. This can do more damage, as it will revive the person's negative feelings about their experience.</i></p>
<p><i>Control your own emotions</i></p>	<p><i>Don't react to aggression and 'triggers'. You could say instead:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Yes, I know some people believe this</i> • <i>You are entitled to your view</i> • <i>I see</i>
<p><i>Show empathy for their stress and anger.</i></p>	<p><i>Don't allow your empathy to affect your objectivity.</i></p>
<p><i>Echo what they are saying. This can show you are listening.</i></p>	<p><i>Don't echo what they are saying if you don't fully understand what they have said. Don't put words in their mouth, and don't echo offensive language as it may escalate the situation.</i></p>
<p><i>Acknowledge their point of view without agreeing. You might say:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I can see that you believe</i> • <i>I do understand that your position is</i> 	<p><i>Don't disregard their point of view. People can have different but equally valid viewpoints, interpretations, perceptions and recollections of the same issue or event.</i></p>
<p><i>Anticipate likely counterarguments/objections the person may raise and address them initially:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I can see that you may say that ... so let me explain why things have happened this way.</i> 	<p><i>Don't present counterarguments unfairly or in a way that might be seen as confrontational or disrespectful.</i></p>
<p><i>Find things you and the person can agree on, without accepting their whole argument.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I agree that \$2,000 is a lot of money to lose.</i> • <i>Two weeks does seem like a long time to wait.</i> 	<p><i>Don't make promises or agree to something that you will have to go back on later.</i></p>
<p><i>Use 'I' and 'we' messages. These create a connection, demonstrate respect and build trust.</i></p>	<p><i>Don't use 'you' messages in a way that might be perceived as confrontational or accusatory.</i></p>

DO	DON'T
<p>Ask questions to keep a conversation under control. 'When', 'what', 'where' or 'how' questions can help to respond to accusations and other claims.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has made you think I am not taking you seriously? 	<p>Don't use 'why' questions if they can be avoided. Some people see why as an attack, and it can lead to a defensive response.</p>
<p>Avoid jargon and use a communication style that is comfortable for the person.</p>	<p>Don't say things to make the person feel inferior or excluded.</p>
<p>Use 'I' and 'we' messages. These create a connection, demonstrate respect and build trust.</p>	<p>Don't ignore what is not being said. What is the person avoiding discussing?</p>
<p>Clarify the issues in dispute and the impact these are having on the person.</p>	<p>Don't forget to outline what they can expect from you, and also what you expect from them.</p>
<p>Ask for clarification if you are unsure about something. You might say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I understand the situation is Is that correct? 	<p>Don't assume anything.</p>
<p>Explain carefully why you are following certain processes or procedures.</p>	<p>Don't be too formal or bureaucratic, as this can make people feel inferior and frustrated. Avoid saying:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That's the law. • I just follow the policy.
<p>Be personable and build rapport.</p>	<p>Don't be too informal or joke around. This could make it seem like you are not taking someone seriously.</p>
<p>Give someone space and time to think something through or control their anger and frustration. You could do this by taking a break to talk to a supervisor or check a piece of information.</p>	<p>Don't tell the person they need time to 'cool off' or 'calm down'.</p>
<p>Admit mistakes and apologise.</p>	<p>Don't make excuses, defend or deny.</p>

2.13.4. Knowing your triggers

Triggers are those things that people say and do that can cause you to become angry or frustrated. It may be their choice of words or their tone of voice. Whatever it is, it can sometimes cause even experienced practitioners to lose control and say or do things they then regret.⁸

It is important that you identify these triggers because you cannot reason properly, process information or problem solve while you are angry – making it difficult to manage your interaction with the person you are dealing with.

You should also be careful, in cases where you do not have full control over your anger, not to ever express it in ways that are likely to escalate your interaction with the person you are dealing with. This includes sighing, rolling your eyes, muttering things under your breath, laughing inappropriately, or being defensive or overly reactive. In these situations, it may be best for you to take some time out and return to the conversation when you have had time to cool off.

What are your triggers?⁹

Take some time to figure out your triggers. Ask yourself:

- What things do people say or do that push my buttons?
- How do I normally react when those buttons are pushed? With confrontation do I give in, become dismissive or am I unaffected?
- What types of interactions cause me the most concern – face-to-face interviews, home visits, phone calls? Why?
- How do I deal with such situations? How do my reactions compare to the suggestions in this manual?

2.13.5. Using self-talk to manage your own anger¹⁰

To manage your emotions and anger when dealing with challenging situations, you might try using self-talk. Self-talk is what you say to yourself in your head when you are dealing with a challenging situation. Constructive self-talk can help you to keep things in perspective and recognise that a person's anger is likely to be due to their circumstances rather than anything you have done. As a starting point, you need to leave your ego out of it. Provided you have not done something inappropriate that has triggered the behaviour, recognise that while it might look, sound and feel personal, the person would in all likelihood be angry and reacting in the same way no matter who was in your shoes.

Some examples of positive/constructive self-talk to manage your anger and frustration include:

- They aren't really angry at me personally.
- I can handle this.
- Boy, do they have it rough.
- This person really needs some help.

8. Bacal R, *Defusing Hostile Customer Workbook*, p 40.

9. Office for Children, Department of Human Services 2005, *Staff safety in the workplace: Guidelines for the protection and management of occupational violence for Victorian Child Protection and community-based Juvenile Justice staff*, Victoria, p 25.

10. For more examples of self-talk, see Bacal R, *Defusing hostile customers workbook*, p 42.

- I am better than this. I will not stoop down to that level.
- I'm not going to be suckered into this.
- I will remain calm and cool.
- I'm going to approach this as a challenge to not get angry.

Some examples of negative self-talk to avoid include:

- I'm so useless at dealing with these people.
- Why do I always get the difficult ones?
- Oh gosh. I hope no one is listening to this. They'll think I can't cope.
- This is so unfair.
- He has some nerve saying that
- I don't deserve this.
- Why are they doing this to me?
- Oh my god. What do I do?
- I'm not paid enough to deal with this crap.
- I feel put upon because they are so angry.
- There goes my day.

Most of the examples of negative self-talk would indicate that someone has taken the person's comments and anger personally.