

Tips for Field Personnel Dealing with Angry Citizens

Perhaps a citizen was unhappy with construction or a road closure, a right of way process that annoyed them because they thought it was unfair, or a slippery road they assumed was your fault...or a million other things that have nothing to do with MnDOT. Who knows, maybe their dog died or their wife left them.

It's easy to get upset and respond with emotion when you're confronted with an angry person; but, if you don't have the presence of mind in the moment to know how to respond, you can easily make the situation worse.

When you can step back, and **go with your second reaction** (after you've said to yourself, "this is not about me, I have to be calm, detached, and professional in my response here...what should I say and how do I say it?"), you can calmly reply with something that lets the citizen know you heard their concern (it's called 'empathy'). This way you can become strong in your "self-regulation skills", stay in control, and defuse the situation in a professional, even courteous way.

The Importance of Effectively Dealing with Angry Citizens

It's important to know how to deal with angry people for a number of reasons.

First, you can calm citizens down, so that they don't take any action that harms you or others – either physically or emotionally.

Second, if you respond angrily or inappropriately (give them a hand signal) to a citizen's anger, you can easily end up being seen as the aggressor yourself. This is disastrous for you, for MnDOT, and for customer relations.

Third, when you respond calmly to angry customers, you set a good example for your co-workers. Your behavior can help others to see what is expected and how to do it.

Strategies for Dealing with Angry Citizens

Don't be "passive aggressive" with citizens.

Passive-aggressive anger might include the following examples:

- Ignoring others or pretending not to hear or understand them.
- Engaging in self-defeating behaviors

- Taking it personally and getting defensive.
- Demonstrating an "angry smile."
- Sending hostile non-verbal messages

Passive aggressive responses do not work well, will often make the other person more angry, and are a “habit” (we do them without even knowing we are doing them)...so be aware of how you are thinking and feeling, and avoid being passive aggressive.

Let’s look at several other things that you can use to deal with angry citizens.

1. First and foremost, stay safe. If you feel threatened by an angry person, trust your judgment. Leave the area immediately if you feel unsafe.
2. Call your supervisor as soon as you can and involve him/her. Or call State Patrol.
3. If you know you're too upset to resolve the situation professionally and calmly, ask your co-worker take over the situation before you do something you’ll regret...have them attempt to resolve the situation.
4. Report the incident, if the citizen is way out of line.
5. Don't ever respond with anger – that hurts you, MnDOT, and can have legal consequences. It's very natural to get upset when angry citizens confront you, regardless of whether their anger is justified. We know you can feel under attack, and really want to give it back to them, but don’t...ever, unless you are being physically attacked and need to protect yourself in self-defense.
6. Do your best to respond calmly and professionally when you face angry people. Learn how to manage your emotions, and take a deep-breath , so that you stay focused during tense interactions. If you feel yourself getting angry or defensive, politely tell the citizen you “will share their concerns with the appropriate persons,” and exit the scene.
7. Learn how to distance yourself emotionally. Most of the time, a citizen's anger has nothing to do with you personally. When you recognize this, it can help a lot when you have to cope with an angry citizen. There’s a lot of research to support this idea.
8. Don't interrupt the citizen while he speaks – and try to listen. This may help you to see things from his perspective.

9. Have some “pat phrases” to use when these stressful events occur, like:
“I can see how upset you are, but let me take your name and give it to management to follow-up on – they can better influence your concerns than I can.”

or...

“I’m sorry that was your experience, but here’s a number you can call to complain to or talk to someone who can better address this with you.”

(have a number to give them)

10. When it's your turn to talk, speak slowly and calmly, lower your vocal tone, and use non-threatening body language. This will often encourage others to calm down.
11. Show respect. You are representing MnDOT at all times. Think about the last time you felt angry, and remember how you wanted to be treated in that situation.
12. Perhaps ask what you can do to resolve the situation and make things right...in other words, what would help them?
13. Always help your co-workers to manage angry outbursts from citizens - this can affect the whole crew's productivity and morale.
14. Practice the new habits listed here...then when you are under a lot of stress and emotions are involved, you will be better prepared.
15. Try to avoid accusatory "you" statements, which can make the citizen feel more angry and defensive and escalate the situation. Don't argue with them.
16. We all have anger, and anger is a normal emotion. No matter what you do, it's important to know how to deal with an angry citizen calmly and assertively.
17. Try not to get angry yourself. Stay calm, speak slowly, and use non-threatening body language. A calm, rational response can go a long way toward calming angry people down.