

Administered by the
Michigan Municipal
League

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Pro-active Risk Control \$olutions for Public Agencies

*A Service of the Michigan Municipal League Liability and Property Pool and
the Michigan Municipal League Worker's Compensation Fund*

HANDLING ANGRY CITIZENS

INTRODUCTION

Occasionally a municipality will have citizens who become angry. They may be angry for a variety of reasons.

- The individuals may be unhappy with the service the municipality or one of its employees provides.
- They may be frustrated as a result of the "red tape" or bureaucratic process they encounter in requesting services, or
- They may be unaware of or disagree with rules, ordinances, or laws that the municipality is enforcing.

Often these citizens will be very specific in telling you or your employees the reason for their anger. Welcome this! Knowing why the individual is angry can help an employee address the citizen's concern and resolve it.

THE PROBLEM

Angry citizens create several concerns for the managers and supervisors of public agencies and their employees. They can create increased stress for employees. This stress may lead to an increased incidence of absenteeism, nervousness, and discontent among workers. It may also cause a decline in productivity, resulting from a loss of efficiency and worker errors. These errors may create liability concerns for the employer.

Additionally, public agencies have a responsibility to provide employees with a safe work place. There may be several consequences if public agencies do not provide employees with specific tools with which to address angry citizens. Public agencies may lose credibility with members of the community, their employees may feel less job satisfaction, and, at the extreme, an employee may unknowingly fuel an angry individual to the point of violence.

THE SOLUTION

Management should establish basic guidelines for their employees that help them to identify and handle situations involving angry citizens. The guidelines should address how to handle the immediate situation. They should also address how to handle it so employees build a foundation for better relations with the angry person in the future. The guidelines should also establish the extent of employees' authority to resolve citizen problems. Employees should receive training on the guidelines. They should know what the guidelines say, how to put the guidelines to use, and what the potential consequences are for both employees and the agency if they do not follow them. The guidelines and training should cover the following proven techniques for handling angry individuals.

Maintain a Professional Demeanor

Employees should act professionally. They should always greet the public politely and in a friendly manner. Doing so calms down irate citizens by showing them that employees respect them. As employees greet angry customers, they may also want to smile and identify themselves even if they wear name badges.

Many people overlook this step. However, the introduction shows that the employee is friendly. This makes it harder for people to be hostile with them. Angry individuals often do not expect a friendly greeting. An employee's friendly actions can dramatically alter the entire exchange to a positive outcome because the person now views the employee as someone who will help them. A polite, friendly and attentive manner can help to calm down an angry person. On the other hand, telling someone to 'calm down' frequently tends to make him or her angrier.

Use Deflectors

Occasionally, an employee gets into an argument with an angry member of the public. Often this occurs because the employee reacts to things that the person is saying that have nothing to do with his or her problem or complaint. For example, instead of describing the problem, the individual may use insults or make general, negative comments. By reacting to the hostile comments rather than listening to the underlying concern, the employee tends to increase the person's frustration and anger. To avoid this, employees should receive training in using deflectors. A deflector is any technique that allows employees to avoid the trap of responding to the customer's anger. A deflector is usually a quick verbal transition that allows employees to redirect a person's attention to the business objective. For example, if a citizen calls an employee a "jerk," the appropriate response is not anger. Instead the employee should give a firm verbal signal that the employee is willing to listen to and solve the person's problem: "I hear what you're saying, but . . ."

Empathy

Employees need to project the appearance of empathy or the ability to understand the other person's situation. Even though employees may not feel sympathetic toward angry citizens, it is important to understand them. Projecting empathy tells angry citizens that employees care and are listening to their concerns. Some non-verbal techniques for conveying empathy are tilting one's head attentively, taking notes, or using facial expressions that convey sympathy and understanding.

Paraphrasing

The most common verbal technique for conveying empathy is paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is restating in your own words what another person has said. When an employee summarizes a citizen's complaint, the employee demonstrates that he or she has listened attentively and understands the individual's problem. Additionally, paraphrasing helps an employee to defuse a potentially volatile situation by making the other person stop talking. To listen, the citizen must stop talking. And the individual will because he or she wants to make sure that the employee understands his or her concern. Employees can start to paraphrase by saying something like; "So what you are saying is. . .," "Let me see if I understand the situation. . .," or "So what the boss needs to know is. . ." The employee's demeanor is very important. A calm, professional manner; body language that conveys a friendly concern; a neutral tone of voice, low pitch, and moderate speed when speaking can help calm down the other person.

Suggest a Solution

Management should instruct employees on the range of options available to them for solving citizen's problems. In many cases, providing alternatives to the citizen is appropriate. "We can help you fill out that paperwork again or you can take it home and return it on Monday." In other cases, apologizing and making a commitment to correct the situation is sufficient. "I'm sorry that we did not complete that paperwork. I can have it done for you by. ____."

If these solutions do not placate the person, the employee should use the following procedure that takes a progressively firmer tone in its approach. The employee starts by asking for cooperation from the individual. Many people respond favorably to this if the employee is polite and cooperative: "Please sir/ma'am, I would like to work with you to solve the problem, may I have your help?"

The employee should then clearly explain the actions: "Sir/ma'am this solution is good for you and for us. The other option is no good for either of us and we don't want that." The employee should be as specific as possible. During the exchange with the citizen, the employee probably gained information that will enable him or her to tailor the options to the individual. The citizen is more likely to agree if he or she has

something to gain by cooperating. "I'd like to think that you can agree with this proposal. If not . . .". The employee should state what the person might gain by cooperating or lose by not cooperating.

At this point the individual may be cooperating, but not fully. The employee should make sure that the individual understands the options and the employee's desire to be helpful: "Sir/Ma'am, if there anything I can say or do to get you to agree, please tell me."


Always Remember That Safety Comes First!

Management should encourage and train employees to handle difficult people. Employees, however, need to realize that they may not always be able to diffuse every volatile situation. Employers should tell employees that they may sometimes need help with an angry citizen and that they should take any threats or other overt signs of violence seriously. If an employee is unable to satisfy a citizen or if the person becomes very angry or violent, the employee should call for a manager. If management intervention does not diffuse the situation or if the angry citizen poses an immediate threat, the manager should contact law enforcement officials immediately.

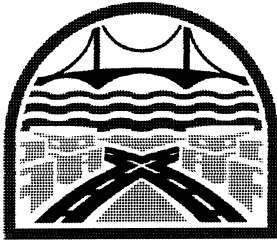
Management should document any situation involving a citizen that requires management intervention to satisfy the person or diffuse a potentially volatile situation. At a minimum, the documentation should include the citizen's name and phone number, a description of the problem, and its resolution. If the person has made overt threats, the report should indicate this, as should the need to call for law enforcement should that occur.

A situation involving an angry citizen may not always progress in an orderly manner. Management should develop a procedure for handling angry citizens and train their employees on it. Employees should receive training on how to assess the potential for violence so they can protect themselves. They should also learn what to do if a situation gets to the point where management or professional intervention is necessary. Training should also include instruction on how to contact others for help. The means of contact may be a panic button placed near the area where a potential conflict is most likely to occur. It may be specific code words the employee can use that do not alarm the angry customer but alert other employees to get help.

*As with all issues concerning public relations and employee safety, seek professional advice from your attorney and experts in the fields of customer relations and security. The absence of conflicts with citizens helps to create a safe and business like atmosphere for all employees and results in better productivity. If you need additional information regarding this topic, contact the MML Risk Management or the League's **Loss Control Services**.*

	Important Phone Numbers
MML Risk Management Services	734/662-3246 800/653-2483
Loss Control Services	800/482-0626

Note: This document is not intended to be legal advice. It does not identify all the issues surrounding the particular topic. Public agencies are encouraged to review their procedures with an expert or an attorney who is knowledgeable about the topic.



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Handling Angry Citizens Self-Assessment

Angry customers can create many concerns for employers and their employees. This assessment will help you determine how well prepared your organization is to handle situations involving angry customers.

Does your organization:

1. Have an established procedure for dealing with angry customers?

Yes No →



The procedure should:

- Define clearly how to attempt to defuse the citizen's anger.
- Establish that top management supports the process.
- State that failing to follow the procedure may result in discipline up to and including discharge
- Be openly communicated to and understood by employees.
- Establish methods for employees to get help.
- Emphasize that employees can use safety procedures whenever necessary.

2. Provide training to all employees?

Yes No →



The training program should:

- Define and demonstrate clearly how to attempt to defuse citizens' anger .
- Be mandatory for all employees who have contact with the public.
- State that top management supports the process.
- State that violations of the organization's policy may result in discipline up to and including discharge
- Establish methods for employees to get help.
- Be clear that an employee can utilize safety procedures at any time necessary.
- Be documented.
- Provide practice using real life situations.

3. Require that management properly responds to employee successes and failures in dealing with angry customers?

Yes No →



A comprehensive program should:

- Include proper training for employees.
- Provide retraining where appropriate.
- Include an effective corrective action program.
- Have a recognition and reward program to encourage successful employees and model appropriate behaviors for other employees.

4. Have established safety procedures?

Yes No →

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The procedure should:

- Define clearly how to attempt to defuse the citizen's anger.
- Establish that top management supports the process.
- State that failing to follow the procedure may result in discipline up to and including discharge
- Be openly communicated to and understood by employees.
- Establish methods for employees to get help.
- Emphasize that employees can use safety procedures whenever necessary.

5. Have other measures in place to deal with angry citizens?

Yes No →

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Do you:

- Have a violence in the work place policy?
- Assemble a threat assessment team if necessary?
- Assess areas where employees may be subject to threats or violence?
- Follow up to determine how well measures to protect your employees are working?

Conclusions



If you were able to honestly answer "yes" to all five questions and your organization is following most or all of the suggested practices, then your organization has reduced its exposure to future liability claims and worker's compensation claims. You should congratulate yourself.



If you are unable to answer "yes" to any one or more of the five questions, your organization may have an exposure to claims from angry customers or from an employee resulting from an injury sustained during a confrontation with an angry customer. Missing components of one or more of the five recommended practices may also indicate a deficiency in your current program. You should take one or more of the following actions:

- **Correct any deficiency that may exist;**
- **Contact your attorney and a specialist in customer or public relations for advice;**
- **Contact the MML Risk Management Services at (800) 653-2483; or**
- **Contact Loss Control Services, at (800) 482-0626.**

NOTE: This document is not intended to be legal advice or implied to identify all exposures related to this issue. Public agencies are encouraged to contact their attorney for assistance in implementing these or other changes.