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Defusing Angry and Hostile Ranchers

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In the course of a major disease outbreak or act of agroterrorism in the ranching community, you may be forced to approach ranchers about destroying some—or all—of their livestock. To avoid confrontation with a rancher who might become violent, therapists and educators recommend a combination of communication, assertiveness and problem-solving.

Robert Bacal, author of *Defusing Hostile Customers*, describes the difference between angry and hostile behavior. Anger refers to an internal state (feeling) experienced by people. It can be shown through a raised voice, animated gestures, or turning red. Hostile behavior, on the other hand, is intended to intimidate, throw you off balance, demean or control you, or make you feel guilty.

There can be some latitude when dealing with angry behavior, but people must be on guard if the behavior appears hostile.

It is important to make safety the bottom line. Your safety and the safety of other emergency personnel, ranchers, and the general public is critical. It may involve physically removing yourself from the proximity of the person who is hostile.

Control

Acknowledge

Refocus

Problem-solve

Steps to Avoid Violence

According to Bacal, there are four major components in defusing hostility:

Control: When you interact with an irate rancher, they will often try to “take the floor”, refusing to listen to you. They may take a verbally attacking position; swearing, gesturing, and not letting you get a word in edgewise. They may begin ranting.

The rancher attempts to control the interaction, by causing you to become defensive, angry or confused. So, the first goal in defusing is to gain control over the situation. The person needs to get to a point where they will stop talking and listen. The key in reasserting control is to behave in ways that send the message—without being aggressive—“**your intimidation will not work on me.**”

Acknowledge: It is important that the angry rancher see that you understand his/her emotional state, and the situation. In acknowledging, we are talking about two major techniques: **empathy and listening**. A person's anger will often diminish if the person feels we understand them.

Empathy statements do not involve agreeing with the person or condoning the behavior; they simply convey that you are concerned and that you understand:

"This must be terribly devastating for you."

Refocus: When first interacting with an angry or hostile person, that anger interferes with the ability to work with the person rationally and effectively. Control and acknowledge are designed to calm the rancher down. Refocusing moves from dealing with the emotions to dealing with the actual problem.

We do not attempt to deal with the problem until we have dealt with the feelings first.

Problem-solve: First, we look to see if the person is becoming less emotional and more rationale. Then we begin the transition to "getting down to business". Problem solving involves getting and giving information, suggesting possibilities, offering choices as available, agreeing on a course of action and following through.

Principles of Defusing

- *Deal with feelings first.* Remember that angry people are sometimes irrational. You don't have to agree with the person, but it is important to acknowledge that they are upset.
- *Remember that each situation is different.* Some ranchers will respond best to empathy, but some will calm down only if you are assertive. Observe what is working and modify your approach from there.
- *If you lose control of yourself, you lose.* While it is impractical to suggest that you will never be internally affected by others' anger, you do have control over your reactions. Make a conscious decision to choose your behavior. If you lose control, not only is the interaction more likely to escalate into a verbal or physical confrontation, but there may also be work-related consequences for you.
- *Don't supply "ammunition."* There are different types of ammunition that you can actually provide to an angry person, thereby making a situation worse for you in the long run. The first type of ammunition involves behaviors that fuel a person's

anger. These behaviors include actions such as sighing heavily, rolling your eyes, and speaking under your breath. Next, there is more overt behavior that can be used directly as ammunition against you. If you storm out of the room, slam down the phone, or are verbally inappropriate with a rancher, you may have just armed that person for a complaint to your supervisor.

- *Don't sound like a bureaucrat.* The more bureaucratic you sound, the more it is likely to infuriate the rancher. Their anger is primarily about the situation and the system they are facing and if you state policy, regulations etc., you are seen as part of the "system". They are more likely to address their frustrations at you. In other words, talk like a human, with a name and feelings and not a bureaucrat.

Dos and Don'ts in Working with Angry People

Do:

- Consider the impact of your words and actions
- Focus on the here and now
- Accept the person's feelings as legitimate, even if you disagree with what he or she says
- Ask what the other person wants
- Listen to the client for clues on his or her emotional state
- Remain calm
- Be compassionate when giving bad news
- Accept responsibility
- Be proactive and positive
- Develop procedures for handling angry people

Some people respond to a gentle approach, some to a firm tone and others require almost aggression. Use your judgment and experience since you are the one interacting with the person.

Don't:

- Engage in name-calling or labeling
- Disregard the other person's feelings or say he or she "shouldn't feel that way"
- Make threats, especially those that you don't intend to, or can't, enforce
- Impose your personal feelings or beliefs
- Diminish the problem or ignore the issues
- Try to solve a problem that is outside your abilities or job description
- Lose your temper
- Cry
- Appear uncaring
- Place yourself in danger

(Source: USDA Farm Service Agency. "Dos and Don'ts of Workplace Safety and Dealing with Angry Customers." Casper, WY: Farm Service Agency Training, 2001.)

Is It Okay to be Angry?

Anger is not a bad emotion. Anger is like steam--not addressed, it can lead to an explosion; improperly vented its energy can be wasted; and properly managed, it can move a problem from contention to problem solving and solution. You are likely to feel anger, fear, or a sense of betrayal after an interaction with an angry rancher. Like the rancher, these emotions must be recognized, acknowledged, and appropriately managed.

In the real world, personal buttons get pushed. When this happens, there are instinctual responses that may completely divert your focus from a workable plan. If you notice a physical reaction (heart pounding, pulse racing, body temperature rising rapidly) in your body, use it as a signal to pause and back up to the point where the interaction went off track. If, for example, you find your blood pressure rising during the re-focus phase of the conversation, use this as a red flag. You may need to pause and backtrack to the part of the process where you use active listening and really ask what is the root of the problem. It is not uncommon for anger (within both parties) to re-surface many times. Self awareness is crucial to working with angry customers because it brings clarity in how you react to anger, thereby giving you valuable information that can help you be more effective.

(For more information on dealing with anger or resistance, see: *The Personal Nature of Agriculture: Lenders and Angry Customers*, B-1113

http://www.uwyo.edu/ces/LIFE/Personal_Nature_Main.html and

Why Ranchers and Farmers are Reluctant to Seek Counseling and How Family Practitioners Can Help [http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/pub/8\(2\)/forum.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/pub/8(2)/forum.html))

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