
Principles of Defusing Anger

It isn't necessary to apply all ten principles listed below to be successful in defusing someone's anger. However, the more of these you can apply, the greater the likelihood of success.

Principle 1: Deal with their feelings first

Acknowledging they are angry first before moving on to a solution is an important step. Until the angry person feels they are being heard and their anger recognized, they won't listen to much of anything else, including any solutions you may offer. Problem solving with angry people won't happen until they are ready to participate calmly.

Principle 2: Avoid coming across as a bureaucrat

Avoid bureaucratic language. Rather than reciting agency policy or the law, explain it in common language. Let the person know that she or he is not being singled out. Avoid language that suggests being inflexible, such as, "It's against policy", or anything similar. If you need to explain a policy, introduce your explanation with something like: "Here's how we usually do things. We ask that you..." We may think we are distancing ourselves from the bureaucracy when we say things like, "I don't make the rules", but we're not: we're aligning ourselves with the bureaucracy.

Principle 3: Each situation is different

Each person you deal with is different and every situation is unique. One person may respond well to a gentle approach. Another may respond to a firm tone, while someone else may require you to be almost aggressive. Use your judgment and experience. If you try several empathetic responses and the person gets more hostile, either you aren't communicating your responses well (tone, words), or, empathy just isn't going to work with that person. If something works, keep doing it and if it doesn't, try something else.

Principle 4: Begin defusing early to take control

Angry people usually indicate their mood prior to beginning a hostile attack, often with subtle hints of their tone of voice and body language. One way to address or pre-empt the attack is to begin the defusing process before the other person gets on an abusive rant.

You can pre-empt angry attacks by taking control of the interaction immediately (be the first person to speak), and empathize, even before the angry person has had a chance to launch the first salvo. Look for nonverbal indications that the client is upset as they approach you. If they look tense, glare, scowl, or exhibit other early warning signs of anger, begin defusing immediately.

Principle 5: Be assertive, not aggressive or passive

Being assertive means being firm, sounding and looking confident, and recognizing that you also have rights. Aggressive behavior invites confrontation and argument. Passive behavior looks weak and powerless. Some people believe that the more passive you are the less likely people are to be hostile towards you. The problem with this is that passivity may entice someone to redouble their efforts at intimidation. They will sense your discomfort, and continue to attack if they feel you are off balance or weak. Assertiveness is, in most circumstances, the best option.

Principle 6: What you focus on, you get more of

When a hostile person brings up an unrelated topic that has little to do with the reason you are dealing with them, you can sidestep the topic and *not* focus much on it, or "dignify" the topic by talking about it. If you focus on some unrelated topic, you will encourage the person to talk more about it. When you do not focus on it, you are less likely to encourage the person to continue on that theme.

Cooperative Communication

Principle 7: Avoid high risk, high gain behavior

High risk, high gain behavior is behavior that when it works, is very effective in defusing. When it doesn't work, it fails miserably. Telling someone to be quiet may be effective in some situations, and the client may realize that he or she is acting inappropriately. For some people, being told to be quiet is like being told to shut up, and bound to escalate the situation.

Humor can be a great technique to defuse a situation—when it works. If you can say something that gets the client to smile or laugh, you will probably defuse the situation. However, if you try humor and the client doesn't think it's funny, they will think you aren't taking them seriously. That tends to increase their anger.

Principle 8: If you lose control, you lose—period

Manipulative nasty behavior is designed to affect you emotionally so that you will become aggressive or defensive. When you lose your cool and defend yourself or become aggressive, you actually end up doing what the other person wants you to do: lose control of yourself. You are entitled to be angry or upset if you choose, but learning to control your behavior and the way you express that anger or upset is critical. Slowing down your responses, paying attention to the tempo and volume of your speech, remembering to breathe, or taking a time-out are methods to use if you feel your anger is rising.

Principle 9: Don't be manipulated

Aggressive, abusive and manipulative people look for victims they can control, using a variety of confrontation-provoking behaviors. When dealing with such people the important message to send is "I will not be bullied, drawn into stupid arguments, insulted or tolerate verbal abuse". In short, what you are saying is "What you're doing isn't going to work with me". Once aggressive people realize that they aren't going to be able to control you (make you angry or upset), they are more likely to change their behavior.

Principle 10: Don't take the bait

People will often employ verbal strategies that have a purpose of drawing you into responding in emotional ways. When you take the bait you have given up control of the conversation. Worse, you have given up control to someone who probably doesn't have your best interests at heart.

People often use blame or attack your competence or integrity as a means to get you to defend yourself. Expressions such as "You just don't care!", "This whole thing is your fault!", "I want to talk to someone who knows what they're doing!", or "You people are all alike!", are typical examples of this. These attacks are best ignored. One tactic is to acknowledge the other person's feelings, then refocus or move on to the issue you need to deal with.