De-escalating aggressive behaviours

Tactical Assertive Communication

Gerald Pauschmann
Dealing with people who are angry can be difficult, particularly for those with little experience of doing so in a way that defuses the situation. New staff learn by watching others and by asking their preceptors questions about the situations they encounter.

On occasion, they will be confronted by new and unfamiliar events, but will lack the internal resources or experience to devise a plan of action to deal with them. Such situations could include being confronted with an angry customer, visitor or colleague.

**PROBLEM BASED APPROACHES**

Problem-based approaches are said to lend themselves better to conflict resolution, through development of personal insight and greater interpersonal skills awareness (Seren and Ustun, 2008).
Workshop Outcomes

Understanding that there needs to be a good balance between communication and being aware of the tools and ‘tricks of the trade’ to deal with some of these issues. This needs to be an essential learning outcome (it was noted that although some officers have useful tactics, these strategies are not always documented so there is very little reference material available for new or existing officers).

Being aware of their surroundings to position themselves so they are not vulnerable to physical attack

Adopt de-escalation techniques (designed to prevent an aggressive or violent incident)

Learn ‘Calming’ communication

Learn to avoid language that escalates aggression

Practice the three ‘R’s – Response – Reaction – Reflex

Get to know the practical tips around being vigilant

Skills to deal with the abuse to soften the approach

Avoiding language that increases anxiety (e.g. ‘Complaint’ or ‘Unfortunately’ etc)

Being aware that the role of the officer can provoke a ‘siege’ mentality

Self-protection

Using assertive and de-escalating language (not manipulative, passive, aggressive or sarcastic language)

Develop a sense of ‘appropriate’ resilience eg, not always good to ‘fight fire with fire’

Using negotiation tactics to meet the needs of what your responsibilities are and the needs of the customers

Applying tactics to disarm aggressive communication
Course methodology

This workshop will give all Local City Council participants the understanding of what they say and do can greatly impact the response they get from their customers.

This is a highly interactive and participative workshop to highlight techniques to diffuse many confronting and aggressive situations.

All participants will also have an opportunity to practise certain scenarios to refine their assertion skills.

Whether it’s Local law, education system, healthcare institution, corrections facility, public transit operation or any business entity that deals with the public.

If conflict and crisis are handled poorly in interactions with the public, it can lead to complaints, liability, and physical harm. Within a team, it can diminish performance, morale and safety and, within a family or with friends, it can ruin relationships.

I have been teaching organisations how to better manage conflict for over 25 years.

Our training is focused on the point of impact the short period of time when a disagreement or insult can escalate to conflict and on to emotional and/or physical violence.

During the workshop our structure of tactics are able to:
Predict, prevent and mitigate violence
De-escalate anger and resistance
Control crisis and aggression
Avert verbal and physical attacks
Provide exceptional customer service

Our goal is for our clients to establish and maintain a professional culture that is incompatible with violence a social contract where both clients and internal staff are treated with dignity.

Local government employees deserve the training in non-escalation and de-escalation they need to stay safe and serve our communities.

Gerald
Dangerous Situations

Our first PRIORITY

WE DON'T WANT NO HEROES

Stay safe

The safety of any Council, whether staff, contractors or freelance, is paramount. No hero action is worth a life.

While some conflict and other dangerous environments involves an element of risk, you must avoid obvious danger and not take unreasonable risks.

You may move into a dangerous environment only with the authorisation of your superior.

Do not remain alone in a dangerous situation.

If caught in a situation where people are acting in a threatening manner, punching walls, slamming fists on tables and so on, try to stay relaxed and act friendly. Avoid excessive eye contact. Aggressive or nervous behaviour on your part is likely to be counter-productive.

Have cigarettes or other small luxuries you can use as an icebreaker nearby. In most cases, the aggressor may ask for a cigarette.

Being exposed to a dangerous situation, either as primary or secondary reasons, can be traumatic. Such reactions are normal and assistance is available through the HR manager. Do not hesitate to seek this assistance if you think you would benefit. It will remain confidential.
So...

What are your customers NOT HAPPY with
Identifying anger in others

**ACTIONS OR RESPONSES**

Anger is not in itself always bad – it is a feeling or emotion, often a response to a perceived negative situation. We all get angry at times and sometimes this can lead to positive outcomes. Anger can dissipate or escalate; which way the situation goes may be determined by the actions or responses of the council employee.

**BE AWARE OF THE WARNING SIGNS**

People become angry for different reasons, and the way it is manifested varies between individuals and situations, so it can be difficult to recognise the extent to which someone is angry. There will often be indications of the depth of anger, but these may be subtle; for example, one person might sulk or become uncharacteristically quiet, while another might display agitated behaviour or verbal hostility. It is important to be aware of the warning signs and act accordingly. If there are few outward signs of anger, it does not necessarily mean that the potential for a dangerous escalation is less.

**STOP USING THE DIRECT QUESTION ‘WHY’**

Managing the anger of people who are highly unreasonable requires a specific skill set and approach. One immediate strategy that significantly helps reduce anger in these people is to stop using the direct question “why”, as the word can be challenging to them – their cognitive impairment may leave them unable to elicit the reasons for their fear or anger.
Causes of anger

UNMET NEEDS...

The cause of anger is almost always an unmet need – for control, information, to be listened to, to feel safe or to be pain-free; it may have psychological antecedents or be triggered by fear.

MANIFESTATION OF ANGER CAN ALSO BE AFFECTED BY NEGATIVE REACTIONS FROM PERCEIVED AUTHORITY FIGURES

Even the most placid individuals can experience frustration in an unfamiliar environment in which they perceive things to be beyond their control. For example, frustration and fear can be triggered when people are asked to provide information.

Fear and its associated anger response may act as a form of defence against the perceived threat to their autonomy or reduced control over a situation.

“...RESPONSES THAT APPEAR UNSYMPATHETIC OR INSENSITIVE”

This is exacerbated when a person tries to understand the situation and encounters staff responses that appear unsympathetic or insensitive. In busy environments, such as libraries or customer service counter, staff have less time to notice the subtle signals that indicate when a person is becoming frustrated or fearful;
Managing anger

BE ASSERTIVE IN YOUR APPROACH

It is essential for professional operators to be assertive in their approach to an angry person. People often wrongly confuse assertive behaviour with aggressive behaviour.

Assertiveness is a way of behaving in an open, honest manner to communicate feelings, thoughts and beliefs without violating the feelings, thoughts and beliefs of others (Adam and Taylor, 2014).

SO, WHAT ESCALATES A SITUATION

An aggressive or passive response to anger might result in an escalation of the situation.

Professional operators need to be aware of themselves and how they are presenting to customers who appear angry by maintaining eye contact, a clear, calm voice and showing attentiveness; their posture should be non-threatening, relaxed and open.

PRESENT AS CARING AND WILLING TO HELP

We also need to be aware of the customer, observing changes in behaviour or other signs of escalation or de-escalation, and to react accordingly. While this may be difficult, it is important to present as caring and willing to help, rather than as an authority figure and representative of the organisation.
A new model for de-escalating aggressive behaviour -

LOWLINE

The LOWLINE theoretical model contains elements for effective listening. It evolved as a distillation of common approaches to skilled communication:

LISTEN

OFFER

WAIT

LOOK

INCLINE

NOD

So What is LOWLINE

- An approach based upon established principles in communication and empathetic listening to help resolve difficult situations.
- Takes the position that:
  - Anger may not be bad
  - Anger can be an indication of an unmet need
  - Anger is a natural part of the grieving process
  - Anger can be a manifestation of fear

Things you can do to handle someone else’s anger

- Agree with them
- Remain calm
- Make an effort to open up the communication
- Validate their concerns
- No humour

Respond – Redirect - Outcome

- Natural first response
- Professional first response
- Redirect
- Professional second response to reality

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Listen

SAYING NOTHING CAN BE POWERFUL

It might be tempting to make statements early in the engagement, but saying nothing can be powerful at the beginning of the de-escalation process. What constitutes good communication skills – in other words, active listening – is not simply hearing the words being said by the person who is angry. Skilled listening can make it possible to pre-empt an angry outburst by looking for, or reading, non-verbal signals, or by listening to paraverbal communication, that is, tone, inflection and volume.

Customers are unlikely to have chosen to be in their relatively vulnerable situation; it is likely they might be fearful, so anger may be the response.

Active listening uses non-directive, non-intrusive verbal feedback to let angry people know they are being paid attention to. The use of open-ended questions is an effective active listening technique.

Questions such as “can you tell me more about that?”; “what happened after that?”; and “do you have other thoughts and feelings about that?” can help the person explore the cause of the anger and possible solutions. Anything that causes the customer to explain, rather than argue, would help lower the confrontation level.
Offer
As professionals, we should offer reflective comments, which should be brief and use the words spoken by the angry customer. Unless they acknowledge that the customer is feeling angry, it is unlikely that they would be able to work together to deal with the anger.

Therefore, when a customer appears to be angry or is demonstrating early signs of anger, it is important for staff to notice it and to state what they see or hear, so the customer can be sure their feelings are being taken seriously.

At this stage, it is wise to avoid comments that could be seen as devaluing, such as “I can’t see why you are angry”, because that is likely to inflame the situation. It is better to say, for example: “I notice you are angry.” (see stage one of the figure 8)

DO NOT ARGUE, GIVE ADVICE OR (VERBALLY) DEFEND YOURSELF

After acknowledging the anger, staff should ask what the angry person perceives to be the cause. People in this situation might not be able to pinpoint the cause, but simply respond that they “felt unease” about something. Nonetheless, they need the opportunity to explore their feelings, rather than allow these to fester and worsen. A useful technique is to offer them the opportunity to air their feelings. This involves letting them speak, giving them a chance to ventilate and discharge their frustration harmlessly. While customers do this, staff should not argue, give advice or defend themselves, but should give customers space to continue. The purpose is to let them “blow off steam”, providing the space to express their anger and thereby decrease it.
Wait

DO NOT INTERRUPT

Staff should avoid the temptation to fill the void with words. If the situation feels uncomfortable, a good technique is to count slowly down from 10. That is usually more than long enough for the silence to be broken.

Look

UNREMITTING STARES SHOULD BE AVOIDED

Although eye contact is important, it should be appropriate to the customer. We should consider how much direct contact is likely to be acceptable. For example, while it is important to establish eye contact, unremitting stares should be avoided. It is essential to remember that facial expressions can give a lot away: smile, if appropriate, and maintain a neutral expression if not.

Incline

Inclining the head is useful to affirm interest. A slightly inclined head often serves to present a non-threatening posture.

Nod

An occasional and appropriate nod can demonstrate continued attention and a willingness to listen without interrupting.

Express

We should express a desire to understand/express empathy. It is important to keep it brief, for example, by saying “I expect that made you feel worse”, “you must have felt isolated” or “I can appreciate why you felt that way”.

Paraphrasing can be an effective way to express empathy. (see stage two of the figure 8)

This involves feeding back that which the person said has been heard, but using different words. In a situation that involves dealing with an angry person, paraphrasing communicates that their concerns are being taken seriously. After paraphrasing, it is helpful to let them know that their story has been heard by summarising the content of the encounter. This also enables the nurse to check information and to amend understanding.
Phrases you could use depending on the situation

I can help you with that but I need you to hear me out

Let me see if I heard you correctly

Tell me what has got you so upset

Will you allow me to try to help you with your concerns

I would if I could but I’m not authorised to do that

I would really like to help you with that but only the courts can do that

I want to work with you but I need you to be cooperative.
The next stage

After their anger has been de-escalated, we should encourage customers to maintain ownership, but offer appropriate support and advice, such as

“what can we do to resolve this?”

Staff should identify how angry customers would like the cause or focus of their anger to be dealt with, and by whom. For example, they might ask to speak with a senior member of staff to complain about something. Equally, what they might really be seeking is some measure that their concerns are being dealt with and not merely paid lip service to.

_Having someone listen to their concerns and offer a way to deal with them may be sufficient to de-escalate their anger._

All options should be considered. There is rarely a single way of reaching a solution, but it is essential **not to promise** unachievable solutions. Given that adults are generally used to making decisions for themselves, offering them a range of options enables them to take an active part in solving the problem or, at least, reducing their feelings of anger.

Good relationships sometimes come out of strained beginnings, and customers are likely to feel more appreciative towards a staff member when they have shared an experience that has had a satisfactory resolution. Any effective strategies should be shared with colleagues to reduce the risk of recurrence.

_It is essential to document the event and review the situation with other senior staff._

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**Natural skill at verbal de-escalation exists on a continuum.**

However, almost anyone can learn de-escalation techniques and use them successfully if he is well trained and adopts a certain skill set.

The most essential skill is a **good attitude**, starting with **positive regard** for the customer and the capacity for **empathy**.

Staff should be able to recognize that the customer is doing the best they can under ‘the circumstances’, ie, the customer is experiencing difficulty in **conforming** to what is expected of him.

You may also need to be skilled at recognising that the inability to conform is due to either cognitive impairment—for example, delirium, psychosis, intoxication, and intellectual disability—or the customers lack of the skills needed to effectively get his needs met.
What about your own feelings?

Being involved in dealing with an anger event is enough to affect how staff feel on a personal level. Therefore, it is always helpful for you to debrief after the event and to use what you have experienced to increase your portfolio of understanding for the future. This can be done with colleagues or individually, but a structured reflection is useful and can be used as revalidation evidence. This could include consideration of the following questions:

- What happened? Staff should think about who was involved, what was happening before and consider if there were any obvious triggers;
- How did you feel at the time? You should explore how you felt when you first became aware of the anger;
- Was the situation a surprise – did it seem unreasonable at the time?
- How do you feel now? Hindsight is only of benefit if we learn from it. We should think about how we feel after dealing with the person and their concerns. After having time to reflect, what level of personal hurt did you feel, for example, if the factors that caused the customers anger were outside of their control?
- What advice would you offer to a newly qualified colleague in a similar situation?

When you approach agitated customers, you must monitor your own emotional and physiologic response so as to remain calm and, therefore, be capable of performing verbal de-escalation.
Scenario:

Identifying your first response:

I am going to present to you some common phrases that your customers use in highly confrontational situations. Your first response is what I am after, I don't want you to analyse your response, just the first thing that comes to mind.

1. I pay your wages

2. You're not a real council

3. You have no idea what it is like to raise 2 children

4. Why don’t you get a real job?

5. You’re a racist

6. You are only concerned about revenue raising
What would you say?

• You can’t tell me what to do
  You’re right, no one can tell you what to do

• I pay your wages
  And I would like to acknowledge that

• I know the Mayor
  And I would like to acknowledge that

• You’re a RACIST
  I take great offence with that comment. I have been nothing but respectful during this conversation

• You people are all the same
  I am sorry that you didn’t get the outcome you were after and I know you are not making this personal

• This is our land (rightful owners)
  And I would like to acknowledge that

• You have NO idea what it’s like to bring up children these days
  I can only imagine how tough it is for you
Using de-escalation techniques effectively

The number of people who are classified under the umbrella term 'social, emotional and mental health' (SEMH) needs in mainstream society has increased considerably in recent years.

De-escalation techniques go against our natural fight-or-flight reflexes. Remaining calm and professionally detached is not natural and therefore it is a skill that will need to be practised. We need to retrain ourselves to respond in a different way when a challenging situation occurs.

Reasoning with an angry person is sometimes not possible but, in our role as professional service providers, this is often our immediate response.

Our aim instead should be to reduce the level of agitation so discussion then becomes an option and a better outcome is achieved.

De-escalation techniques are most successful when used early, before the customer becomes physically aggressive. To do this, it is necessary to be aware of and spot early signs of agitation such as:

- balled fists
- fidgeting
- shaking
- ‘eye-balling’ another child
- head thrust forward
- clenched jaw
- speech becoming more rapid or high-pitched.

These signs should not be ignored and you should never turn your back on an angry person in the hope that they just calm down.
Pacing
Pacing is a cycle of feeding off someone’s emotions and escalating. If the customer can make you as angry as them, it gives them permission to become even angrier and the customer can justify their own hostility.

POWER Vs CONTROL

You may not always know what you are going to do, but keep in your head what you are not going to do. When the customer has least control, it is time for us to have the most control over themselves.

Non-verbal techniques
Calm can be just as contagious as fear and must be communicated to the customer.

Approximately 55% of what we communicate is through physiology, 38% is through the tone of our voice and just 7% is through the words that we use. It is useful to remember these proportions when you are trying to de-escalate.

Techniques include the following.

Appear calm and self-assured
Make sure you are not displaying the same signs of agitation that can be seen in the customer: unclench your fists, do not hold eye contact and avoid standing square to the person.

Maintain a neutral facial expression
Even our eyebrows can indicate we are surprised or angry, and similarly our mouths can betray our emotions unwittingly. Another natural reaction we often have when under stress is to smirk or giggle, which must be controlled.
Allow space
Entering a person’s personal space can be useful to refocus on a task when the situation is calm, but when a customer is agitated this can indicate aggression and escalate the situation. Staying some distance away will also help keep you safe should the person become physically aggressive.

Control your breathing
When we are stressed, angry or tense, our breathing becomes more shallow and rapid. If we take deeper, slower breaths, this will not only help keep us calm, but the person will begin to match our own breathing pattern. It can sometimes help to match the customers breathing initially then gradually slow it down.

Verbal strategies

Lower your voice and keep your tone even.
It is hard to have an argument with someone who is not responding aggressively back to you.

Distraction and diversion are extremely useful.
When a person is aggressive, they are responding with their own fight-or-flight instincts and not thinking about their actions.

Distract them and engage their thinking brain, perhaps by changing the subject or commenting on something that is happening elsewhere.

Give choices, repeat these using the figure 8 technique if necessary, and do not get drawn into secondary behaviours such as arguing back, which are designed to distract or upset you.

Acknowledging the person’s feelings shows that you have listened to them, and can be crucial when diffusing a situation; for example, ‘It must be really difficult for you ... thank you for letting me know’.

Use words and phrases that de-escalate, such as:
- I wonder if...
- let’s try...
- it seems like...
- maybe we can...
- tell the person what you want them to do rather than what you do not want them to do; for example, ‘I want you to stop yelling’ rather than ‘stop yelling at me’.
- give the person take-up time following any direction and avoid backing them into a corner, either verbally or physically.
Things to avoid

- Do not make threats you cannot carry through, such as threatening to not help the customer.
- Do not be defensive or take it personally. What is being said may seem insulting and directed at you, but this level of aggression is not really about you.
- Do not use humour unless you are sure it will help and you have a very good relationship with the customer.
- Do not use sarcasm or humiliate the customer.

Sometimes, no matter how carefully and skillfully you try to de-escalate a situation, it may still reach crisis point. Know your systems for summoning help and moving bystanders to safety.

After any outburst or incident, always make time to debrief, repair and rebuild, or the relationship will flounder and continue to deteriorate.

Problem-solve the situation and teach new behaviours where needed. Ensure any sanctions are appropriate to what has happened and remember that it is the certainty that behaviour is challenged that is important rather than the severity of what happens.

**De-escalating conflicts is one of the most important skills to model.**
So why do people behave the way they do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where does our <strong>aggression</strong> stem from?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• DNA?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Upbringing</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Learned</td>
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<td>• Past experiences</td>
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<td>• Circumstances</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Cultural</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Why are people <strong>ANGRY</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional symptoms</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A desire to escape from the situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Irritation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sadness or depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Resentment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Desire to lash out verbally</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Desire to lash out physically.</td>
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For us to change or modify the way we perceive things and to see them from the customers' point of view, we need to carefully examine this model below.

* Paradigm: The way we see, understand, and interpret the world; it’s our mental map.

The results we _ _ _ in life depend on what we _ _. What we _ _ _ in life depends on how we _ _ _ the world around us.
**Procedure for an escalating situation**

There are those instances where one or both of the people in a conflict are not acting rational, and the conflict has escalated, SOMETIMES RESULTING IN HOSTILE AND VIOLENT SITUATIONS

- Is the other person yelling at you? Calling you names?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Don't yell back.</th>
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<tr>
<td>I would like to talk about this situation. Can you tell me what is happening</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At this stage I am the only person in front of you who wants to help you, and yelling at me is not helping. How do you want to do this?

| I know you are upset with the department handling your claim. I know this is extremely important for you, and I will make it a priority to find out what there is I can do. |

**LEARNING THE FIGURE 8**

The objective here is to remain as a mediator between the customer and council

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[Diagram of the Figure 8 process]

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The situation is this
Here’s the thing
The legislation
The law
You cannot

**REALITY**

**FEEL**

**ACTION**

**REPHRASE**

Council

You

But

So you need to listen carefully
This is what we are going to do
I suggest that you

And you think
what you would like me to do is...
So what you are telling me is...
The way you see things is....

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Designed and Developed by Gerald Pauschmann 2017
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If the situation continues to get out of control WALK AWAY - Especially if you feel that things are going to get physical. You can always revisit when both parties are calm and collected.

If someone hits you, then yes, defend yourself. However, do not continue on longer than you have to. Don’t try to win a physical fight, escape as quickly as you can, find a safe place, and seek help. You should never let someone hitting you just slide. Call security, the police, talk to the manager, tell your workmates, whatever the situation calls for.

Final thoughts on diffusing conflict:

- If you feel unsafe, get help, call the police. You need to put your personal safety first.
- If you can't resolve a problem on your own, get someone to moderate.
- If someone is emotionally, verbally, physically abusive towards you, they have no place in your life, WALK AWAY.
- During a conflict, treat others how you would like to be treated.
- Unless the person causing you some type of harm, you should always try to work out a solution, it is never wise to burn your bridges.

The first rule in dealing with someone who’s getting angry or frightened is to keep your voice low in pitch. Higher pitches signal excitement, and will only fuel the person’s growing emotions. Keeping at a low volume is good, too. Sometimes you can calm people down just by talking at a normal volume.

**Another TAC tip**

Take responsibility for your actions. People will get annoyed with you on a regular basis if you cannot own up to mistakes. You want those who you care about to fess up to their mistakes. Otherwise, if someone always denies that they did something wrong it's basically saying "I did nothing wrong, you did everything wrong," which is hurtful, and, not true.

Acknowledge the other person's feelings and don’t get defensive. For example, "I know you are upset with the department handling your claim. I am very sorry, It is extremely important for you, and I will make it a priority."

Compromise. Try to find a solution to the problem that you are both satisfied with. This is the biggest part of that "give and take" idea. Sometimes, its worth it to suck it up to put the flames out in a conflict. You have to pick your battles.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Remember:</th>
<th>Your response: (continued)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t take the BAIT</td>
<td>Deal with the difficult behaviour, not the person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t get drawn into the other person’s power games</td>
<td>Respond to the difficult behaviour rather than reacting to it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain your self control</td>
<td>Choose appropriate responses to the other person’s behaviour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clarify any vague or general statements to determine just what the other person is saying</td>
<td>1. Don’t react to emotional outbursts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Allow people to let off steam</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Listen actively &amp; acknowledge what is being said</td>
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<td>4. Explain, offer alternatives</td>
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How we behave during stressful conversations

There are six main characteristics of assertive communication. These are:

- eye contact: demonstrates interest, shows sincerity
- body posture: congruent body language will improve the significance of the message
- gestures: appropriate gestures help to add emphasis
- voice: a level, well modulated tone is more convincing and acceptable, and is not intimidating
- timing: use your judgement to maximise receptivity and impact
- content: how, where and when you choose to comment is probably more important than WHAT you say

Some Don'ts when handling an aggressive person

1. First and foremost, don't take their behaviour personally. Most of them behave in a difficult manner habitually and their attitude is not directed specifically towards you alone.

2. Don't try to fight with them. Fighting with them may only complicate matters further and can pave the way for a bigger argument.

3. Don't try to win the argument: Don't approach the argument with the mindset of winning it and proving the other person wrong. You may prove them wrong but that is unlikely to change their future behaviour. Instead of trying to win the argument, try to work towards a reasonable solution which will be in the best interests of everyone concerned. Remember your goal is simply to assertively express your own opinion, not try and win a battle of right and wrong.
Being aware of your surroundings and ensuring your own safety:

Prior to meeting a person (in the case of an external site eg house, business, food premise or local parks etc, let a colleague or supervisor know that you may be meeting with a potentially hostile person, so that your colleague may be ready to call for help whether it be the police or others for assistance.

Consider holding the meeting in a more public arena, perhaps having another colleague or supervisor in the meeting with the person.

If you decide to meet with the person privately, keep your door open when meeting with a potentially hostile person.

Arrange your office furniture so that you have a clear path to the door to exit if need be, and the other person won’t be as easily able to block your path.

If a person becomes aggressive or seems increasingly agitated, first ensure your own safety. Take long, deep breaths to stay as calm as possible.

DO:

It is generally helpful to meet with a disruptive person in private. Reduce stimulation. This provides an opportunity for the faculty or staff to address issues directly without interruption or shaming the person.

Use low, deeper tones, and avoid raising your voice or talking too fast.

Use gentle, soft voice, speaking slowly and confidently.

Allow the person to tell you what is upsetting them.

Acknowledge the person’s strengths (e.g., good attendance, desire to perform well, etc.)

Stay calm and paraphrase your understanding of the person’s experiences. Set aside your own thoughts and responses and focus on what you are hearing.

Validate the person’s possible emotions and what is upsetting them.

Be specific and gentle, but firmly directive about the behavior that you will accept. For example, “Please sit down.” Or, “Please lower your voice and do not scream at me.” Or, “Please do not thrash your arms like that. Please keep them lowered.”
Explain your intent before making any moves (e.g., “I’d like to get some water. Would you like some?” Or, I’m going to move behind you to close that window.)

Take deep breaths, slowing down your breathing so that you remain calm.

If the tension in the room is not dissipating, consider taking a quick break. (Apologise in a calm tone for needing to step out just for a couple of minutes, stating for example that you would like to consult with a supervisor; that you would like to get a glass of water, and offer one to the person; etc.)

Ask the person what would be helpful from you.

Ask for permission to problem-solve the issue. The person may just be venting and may not want you to problem-solve with them.

Summarize what the person has said, and summarize any agreed upon resolutions.

**Do NOT:**

Do not argue. When a person is already agitated or angry, he/she may escalate if they do not feel heard. Even if you are correct, arguing at this point will likely increase aggression. It is more helpful to show that you heard them and to de-escalate than to be correct.

Do not focus on the person, and do not use adjectives or labels to describe the person. Instead, do focus on the specific behaviour.

Do not restrict the person’s movement. If he/she wants to stand, allow them.

Do not corner them.

Do not meet behind closed door if you foresee possible danger.

Do not touch the person or make sudden moves.

Do not threaten the person. Threatening could increase someone’s fear, which could prompt defense or aggression.

Do not press for explanation about their behaviour. Avoid “why” questions; these tend to increase a person’s defenses.

Do not take the person’s behaviour or remarks personally. Disruptive or aggressive behaviour generally results from other life problems.
When confronted with difficult situations the words, tone and non verbal language are vital to diffuse many (if not all) negative behaviours.

How would you respond?

Local Law Services

Scenario 1

A parking officer attended a school to conduct a school parking patrol. The officer located a Holden utility parked in a bus zone. Ample legal parking was available, including nearly all the marked parking bays outside the school. The vehicle was unattended so the parking officer issued an infringement notice to the vehicle for the offence of "Stopping in a bus zone" and placed it under the windscreen wiper of the vehicle. A couple of minutes later a male person approached the officer. The male person was agitated and demanded to know why a ticket was issued. The officer explained to the male person that the vehicle was in a bus zone and that was the reason for the ticket being issued. The male person then abused the officer and threw the ticket into the officer's face. The male person then returned to the vehicle and drove it into one of the marked parking bays outside the school, parked it and then returned to the worksite.

Scenario 2

A Local Law Officer has been granted a Court Order by a Magistrate to enter a property and perform work. The officer has arrived at the front of the property with the police and the contractors. The male owner of the property is waiting at the front gate and appears agitated. As the officer approaches the gate, the male owner starts shouting and swearing denying anybody entry. The officer can smell alcohol on the male but needs to explain the Court Order and perform the work required. The owner is very noisy and very disruptive.

Scenario 3

A Local Law Officer arrives at a boat ramp where both boat trailers and vehicles share the same parking area. The boat trailer parks are set aside for vehicles with boat trailers only and are not able to be used by normal vehicles, however, on your arrival, it is evident that the weather conditions are not favourable for boaties, and vehicles without trailers have decided to park in the 'trailers only' bays. It is your position to enforce these areas in accordance with the signs. Although some strategies have been implemented to minimise the risk to officers, some of the offenders see your uniform and give you a mouthful of abuse and yell racist remarks, including what country you should take your 'coloured ass' to. The exchange of words gets heated and now you are surrounded by a mob of angry visitors/
Environmental Health Compliance

Scenario 1

An Environmental Health Officer (EHO) is inspecting a food premises and has noted several serious issues. When the EHO starts talking to the business owner about the issues he starts throwing pots and bowls around the kitchen (not near the EHO) making loud noises and shouting about how he has been cooking for years and hasn't made anyone sick, Council 'idiots' have no idea how to run a kitchen and that the EHO doesn't understand what small business has to put up with.

Scenario 2

One complainant has lodged several complaints about noise and light from a shopping centre that is next to her property. She has stated several times during phone conversations with the EHO investigating the nuisance that the noise keeps her young daughter awake. The EHO has worked with a Development Compliance Officer (DCO) to investigate the complaint. No DA conditions have been breached. The EHO has assessed the noise and light and determined that neither are causing unlawful environmental nuisance. When the EHO advises the complainant that no action will be taken, she yells at the EHO 'how would you like it if I came to your house and kept your kids awake or woke them up at all hours of the night … I'm going to find out where you live and make you understand just how hard it is for people to cope with no sleep'.

Scenario 3

A young EHO is inspecting a motor vehicle workshop. The owner is present, along with a few mechanics and an apprentice. Every time the EHO asks the owner a question he plays the situation up, showing off to his staff, implying that the young EHO doesn't know what he's doing. He is very patronising to the EHO throughout the inspection including comments that the EHO doesn't know the first thing about mechanics, the EHO should go back to the office because he/she may actually know what a pencil sharpener does, that young people that go to uni have no understanding of the real world, etc. During the inspection the EHO has noted a few minor issues and wants to speak to the owner about them, but as soon as the EHO starts the owner says 'you've got to be kidding, you don't know the first thing about mechanics and you expect me to listen to you'.
Development & Building Compliance

Scenario 1

A customer has lodged a request in regards to an illegal carport in the front 6 metres and that it encroaches onto her property. The officer investigates and as it turns out, there is a neighbourhood dispute going on. However it was substantiated that the carport is illegal. The resident decided, after all the stress in the past, to remove the structure. Before she started executing the work, she comes back to council and asks if it is permissible to have a part of it (rear), to keep a screen towards her dwelling. Council agreed and the work has been executed. During the whole process the customer has been kept informed. However, the investigating officers still received calls in regards to encroachment and to support her claim, it now includes natural stones within the joined retaining wall at the common boundary.

The matter was investigated again and found no issues. The customer was advised of the outcome. However, the customer still rang a few times and got very verbal on the phone including the threat to engage the press. The phone calls have been concluded by suddenly hanging up.

Scenario 2

Council received a request to investigate an unfenced pool. Two officers visit the property and after knocking at the door, it has been answered by a female, who identifies herself as one of the property owners. The officers identify themselves and explained the reason of the visit. It has been asked for permission to inspect the pool with her. She agrees and an inspection has been conducted. The pool had no fence! It has been explained to her what is required by the applicable Standards and Regulations. Additionally it has been explained that temporary safety is required within 48 hours and on how this can be achieved. Later on the same day, the investigating officer receives a call of the upset husband, who states that the investigating officer came onto the property without identifying himself and just walking to the back towards the pool without permission. The officer stated that he was accompanied by a colleague and that his wife provided permission. This was dismissed by stating the officer is not telling the truth.

Scenario 3

Council had reports of the illegal commercial use of a property without a development permit. After refusal by the property owner to enter and inspect and advising him what the general process is, a warrant has been obtained by the courts. On the day of the execution, officers from various departments attended to perform a joint inspection. Arriving at the premises, only the tenant and his employees are present. He asks the Council officers to wait until the property owner comes. He lives just around the corner. The owner turns up and approaches in his car with a very aggressive speed towards the officers. He jumped out of the car and was informed about the execution of warrant. He still refuses the execution and denies the right for council's officers to be present at his property. The QPS was called attend and assist enforcing the warrant. While waiting for the QPS a second car turned up at high speed as well. A female jumped out of the car and ran towards the council vehicle. She tried to open the door (was locked) and started using abusive language. She makes the claim that the car now belongs to her, it's on her property. She comes up to the officers and started threatening them by stating that she will 'sue their ass off'. She also starts pointing at the jewellery of the officers and states that this will belong to her after she is finished with the individual officers. She gets hold of a camera from one officer, takes the batteries out and throws them over the fence.
Animal Management

Scenario 1

An officer has attended a property as we have an alleged complainant of the dog on the property jumping the fence and escaping. When the officer arrives at the property they see the fence on the property is only 1.2m in height and the dog is an adult Great Dane. The officer has done a prior check of the property and found that the dog is registered. With this knowledge the officer has only one offence to deal with and this is the fence height will need to be raised to 1.8 m as per section 20 (C) Subordinate Local Law No. 4.1.

The officer needs to make it clear to the dog owner that the dog causes a nuisance by wandering the street and could pose a threat to public safety if it is running loose on the road. It is a requirement as stated in section 20 (C) Subordinate Local Law No. 4.1 that all dogs be contained if over 10kg in a 1.2m height enclosure unless they can jump that and if so then they must construct a 1.8m height fence to contain the dog.

NOTE: Comments that are often thrown at officers:

- No money to build the enclosure
- The dog owner has not seen it escape.
- Wants to know who the complainant is.
- The officer gets told they have no rights to be on the property and to come back with a warrant.
- Even if the dog gets out it wont hurt anyone etc.

Scenario 2

1 x dog, not registered, not micro chipped and a female entire dog.

This dog was impounded off the street (public place) by an authorised council officer on Monday.

The dog owner has seen a photo of his dog on council’s website and after contacting Customer Service on Tuesday has arrived at the pound to formerly identify his dog, up until this time fees had not been enquired about and not discussed with the owner.

The Animal Services Officer (ASO) then explains the fees to the dog owner. The dog owner does not appear happy, he tries to explain that he wants to keep the entire as it is a pure bred dog that he wants to breed from.

To be charged $360 impound fee (entire) plus $115 Registration, plus Micro chipping $29, plus 1 night sustenance $ 25, total $529, the option to desex the dog was given but declined as he wishes to breed from the dog.

Desexing total $245.00 including registration m/chipping and sustenance

The ASO then explains the requirements for a breeders permit if he wishes to become a breeder under LL4 & 9, permit cost $220

Dog owner then becomes very upset as he believes the fees are outrageous and how can we possibly justify charging him with that when we’ve only had the dog overnight and where was he going to get that sort of money from. Also a friend got a payment plan when his dog was impounded, I want a payment plan. Payment plans are no longer offered.

Scenario 3
You are walking along a pavement adjacent to an ‘off leash area’ and you notice a gentleman exercising his dog off leash along that pathway, and not within the ‘off leash area’. You bend down to obtain the registration tag of the dog and was pushed to the ground by the gentleman. The gentleman also grabbed your arm in an attempt to take you over to the signage. The gentleman refused to provide his name and address details.