

Dear Dr. Mazie,

I'm working on a project that has faced a lot of opposition, and the landowners have been particularly angry and difficult to deal with. I'm not sure I've been handling it as well as I should. Do you have some techniques for helping me handle these situations more professionally?

Johnny in Indianapolis



Whether they are landowners, neighbors or coworkers, difficult people can test the patience of even the most highly-skilled professional. Most right of way agents accept the fact that some negotiations are just going to be difficult. This may be the result of a route selection that's inconvenient or the simple fact that many landowners just don't want an easement on their property. Let's face it, if a person is forced to give up their property and relocate, we should be able to empathize with them. After all, it's our project that is causing the disruption and is negatively impacting their life.

However, there are also times when a landowner becomes angry for no clear reason. Perhaps they have had a negative experience with another agent in the past. Or maybe they recently lost their job or have other personal problems. While it's not the agent's job to probe into a landowner's personal problems, knowing that their behavior is not associated with you or the project can certainly help you deal with their behavior more effectively.

Here are some suggestions for working through anger-fueled situations:

Never take it personally: Recognize that the right of way agent is often seen as an easy target. The landowner may be so distraught that they overreact without realizing that their behavior is inappropriate. If this happens, the agent may want to probe a bit. In a professional manner, ask if you have said or done something wrong. Just asking will likely get them to open up and explain their situation. They may admit that their

outburst has nothing to do with you and even apologize. Giving them a forum to express their feelings can go a long way in furthering your efforts.

Do not overreact: A right of way agent should have exceptional control over their emotions. Difficult people have been known to bait others into an argument with verbal attacks, personal affronts and other manipulative tricks. An agent's best strategy is to stay calm, handle the landowner with the utmost respect and not engage in a battle of words. Professionalism is always the key.

Ask questions: If a person is verbally attacking you, address the situation by saying something like, "I see you are upset, and I would like to get a better understanding of your concerns." Then ask them to explain exactly what they are upset about, and be sure to listen carefully. If an angry person is known for their outbursts, they may feel ignored by the people around them and just need some attention. If they believe you genuinely care about their needs and concerns, they are likely to feel more valued and become willing to work more collaboratively.

Confront false impressions and misunderstandings: In speaking with landowners, agents oftentimes hear misconceptions based on partial facts, rumors or misleading media coverage. Whatever the source, it's essential for the agent to use facts to clarify the situation. In this case, it helps to have documentation that verifies the facts. More importantly, the landowner must

be able to save face. This means the facts must be presented objectively and tactfully, and in no way should the landowner feel judged.

Deal with anger quickly: Anger can breed more anger, especially if ignored. Try using a professional and authoritative manner to set a boundary early on. Say something like, "Mr. Smith, I came here to work with you in good faith, but this is impossible when you are shouting at me. My goal is to get you a fair agreement that works for both of us, and I am willing to take as much time as needed to hear all your concerns." If this doesn't work and they continue yelling, tell them, "Mr. Smith, I'm leaving now and will give you a call in a couple of days so we can set up another appointment." Then leave quickly and without further conversation. By handling a bad situation swiftly, you are setting a firm boundary. Typically, this ensures a more productive discussion on your next visit.

Dealing with a difficult or angry person is challenging at best. Yet, by staying focused on your goal and maintaining a calm and professional demeanor, many a bad situation can be turned around.

A nationally recognized speaker, workshop leader and trainer, Dr. Mazie Leftwich, Psy.D has a clinical background in applied psychology with expertise in organizational and personal development. She is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and team excellence programs.

