The situation will be like emotional way, you'll lose control, you'll lose your power, and this positioning, and start reacting to the moment is helping him with his problem. If you step out of not angry, you are in control, and your only problem at the moment is helping him with his problem. If you step out of this positioning, and start reacting to the visitor in an emotional way, you'll lose control, you'll lose your power, and the situation will be likely to escalate into a lose-lose for everyone. So, begin with a mindset that says, "No matter what, I will respect the visitor."

B. EMPATHY. Put yourself in the visitor's shoes, and try to see the situation from his/her perspective. Don't try and cut him off, don't urge him to calm down. Instead, listen carefully. If someone is angry or upset, it is because that person feels injured in some way. Your job is to let the visitor vent and to listen attentively in order to understand the source of that frustration. When you do that, you send a powerful unspoken message that you care about him and his situation.

Often, as the visitor comes to realize that you really do care and that you are going to attempt to help him resolve the problem, the visitor will calm down on his own, and begin to interact with you in a positive way.

Here's how you can use these two tools in an easily-remembered process for dealing with angry visitors.

CRACK THE EGG

Imagine that you have a hard-boiled egg. The rich yellow yolk at the center of the egg represents the solution to the visitor's problem, the hardened white which surrounds the yolk represents the details of the visitor's situation, and the hard shell represents his/her anger.

In order to get to the yolk, and resolve the situation, you must first crack the shell. You have to penetrate the visitor's anger. Then you've got to cut through the congealed egg white. That means that you understand the details of the visitor's situation. Finally, you're at the heart of the situation, where you can offer a solution to the visitor's problem.

So, handling an angry visitor is like cutting through a hard-boiled egg.

Four steps process to

I. LISTEN. Let's say you stop to help a visitor. She doesn't even give you time to finish your greeting before she launches into a tirade.

At this point, just LISTEN. …don't try and cut her off, …don't urge her to calm down, …not yet. As you listen, you begin to piece together her story. She brought her family to see the baby elephant but it was so crowded no one could see. Why don't you have her out in the front yard where more people can see?

"What kind of shoddy operation is this?" she wants to know. Do you understand how important this is to my children? Do you know how much time and money we've spent? If we don't get to see the baby elephant right now I want our money back! What are you going to about it?

Now you have the basic story. Hopefully, after this gush of frustration, there will be a pause while she comes up for air.

Updated and used by NAI with permission, August 2013
More often than not, once the visitor has had an initial chance to vent her rage, it's going to die down a little, and that's your opportunity to take a step in.

Even if she has started calming down on her own, there comes a moment - and I can almost guarantee you'll sense it - to help calm her down. Try something along the lines of: "It sounds like something has gone wrong, and I can understand your frustration. I'm sorry you're experiencing this problem. Let's take a look at the next step."

Try to calm yourself first, and then acknowledge her feelings. Say: "I can tell you're upset..." or, "It sounds like you're angry...", then connect to the visitor by apologizing, or empathizing. Say something like: "I'm sorry that happened. If I were you, I'd be frustrated, too." It's amazing how much of a calming effect that can have.

Keep in mind, anger is a natural, self-defensive reaction to a perceived wrong. If there is a problem with the zoo’s service, some frustration and disappointment is justified.

First you listen carefully and completely to the visitor.

Then you empathize with what the visitor is feeling, and let her or her know that you understand. This will almost always calm the visitor down.

You’ve cracked the shell of the egg. Now, you can proceed to deal with the problem.

Train all your people in expert techniques to handle difficult visitors!

Buy Dave’s CD learning program: Dealing with Difficult Visitors.

2. IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM. Sometimes while the angry visitor is venting, you'll be able to latch right on to the problem because it's clear-cut. Something is broken. Or late. Or she thinks a promise has been broken.

But sometimes in the middle of all that rage, it's tough to comprehend the bottom-line issue. This is a good place for some specific questions.

Ask the visitor to give you some details. "What day did she order it, when exactly was it promised. What is his situation at the moment?"

These kind of questions force the visitor to think about facts instead of his/her feelings about those facts. So, you interject a more rational kind of conversation. Think of this step of the process as cutting through the white of the egg to get to the yolk at the center.

It's important, when you think you understand the details, to restate the problem.

You can say, "Let me see if I have this right. You were promised delivery last Friday, because you need it for an important project this coming week. But you haven't received our product yet. Is that correct?"

She will probably acknowledge that you've sized up the situation correctly. Or, she may say, "No, that's not right" and then proceed to explain further. In either case the outcome is good, because you will eventually understand the situation correctly, and have her tell you that "Yes, that's right."

And at that point you can apologize. Some people believe that an apology is an acknowledgment of wrongdoing. But you can appreciate and apologize for the visitor's inconvenience without pointing fingers. Just say, "I'm sorry this has happened." Or "I understand this must be very frustrating. Let's just see what we can do to fix it, OK?"

3. AVOID BLAME. Don't blame the visitor by saying something like "Are you sure you understood the time for the feeding?" This will just ignite anger all over again because you are questioning her credibility and truth-telling.

Don't want to blame the zoo or Metro. Don’t say, "I'm not surprised you got bad information. It's been happening a lot." Or, "Yes, our maps are always wrong."

Avoiding blame is different than acknowledging responsibility. For example, if you know, for a fact, a mistake has been made, you can acknowledge it and apologize for it. "Clearly there's a problem here with our performance. I can't change that, but let me see what I can do to help you out because I understand how important this is to you."

4. RESOLVE THE PROBLEM. Now you’re at the heart of the egg. You won't always be able to fix the problem perfectly. And you may need more time than a you can provide right now. But it's critical to leave the irate visitor with the understanding that your goal is to resolve the problem or get them to someone who can. You may need to say: “We’ll need to go to reception, I can take you,” or “I’ll contact their supervisor.” Then do it. Make the phone calls. Get the information. Find out what you can do for this visitor and do it. Then follow up with the visitor when you said you would. Even if you don't have all the information you need, call when you said you would and at least let her know what you've done, what you're working on and what your next step will be. Let the visitor know that she is important to you, that you understand her frustration, and that you're working hard to get things fixed.

Use the tools of respect and empathy, and the "crack the egg" process, and you'll move your professionalism up a notch.