

# What Makes an Effective ACO

*Today's animal control officer does much more than control animals. To be effective, modern ACOs rely more on their manners than they do their muscles.*

By James Bandow

To persuade pet owners to voluntarily comply with animal care and control regulations, an animal control officer must have the skills necessary to get pet owners' cooperation. Although opinions tend to vary among animal control and shelter managers about what qualities individuals need to become effective ACOs, these five characteristics top my list:

**1. Good, Even Temperment.** An ACO is frequently placed in situations



Illustration by James Bellora

where it is easy to lose one's temper or self-control. When that happens, things may be said or done that would not occur under normal circumstances, and this inevitably weakens the officer's message and often results in complaints to the agency.

It's difficult to remain calm, cool, and collected when you're asked the same tedious question a hundred times during a shift, when you have just been nipped by a supposedly "nice and friendly" animal, when someone tells you that you are "just a dog catcher," or when a pet owner fails to see that you are trying to help and unleashes a string of obscenities

in your direction. It takes a lot of self-control to choke back hot words; yet, to be effective, an ACO must be able to do this and still appear to be in control of a situation.

**2. Tact.** Unlike temperament, which is a part of one's personality and which one can only learn to control, tact is a quality that can be acquired. Tact could be described as "the ability to get things done without ruffling feathers." It has been suggested that it isn't so much what a person does, but the way he does it.

The rules of tact generally begin with the word "don't": "Don't give smart answers." "Don't be sarcastic." "Don't make personal remarks." "Don't be overbearing." These are just a few of them.

**3. Maturity.** People who lack maturity break promises, substitute alibis for performance, and often cannot be counted on. Their lives are frequently mazes of unfinished business.

Mature people, on the other hand, can see the big picture. At times this means putting up with short-term pain for long-term gain. It means being able to defer to other people, to circumstances, and to time. Maturity is the ability to make a decision and then stick with it, riding out whatever storm may follow. It means being there when it counts and coming through in the crunches.

**4. Conscientiousness.** An ACO must be thorough and see an issue or a job through to the end no matter how much effort, time, and trouble it takes. The officer must do this even though, when all is over and done, there is no profit, no glory, and often no recognition.

**5. Effective Communication.** Although an ACO must still be able to capture and handle animals, the key responsibilities of an ACO are to in-

form, to educate, and to solve problems.<sup>x</sup> These tasks require good communication and interpersonal skills.

Like most people, dog and cat owners will not be intimidated or threatened with fines, nor will they jump just because an ACO says to. An officer who has developed the ability to persuade an irresponsible animal owner to become responsible is essential to the management of a successful animal control agency.

I have discussed only five of the qualities and skills I believe an animal control officer must possess. There are, of course, others—some essential, all desirable—that an individual should develop to be a successful ACO. Some of these include integrity, moral courage, dignity, smartness, patience, and calmness.

The public has come to expect high standards from individuals in public service, and people will no longer tolerate individuals who are bad-tempered, sarcastic, or cynical. Members of the public recognize that they are the employers of those who work in public service. They expect and feel entitled to deal with individuals who are not just knowledgeable about the field they are working in, but who are also courteous, helpful, tactful, calm, even-tempered, effective, and efficient.

Individuals who do their bit dozens of times each day are animal control's best ambassadors. ■

—Adapted from an essay in the *AASAO Journal*, published by the Association of Animal Shelter Administrators of Ontario, Canada

James Bandow is general manager of animal control services for the city of Toronto in Ontario, Canada