

Keeping Cool Under Fire

Anger, Conflict Tips Presented

Anger is a powerful emotion. It can energize us to right a wrong, fight a righteous battle, and address important issues in relationships. When we keep our cool, anger can even be beneficial. But when we allow our emotions to boil over, we are likely to create tension, conflict, or even worse. Important questions for the EA professional include:

- How and when is anger a problem in an employee's life?
- How is anger affecting productivity?
- How can anger be expressed in a more positive manner?

When someone expresses anger only occasionally, the impact will probably be only fleeting. Any transgressions will likely be forgiven. However, when anger is expressed inappropriately over and over, the effect will likely be greater and last longer – and conflicts will invariably increase. Eventually, the employee's job may be threatened.

The Cases of Marcy and Sam

Let's take the example of "Marcy." Marcy's feelings over how slow her son got going in the morning did not blow away easily. She often left the house so irritated that her drive to work was very stressful, which set the stage for her first encounter at the office. Her secretary dreaded Marcy's frustration and mood. Once triggered, Marcy's anger was intense and lasted a long time.

Marcy found it difficult to concentrate on work when she was irritated, causing her to fall behind. Her team's performance was set back when several co-workers decided they couldn't work with her due to her outbursts.

Similarly, "Sam's" withdrawal from his fiancée was hard to turn off. He seemed unable to quickly move beyond what had angered him in the first place. Sam found that his withdrawal from his co-workers

made it hard for him to keep up with new developments at work. As others felt distant from him, they were less likely to open up or invite him to be a part of team meetings. *When you're angry, make a point of noticing how intense the anger becomes and how long it lasts. Chances are that others are watching!*

Research shows that when stress rises beyond a moderate level, performance rapidly deteriorates. Unresolved anger is like a silent brake, taking a toll that the individual may not even be aware of.

Is Anger a Problem?

By better understanding anger, it will become easier to determine how it is affecting a given individual. It may not be easy to control anger, but recognizing how anger can quickly lead to conflict that was often avoidable, it is vital for the employee to be aware of warning signs so that he/she can better deal with emotions – so that "Sam" can control his anger, and his anger isn't controlling *him*.

The following are warning signs that Sam's anger has become a problem:

❖ **Others comment on Sam's reaction to a stressful situation or criticize his behavior.** Most people will not readily discuss their feelings about someone's actions, so when they do, it usually means the problem is relatively serious.

❖ **Sam feels embarrassed following an outburst of anger.** It's important to not ignore inner feelings that one may have stepped over the line. These feelings may be valid.

❖ **A relationship Sam values is strained or lost.** Another person may seek Sam out less or even sever a friendship or other tie. Has anyone explored why the relationship is cooling?

❖ **Sam has an indignant, "Who, me?" response.** However, others begin complaining that Sam's anger is a problem.



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❖ **Sam's boss, wife, etc., has warned him about his outbursts.** In other words, he has been told several times that his most recent blow-up was the last straw. He has to do something about the problem – or else.

❖ **Sam is increasingly irritable.** Sam has been exhausted and irritable and often snaps back at others, and then regrets it.

❖ **When Sam gets angry, he holds it all inside.** Then, when asked if something is wrong, Sam responds: *"No, nothing. I'm fine."*

❖ **Sam can be downright sarcastic when someone irritates him.** For instance, he tells a personal and embarrassing story about a person or makes fun at his or her expense. Then, he feels that this individual is overreacting – when the real issue is that he's angry and doesn't want to admit it.

❖ **Sam sometimes responds only minimally – or avoids speaking entirely with a colleague at work, friend, etc.** this may occur for days at a time when he is angry. He may even enjoy making other people guess what's wrong.

If Sam sounds a lot like someone you know, don't be alarmed. It's not an individual's personality that is the problem, it's what this person does when angry that needs to be changed.

Tips for Successful Workplace Resolutions ...

1. Agree to disagree without being disagreeable.
2. State your thoughts, feelings, etc. in the "I" form: "I think," "I feel..." etc.
3. State the situation positively. "I appreciate it when you clean up your work station ..."
4. Listen without commenting, defending yourself, or arguing.
5. Discuss current details.
6. Be ready to be wrong – or equally guilty.
7. Try to understand the other person's point of view.
8. Take a break from the situation, if necessary.

... More Tips: Choose Your Words Wisely

1. Be honest. As noted start with statements like "I feel..."
2. Be aware that you might be misunderstood. Ask questions.
3. Be open.
4. Be creative. Humor helps.
5. Be specific. The other person may not understand.
6. Be sensitive to the other person's reactions.
7. Be expressive when you listen. Use verbal

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and non-verbal feedback.

8. Be patient. Interruptions can be irritating.
9. Offer reassurances that you are truly interested in the situation.

Assertive Problem Solving

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problem solving to successfully resolve workplace conflicts includes:

- Defining the problem in behavioral language so that another person can understand it.
- Mutually brainstorming different potential solutions.
- Selecting the solution that both parties agree is best, after thoughtful discussion of costs and benefits.

Assertive problem solving combines assertiveness and problem solving to ensure that two people not only talk through a problem calmly but also craft a solution that meets the needs of both. Don't accuse and criticize. Listen to each other without interrupting to share ideas and feelings about the issue in dispute.

Use a calm tone to restate ideas and offer new ones. As an issue is a problem-solved, each will feel respected by the other. Here are some additional suggestions:

❖ **Voice** – What you say can invite calm discussion, or it can prevent it. How you say something is important. Avoid interrupting – the focus needs to be on understanding the other person. If there is confusion, ask for clarification of feelings or the other person's position. Paraphrase the other person's feelings, thoughts, and needs at appropriate times and always *before* you state your own position.

❖ **Tone and loudness** – Keep your voice even, showing interest. Don't raise your voice even if the other person does.

❖ **Body language** – Remember that we often communicate without words! Look at the other person and demonstrate interest. Avoid facial negatives like eye rolling or frowning. Position yourself to fully face the other individual, sit comfortably (if sitting), and lean forward a little to show involvement.

Use smooth movements and gestures. Sit in a "receptive" position with arms uncrossed. Avoid nonverbal negatives like shaking your head "no" as the other person talks. Nod affirmation that you are listening or agree when appropriate.

Summary

Changing the thoughts and expectations that fuel anger is not easy. How an individual expresses his or her anger does not spring up overnight, and strategies for dealing with these feelings won't happen overnight either.

It is also important to point out that while getting new behavior started isn't easy, it is often easier than sustaining it. Strategies need to be reinforced so they work with the going gets tough. When roadblocks or setbacks occur, it's important to reassess and adjust your efforts.

However, the strategies and suggestions used in this article are designed as helpful tools to get started in successful conflict resolution.

Moreover:

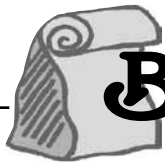
- Encourage your client's employees to pay close attention to their anger over a several week period. Ask them to write down episodes while the events are fresh in their mind.
- Ask employees to fill out self-assessments and enlist assistance to demonstrate "real life" role-playing situations.

Teach positive methods like the ones depicted in this article. (Additional suggestions are provided in this month's handout section on page 4.) Remember that practice makes perfect. Give it time, and new thinking can gradually replace the old.

Source: "Taking Charge of Anger: How to Resolve Conflict, Sustain Relationships, and Express Yourself without Losing Control", by W. Robert Nay, PhD, © 2004, © Guilford Press.

Online Webinars!

Select *Brown Baggers*, such as this one on conflict resolution, will soon be appearing online. The free webinar will be held in conjunction with **Tonya Teal Slawinski, PhD**, a former clinical director, and current owner and consultant of Turn Key Consulting. The date was not set at press time of this newsletter, but it is tentatively set for late August. More info to come.



Conflict Guidelines in the Workplace



The following are some practical suggestions that have worked in the past for an EA professional in Concord, New Hampshire.

❖ **One person versus the team:** This is usually a situation in which one person “loses control” when stressed. Over time, co-workers avoid giving feedback, fearing an angry reaction. The best results occur when the manager gets involved. The manager provides the missing feedback, lets the person know that he/she is having a negative impact on the team, and outlines a performance improvement plan.

The plan often includes webinars / seminars and visits for personalized education and coaching. *Follow up with the manager is key, as are encouraging people to come back for additional coaching if needed.*

❖ **Two individuals who can't get along:** Misunderstandings happen, negative assumptions are formed, and both people conclude that the other person is “not a team player.” They spend time talking to other co-workers about how difficult it is to work with him/her, avoid each other, and the conflict creates a negative environment for everyone.

In these cases, the best outcomes happen when a manager or other business leader invites an EA professional to facilitate and let the two people

know that their current working relationship is not acceptable. Use a structured process that helps both people feel heard and understood, and provide coaching on feedback and listening skills as needed. *Follow up by the manager is essential for success.*

❖ **A team is fractured:** Individuals can't get along, the manager either makes mistakes in handling the situation or feels overwhelmed, and team productivity and morale hits an all-time low. When asked to facilitate these situations, it is usually only after higher levels in the organization and/or HR have been involved. Record what the team sees as the positives and negatives of the situation.

Then, outline a “desired state” for the team, listing positive behaviors and the resulting positive environment. The final step is for the team to create guidelines that will bring about an improved situation.

Instruction on how to listen or offer feedback may be necessary. *Follow up is a shared responsibility* among the team, the team leader, and the manager of that unit or department.

Source: Joan Murray, MBA. At the time of this writing, Joan was a development specialist at Concord Hospital in Concord, NH.