

FOCUS

# Making Peace With Anger

**A**NGER AND VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE are definitely increasing, and one in six workers has been angry enough at work to want to punch a coworker. Understanding how to prevent anger from erupting into violence is imperative.

Anger is a strong feeling of antagonism associated with extreme displeasure. As anger escalates, the quality of judgment decreases, and logic evaporates. You can't control an angry person, but you can control the environment and your own reactions. The quality of your judgment must increase in such a situation.

Often, anger is based on principle—not letting someone “get away with” unfair or controlling treatment. Left unchecked, anger often breeds vengeance, but it is usually a temporary emotion. The angry person usually loses face by failing to reach agreement, walking out or disclosing unintended information. It is important to restore dignity and minimize embarrassment.

There are many myths about anger. The “excuse” myth presumes the anger is natural, and anyone would react the same way. The “response” myth dictates confrontation—exactly the way to escalate anger. Then there is the “judgment” myth, which says that anger is a bad emotion. Emotions are neither good nor bad, they simply exist.

People who use the “I just can't help it” myth have learned the behavior, and believe it is impossible to change their reactions. The “time heals” myth counsels ignoring the behavior, which is just as ineffectual as confrontation. The “manipulation” myth assumes that intimidation wins respect, and anger gets things done.

Last is the myth that “venting” has a calming effect and reduces stress. In fact, a structured two-minute “vent” may be effective during the event, the first stage of the anger cycle. Give the person a minute to vent; you don't say a word, just actively listen; he or she cannot attack you or use unacceptable language in the extreme. If necessary, offer another minute. Usually, the short vent, without any response by the listener, is enough.

Try this yourself, either with a trusted listener, your answering machine (delete before listening) or your television. Don't use your dog, or he'll stop greeting you at the door.

At the event stage, you're looking for the “trigger,” and you must stay calm (breathe deeply, visualize the other person calming down) and control your attitude. Empathy is your most powerful tool; most angry people are fighting to be heard. Use open-ended questions, and substitute “and” for “but.” Ask “what” instead of “why.” Keep comments short, don't dramatize or offer advice, and ask what the person wants. Avoid condescension, clichés or jumping to conclusions, and don't fake understanding or say “I told you so.”

If anger continues, you've reached the escalation stage. Let negative energy pass by—don't lob it back (practice martial arts, not

tennis). Admit any mistakes or responsibility, and avoid the temptation to rescue the person. You'll simply become a “float” for the person and risk drowning in the anger, too.

Make sure you move to a neutral, private area, but leave an escape route for both of you. Guided problem solving can work at this stage; devise a plan together to remedy the situation. You must endure the discomfort of remaining silent, and focus on issues, not actions or emotions.

The crisis stage isn't always apparent. When the Terminator promises, “I'll be back” in an icy tone, he is about to erupt into violence. More obvious signs are a red face, loud voice and total lack of control. Think safety, and protect people and property. Threats and consequences may break the pattern, but may also provoke the angered party. Try stating that you need a break, and agree to meet again in five or 10 minutes—then do it. Be prepared to implement emergency measures and call trained authorities. Dealing with a person in crisis is no job for an amateur. Never touch the person at this stage.

Restoring order occurs in the resolution stage. Offer counseling to witnesses, as well as the angry person, and define expectations of acceptable behavior. Create a plan, allow him or her to save face, and don't hold grudges or allow others to shun the angered person. Help him or her resist triggers, and monitor the person's “temperature” every few days. Most important, praise any progress.

Before assuming that you have reached baseline stage, make sure things have really returned to normal. Repeated incidents can raise the original emotional line and shorten future anger cycles. Search the work environment for conflict breeders such as destructive criticism, excessive workloads, unfair promotion decisions and lack of resources. Symptoms of a high-conflict environment include high turnover, low morale, missed deadlines, power struggles and chronic health problems among your staff. Make sure you serve as a role model for control and respectful disagreement.

Sometimes, nothing works. Evaluate the amount of energy and resources you are willing to invest in a chronically angry person. Sometimes, all you can do is close the toolbox and encourage—or force—the person to move on.

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