

Anger Mastery: Taking the Fear out of Anger

What triggers anger? In this realm perception is reality. Yes, it's all in your head. Whether we feel anger, anxiety, sadness or joy in a certain situation is a result of the meaning we assign to it.

Most people would rather be angry than terribly sad. *J.J. Ratey and C. Johnson, Shadow Syndromes*

In this article, I am distinguishing anger, the emotion, from hostile or aggressive behaviour which sometimes accompanies it. The communication of the emotion of anger, without verbal or physical aggression, is communication no matter how offensive it is to the listener. Understanding anger is the first step to being able to cope with its influence in the workplace. Anger is a natural feeling that is neither good nor bad. It can be managed in the workplace so as to minimize aggression. If employees understand that it is acceptable to feel anger, they will be less defensive about communicating anger and therefore better able to find positive ways to act on it. Managers and employees need to have the skills to deal with the communication of anger and to build on its motivating potential.

We all have the tendency to perceive ourselves as the lead actor in a play and to analyse other people's behaviour in relation to ourselves. We tend to see ourselves as innocent and good and those around us are either supporters or antagonists, good or bad. Our focus on "I" leads us to believe that other people see the situation as we do. We think, "They know they are hurting us". We have implicit rules such as "You should not do anything to hurt me." Then we may apply the rules rigidly making us vulnerable to the behaviour of others. "The more we relate irrelevant events to ourselves and exaggerate the significance of relevant events, the more easily we are

hurt" (Beck, 27). Our own self-protective rules are inevitably broken by other people, who are also acting within their own egocentric perspective.

The paradox is that the more we apply these rules that we construct to protect ourselves, the more we are vulnerable to the behaviour of others.

Anger is not the first response to an offence against our rules according to Dr Beck (31). The initial response is distress, sometimes very subtle and fleeting. The common element of the distress that precedes anger is a feeling of being diminished in some way. If the person perceives that the feeling of distress is caused by another person then he or she is poised to counterattack. If we perceive the threat is due to an impersonal situation such as sickness or economic crisis then we may be upset or unhappy but not angry.

In our prehistoric past it may have been useful to react in either-or fashion to discriminate friend from foe, predator from prey. But we no longer need the margin of safety which was useful when our physical survival was at stake.

Is there a gender difference in the expression of anger? According to one author, men are socialized to believe that they must be brave, show few feelings and suffer in silence. They are encouraged to use their anger to fight back against threat, injustice, frustration and feelings of low self-esteem (Allcorn, 62).

Socialization encourages women to be submissive and dependant and avoid being

competitive or aggressive. The threat of being labelled as unfeminine if they are not passive, may encourage women to redirect anger against themselves. A woman may believe for example that it is her fault that a conflict developed with a male in the workplace even though this was not the case. Disapproval, abandonment and harming others are so feared by some women that any expression of anger is accompanied by tears, guilt and sorrow which tend to nullify the anger in favour of maintaining the connection of the relationship.

Changing self-destructive and self-defeating interpersonal dynamics requires women to become assertive. To be able to assert her self-interest the woman needs to be

The best time to manage anger is before it happens. *W. D. Gentry, Anger -Free: Ten Basic Steps to Managing Your Anger*

comfortable with being angry and acting on the anger. Achievement and creativity are closely related to self-assertion and angry motivations expressed constructively in a person's life. (Allcorn, 63-67) Workplace programs encouraging self-assertion must take these factors into consideration.

Mastering anger in the workplace requires an understanding of the concepts of anger and learning how to communicate in the presence of anger. If fear of anger is a factor in your workplace it is time to invest in training for managers and employees.

For more about anger see Common Ground #17 Summer 2002. For references see www.munncrs.com.

Anger, though a vital ingredient in individual and social life, is inherently a somewhat elusive emotion. No group or society can encourage a fully free indulgence in anger. *C. Stearns and P. Stearns, Anger: The Struggle for Emotional Control in America's History*

Munn-thly Memo

Q. I am a team leader in my workplace. One member of our team was given increased responsibilities at work and no increase in pay. She is a single parent struggling to support her two children. On the next day, a Friday, she found out that her car needed major repairs. She became extremely angry and came into my office, making abusive and angry comments about me, her co-workers and her ex-spouse. I did not know what to do. I sat and listened until she calmed down, then she apologized for her behaviour, went back to her work area and avoided me until the end of the day. I thought about it all weekend. Is there anything more I can do with this team member? How should I handle a similar situation in the future?

A. Listening as you did is a helpful way to respond in to someone else's anger. It is important not to act in such a way as to cause the person to feel diminished or "put down.". Here are four steps to consider for future instances. With this particular team member, I suggest that you resume the conversation at an appropriate time and focus on steps 2 and 4 below.

1. Finding the right time and place: If a manager must deliver a message which may provoke anger it is suggested that the employee be approached at a time when both are more likely to be able to deal effectively with the encounter. For example, a Monday morning is better than a Friday afternoon with the possibility of leaving everyone with negative feelings simmering over the weekend.

Employees may become angry without regard to a preferred schedule. The decision then for the manager is whether to deal with the matter immediately when it arises or at a later time. The correct choice depends on your assessment of the factors present at the moment, since both have a negative aspect. Responding immediately may require the manager to focus on the situation at an inconvenient time. If you are also becoming angry it is probably better to choose the option of dealing with it at a later time. The downside of postponing the encounter is that it may reinforce the employee's anger by making her feel rejected. I suggest that if you choose to disengage and not deal with the matter at the moment, do it with the genuine promise to deal with the matter later, preferably specifying the time.

Location is also important. The angry discussion should not be where the public or co-workers could see or hear. The employee should be immediately and politely asked to move to a neutral area such as a meeting room or, second best, to a private location, such as a manager's office. After the request the manager should immediately move to the location regardless of whether the employee appears ready to comply.

2. Effective listening: It is important to maintain steady, neutral eye contact to let the person know that they are the focus of your attention. Be careful not to glare which may communicate anger and contempt for the team member. Sitting back and crossing your arms conveys defensiveness as compared with leaning forward with hands in view and relaxed. The focus of your listening is to understand them not to rebut what they are saying. What is helpful is to understand and to help your team member understand her anger and its causes. Reflect back objectively what you have understood from what she said.

3. Dealing with your own anger: In this kind of encounter it is easy to feel defensive and angry at being attacked. The only person you can control in the encounter is YOU. It is critical to manage your own anger in order to deal with the situation successfully. Use the logical- thinking part of your brain to analyse the employee's anger objectively. Focus on collecting data about the nature and causes of the person's anger, even jotting down notes if it seems appropriate for the purpose of accurately reflecting back what you have heard. Keep in mind that you need to maintain sensitivity - you are not a machine - and yet avoid overwhelming emotion that compromises your ability to be open-minded and understanding.

4. Finding resolution: Discuss her feelings before and during the angry outburst. Break down the problem into smaller parts so that you can address one step at a time in working toward resolving the situation. Limit the discussion to this specific occasion and not past occasions. Do not impose your ideas on her as a solution. Assert your point of view without judging or blaming her. I suggest starting with the easiest aspects of the problem and working gradually toward resolving the more difficult aspects. At the conclusion discuss your working relationship with the employee to avoid future feelings of shame, guilt or fear that the relationship has been damaged. Do not avoid the employee after the angry outburst, no matter how difficult this is for you.

Be persistent in implementing solutions. Some people and problems are resistant to change. If angry outbursts continue, it may be necessary to discuss the situation further with the employee. Maybe there is something you missed in understanding the problem.

Even with good intentions and good conflict resolution skills, every angry outburst in the workplace is not resolvable. The causes of the anger may exist outside the workplace or be part of psychiatric disorders. An employee with consistent angry outbursts should be encouraged to seek employee assistance or other counseling.

Mark Your Calendar

Upcoming Training Events
Presented by Kathryn Munn

Health & Safety 2003 IAPA National Conference & Trade Show

Workshop: Anger Mastery

April 15, 2003

www.iapa.ca

Mediation Training

Full 40 hour program

Fanshawe College

Part 1 - May 1 & 2, 2003

Part 2 - May 28 & 29, 2003

Part 3 - June 12 & 13, 2003

Call 519-633-2030 for more information
and registration.



I am pleased to fill requests for presentations about mediation and negotiation at meetings of professional and business groups. Call or e-mail to make the arrangements.

Electronic Common Ground

If you prefer to be on our e-mailing list please send us an e-mail.

Kathryn Munn, LL.B., C.R.C., C.Med. is a mediator, arbitrator and lawyer. Through her firm Munn Conflict Resolution Services she works exclusively in alternate dispute resolution from a base in London, Ontario, Canada. She is a Roster Mediator, Ontario Mandatory Mediation Program - Toronto / Ottawa / Windsor, a mediator under contract for the Farm Debt Mediation Service of Canada and for government departments.

© Kathryn Munn, 2003



CONFLICT RESOLUTION SERVICES

2090 Richmond Street

London, Ontario, Canada N5X 4C1

TEL: 519-660-1242 FAX: 519-660-1618

TOLL-FREE: 1-888-216-3202

www.munnrcs.com

E-MAIL: kmunn@munnrcs.com