

Anger In The Workplace: Understanding, Recognizing, And Managing It

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ABSTRACT

Violence resulting from anger in the workplace has reached epidemic proportions. One purpose of this article is to assist managers and supervisors to better understand anger and to recognize its symptoms. Another purpose is to offer useful advice about how to avoid workplace violence by practicing appropriate anger management.

INTRODUCTION

*O*n August 20, 1986 in Edmond, Oklahoma, a despondent postal employee shot and killed two of his supervisors and 12 coworkers and injured seven others, then killed himself. This event was the beginning of a rash of work related violence in post offices. (Montaldo) The series of incidents introduced a new phrase to our vocabulary, “going postal”. On February 5, 2001, an employee at the Chicago Navistar engine plant killed five and wounded four. On July 23, 2003, a disgruntled employee in San Antonio killed two women and critically wounded another before shooting himself. (Mysantonio) On January 30, 2006, a female ex-postal worker opened fire at a mail processing plant, killing six people and critically wounding another before committing suicide. (Associated Press) Boston, Massachusetts; Meridian Mississippi; Houston, Texas; Kansas City...and the lists of death and violence go on. (Quinley)

Violence in the workplace has reached epidemic proportions. According to the US Department of Justice, there are an on average of three to four supervisors killed each month in the United States. (Montaldo) According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, homicide is the second leading cause of job-related deaths in the workplace. (AAOHN)

Handling anger on the job has become a new survival skill for leaders in all fields. Workers get angry for various reasons. Some are merely responding to the pressures and the stress of everyday living. Some are actually mad at themselves or family members, but their anger spills over into the workplace. Others are angry with coworkers because of personality clashes, prejudice or alleged confrontation. A growing number are outraged by procedures or treatment from their bosses or employers. It’s not just the postal workers who are upset and lashing out today. It can happen in any business or industry. More and more workers in their jobs may be angry about layoffs, increased competition, loss of privacy and mounting pressures to do more with less. Many employees feel they are powerless. Bound to uninteresting work or meaningless jobs, they often view themselves as under-paid, under-valued and under-appreciated. Many are angry about what they see as a lack of sensitivity and support from management.

Business success depends upon cooperation, teamwork and mutual trust. Angry workers undermine productivity. Employees have the right to get mad, but they don’t have the right to let their anger get in the way of performance or to vent their anger in a way that disrupts a workplace. It is a manager’s job to see that this doesn’t happen. Workplace violence can be mitigated before escalation if the employees and supervisors have been trained to spot employees who make threats or damage property. “Workplace violence is always avoidable.” (Viollis)

The purpose of this article is to help managers and supervisors better understand anger, to recognize its symptoms, and to offer useful advice about how to avoid workplace violence. The article begins with a description of anger and its symptoms to provide an understanding of this emotion and its causes. Then, several tips are provided about how to deal with anger to assist managers and supervisors in their attempts to avoid violence in the workplace.

UNDERSTANDING ANGER

Anger is a completely normal, usually healthy, human emotion. A variety of factors increase the probability of an angry reaction. If we have seen our parents get angry first and resolve an issue, afterwards, we are more likely to use the same approach. If we are tired, frustrated, or stressed, we are more likely to react with anger. If we tend to hold our feelings inside rather than let them out, we are more likely to experience anger outbursts as a pressure increases, much like a pressure cooker.

There are several factors to keep in mind when attempting to understand anger. First, anger is a reaction to an inner emotion, and not a planned action. Second, anger can be an immediate reaction to an isolated event or it can be a response following numerous events. Third, feelings underlying the anger reaction make us feel vulnerable and weak; anger makes us feel, at least momentarily, strong and in control. Fourth, to repress anger is unhealthy and yet to express it is impulsive, as we often do, may give momentary relief, but inevitably will carry negative consequences. Fifth, anger behaviors are learned over a life span, and therefore can be unlearned and replaced with healthier patterns of coping. (tripod)

Anger is an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage, as described by psychologists who specialize in the study of anger. Like other emotions it is accomplished by a psychological and biological change; when you get angry your heart rate and your blood pressure go up, as do the levels of your energy hormones, adrenaline, and noradrenaline. (Spielberger)

Anger can be self-destructive. As noted above, anger causes a psychological and physiological stress on the body, and in turn this stress can cause heart disease, emotional problems, myocardial infarction, coronary heart disease and psychological stress. "That makes my blood boil" ...is not far from the truth because sudden anger spikes blood pressure and the stress constricts blood vessels both of which can give you either a severe chest pain or could lead to heart attack. (Harvard)

According to psychologists who specialize in anger management, some people are more prone to being a "hothead" than the average person. Some of these hotheads show their anger through chronic irritability and grumpiness while others may withdrawal socially, sulk, or even get physically ill. (Deffenbacher)

RECOGNIZING ANGER

According to Sarkis (2000), protection of employees is usually only thought about after a threat or an actual attack has occurred. Workplace violence rarely strikes without warning, but most workers cannot recognize the warning signs of anger. While nearly 20% of the workforce claims to have been exposed to or experienced violence firsthand, less than 4% recognize the following "red flags" or warning signs:

- mood changes,
- personal hardships,
- mental health issues such as depression and anxiety,
- verbal threats,
- and past history of violence. (Randolph)

Other warning signs of building anger include

- emotional difficulties,
- tardiness or absence,
- contempt for fellow workers or superiors,
- paranoia,
- and obsession with violence or firearms. (Butterworth)

There's a lot of anger just below the surface in the workplace and you'd be well advised not to incur the wrath of a colleague, says a British study. An in-depth interview with 24 men and women in management and non-management positions in a various or job sectors found anger is widespread at work. It most often erupts over immoral behavior as cheating, lying, stealing or when people feel they have been unfairly treated, like an unjust criticism or heavy workload. Other common triggers for workplace anger include incompetence, disrespect, failure to communicate and/or exclusion (Preidt).

MANAGING ANGER

Anger has no legitimate place in business, office, shop or factory. Anger has an effect not only on an individual but all the people in the surrounding area including workers, customer, supervisors and managers. Managing anger, therefore, is important and should be a survival skill for leaders in all fields. Supervisors should know how to control angry employees and at the same time understand how to control their own anger.

A prerequisite for managing employees' anger is for managers to understand that they can't fight anger with anger. Someone needs to take control of the situation. Good managers set the standards of civility in workplace by first learning to control their own anger. According to the Educators for Social Responsibility, there are five steps and to handling anger well:

- Identify your feelings. Go beyond using simple words like "happy, sad or mad," to describe your feelings, and really try to understand the reasons behind your emotions.
- Identify anger triggers. Try to figure out what situations and behaviors really make you angry and why. Try limiting your exposure to these anger triggers.
- Listen to anger cues. Anger cues are physical signs of anger, including rapid breathing, racing pulse and a rising tone of voice. Be able to recognize these in yourself.
- Use relaxation techniques. Use anger reduction techniques to relax. For example, breathe deeply, count backwards, think of pleasant images or repeat key phrases such as "take it easy" or "slowdown."
- Take responsibility for your behavior. Identify and address the behaviors that make other people angry with you. (Breunlin)

The premise or the goals of anger management is to reduce both your emotional feelings and the psychological arousal that anger causes. You can't get rid of it or avoid the things and people that enrage you, nor can you change them, but you can learn to control your reactions to anger. Good supervisors know how to defuse the employee's anger, and most paramount control their own anger as well. Fortunately, any manager or supervisor can learn how to do it. A good place to start is by implementing proven measures for containing anger among employees and staff members. Some strategies on behavior to defuse an angry person include

- listening,
- maintaining a neutral face,
- maintaining a level voice,
- feeding back what you hear,
- changing what the person is focused on,
- making empathizing statements,

- being solution oriented,
- and eliminating statements such as
 - “If you just calm down,”
 - “If you would just let me talk,”
 - “You’re being unreasonable,”
 - and “Exactly what is your problem?”

It is important to remember if the angry person becomes out-of-control, it would be your prudent judgment to just leave the situation. (Larsen) Other conflict resolution strategies include

- remaining calm,
- choosing a quiet place to discuss the conflict,
- making sure there’s enough time to talk,
- identifying the problem (What is the real issue?),
- being honest,
- looking for common grounds,
- treating the other person’s feelings with respect,
- focusing on the problem,
- brainstorming about possible solutions,
- and thanking the other person for agreeing to work together with you.

Say something like, “I appreciate your willingness to clear up this misunderstanding and solve the problem with me.” (Breunlin) Fortunately there are proven ways to reduce confrontation and limit the effects of anger on the job. The most common of these anger prevention measures include

- reducing management/labor tension by increasing accessibility,
- including employee benefit package that allow access to professional help for marriage and financial counseling assistance in alcohol, and chemical abuse problems,
- separating employees when necessary (e.g. different work sites or different shifts),
- offering opportunities for employees to mediate their differences,
- providing conflict resolution training to all employees,
- adopting a policy of zero tolerance for any form of discrimination, harassment, verbal abuse, or violence on the job,
- taking disciplinary actions when necessary
- referring chronic individuals or offenders to anger management counseling,
- offering courses in anger and stress management.

Participation in anger management courses should be considered to help individuals (1) reduce the level of anger, (2) direct anger into healthy way of problem-solving, (3) learn effective coping behaviors, (4) resolve conflict through negotiation, (5) choose appropriate behavior alternatives, (6) identify triggering situations, (7) establish a strategy and plan of action, and (8) apply new coping approaches to more effectively assure healthy responses to anger (Hoy).

CONCLUDING REMARK

The opening paragraphs of this article provided several examples of the terrible consequences of unmanaged workplace anger. This article attempts to help managers and supervisors better understand anger and to recognize its symptoms. The tips about how to deal with anger in the workplace should assist managers and supervisors in their attempts to avoid the awful consequences of workplace violence.

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