

DEVELOPMENT

Anger at Work

Whether it's others' or your own, here's how to deal with it.

By Jeff Bannon

Trying to communicate with someone who is angry is one of the most difficult business challenges. Whether the person is a fellow employee, a manager, or a customer, your natural response to their anger may be to respond in kind: They raise their voice and you match their level of agitation. But if you return hostility with hostility, the cycle will only continue, creating more anger.

The key to managing another person's anger lies in breaking the cycle and establishing a mutual understanding. By finding common ground, you can unlock the conflict and begin to build communication, step by step. To calm a situation and create understanding, use this four-step process.

1. *Inquire.* During this first phase, you should use active listening skills. Being

Facing Your Anger

By Gary S. Shunk

Anger is a protective emotion prompted by a triggering event, such as documents not being completed in time for a meeting. A perceived threat causes an imbalance in your natural homeostasis, forcing an emotional reaction. Anger is useful. It says no, stop, cease. It attempts to dispel the threat by regaining control of the situation. When you start to feel angry, understand the emotion and what's really happening. Realize that you may perceive a threat in your environment—someone cutting you off in traffic, for example, which is a threat to your safety. A co-worker failing to complete an important part of your project poses a threat to your reputation. Whatever it is, acknowledge the threat and realize that you're feeling unsafe. Instead of acting out with hostility, harness your emotions to work productively to improve a bad situation.

In the case of a co-worker not following through, use your anger to enlist his or her help, channeling your reaction into the resolution rather than the problem. That doesn't mean denying your feelings; by all means, let him or her know you're upset. But rather than dwell on the negative event, focus on the positive solution, and use your anger to keep the new initiative going strong.

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a focused listener means that you concentrate fully on the other person's issues and concerns. The goal is to let people talk. Trying to interrupt them is counterproductive and will delay resolving the conflict.

2. *Empathize.* To empathize means to connect with someone on his or her emotional level. That doesn't typically happen in our day-to-day business conversations. In an emotionally charged situation, empathy is essential. You can communicate your empathy with this two-step conversational model:

- *I to you.* This conversational structure says to the speaker *I* relate to how *you* feel. To do this effectively, you should name the emotion you think the person is feeling. For example, Relate to the person:

"I appreciate..."
"I understand..."
"I share..."

Name the emotion:

"your frustration..."
"your doubt..."
"your concern..."

- *I, too.* The second step is to let the person know that you also feel or have felt in the past the same way he or she does. A key phrase might be, "I felt like you do about..."

It can take time to establish empathy with people who are angry. They may at first reject what you say as lip service. It's only when you have shown that you understand their emotions sincerely that you can move to conflict resolution.


3. *Ask permission.* Ask if the person would like additional information. That way, you give the other person control and lessen his or her tension. Say something like, "What information can I provide you?" Or, "Would it be helpful to you if we...?" If your listener replies no, ask, "What would be helpful?" Those permission questions demonstrate that you're a reasonable person doing your best to reach a common

understanding. Once your listener says yes, you can proceed to the final step.

4. *Explain and offer choices.* When you have permission to explain, keep your statement short and simple. You can also ask questions to confirm understanding. If an explanation isn't appropriate, you might offer some choices. For example, "Do you want to see our analysis of the situation next Tuesday or next Thursday?" Or, "Would seeing the plans or the figures help you?"

As you foster more brainstorming, the person's sense of control will grow. When he or she is in a more neutral state, you can start to resolve the problem together. But realize that this model doesn't always move in a simple and linear fashion. You may hear some residual anger surface just when you thought the problem had been solved. You may then have to recycle through the model or spend more time on individual steps.

Although it's never pleasant to face someone's anger, learning and practicing those steps can help make the process easier and help you attain productive solutions.

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