

Dealing With **ANGER AT WORK**

While anger is a normal human emotion, it must be properly managed and expressed in the workplace.

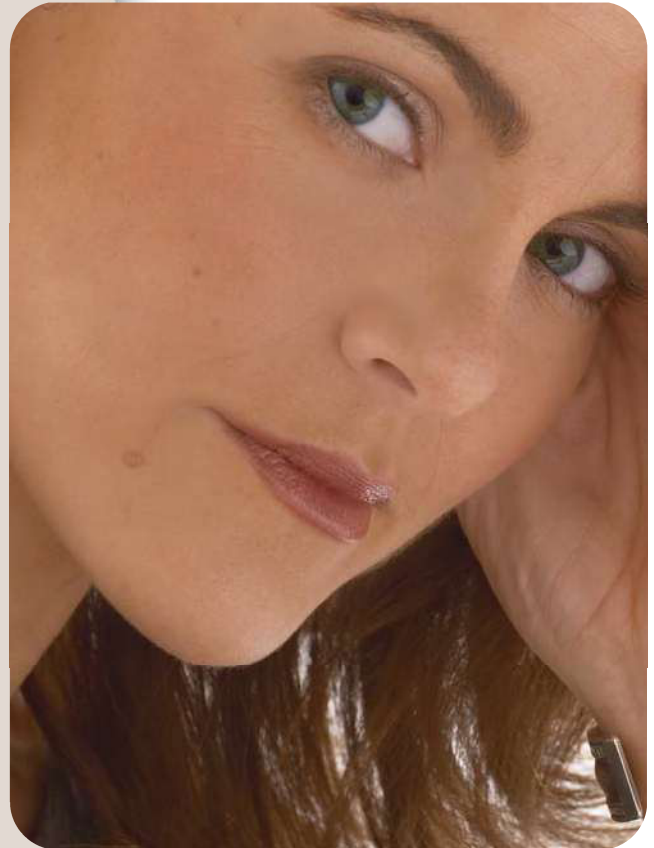
Often, workplace anger is a side effect of a change in co-workers, tasks, or routines. Many people find change frightening, and feelings of uncertainty, worry, or loss of control can contribute to an aggressive reaction.

While there are many variations, anger is usually expressed either directly or indirectly. Direct expressions vary from tense verbal confrontations to inappropriate “meltdowns” or “blow ups.” Indirect expressions may involve letting anger leak out through sarcasm, backstabbing, spreading rumors, or becoming passively resistant. Whether direct or indirect, inappropriate demonstrations of anger eat away at work group morale and productivity, resulting in a negative emotional environment that adversely affects everyone.

Regardless of the reason for a team member’s anger, dealing with it is often the last thing a manager wants to do. Many managers fear that confronting an angry person will only escalate things further. Instead of risking it, they may avoid angry workers and hope that problems will simply resolve themselves. While this strategy may work in some situations, it is rarely successful in the long run and could damage a manager’s credibility and ability to lead. When anger is damaging work group functioning, it is important for the manager to take action and address the issue.

One of the best ways to manage anger in the workplace is to be proactive. Some ways to do this include:

- **Know what external forces are affecting your work group.** Consider how changes in work procedures or unexpected events may fuel resentment or discontent within your team. When you are aware that a change is coming, plan on how to address it prior to its announcement. When unexpected events



happen, encourage resiliency and look for ways to ease the transition.

- **Take the pulse of your work group or affected individuals.** How and when you do this will depend on your interpersonal style. If you are more casual, go to the person’s desk or work station and engage him or her in a discussion. If your style is more formal, a sit-down conversation in your office may be more appropriate.

DEFUSING ANGER

Often you can predict who is going to become openly angry when an unpopular change has occurred. While your first reaction may be to withdraw, it is best to deal with anger head on before it spreads to other members of your team. Consider the following approaches for defusing an angry person:

- **Center yourself physically.** Take a couple of deep breaths, center and balance your physical posture so you feel solid, and keep your hands open and “at the ready” (rather than folding them, fidgeting, or placing them in your pockets). Face the angry person and keep your facial expression neutral.
- **Listen without interrupting.** Let the person vent (to a point) without challenging him or her. This will help “let the fizz out of the bottle.” Display effective non-verbal communication by nodding and maintaining eye contact without staring the person down. Keep your posture open to demonstrate your interest in what the person has to say.
- **Use the person’s name.** When you do speak, say the individual’s name. This helps to personalize the interaction and promotes rapport.
- **Reflect what the person is feeling.** By using phrases like, “I can see you are upset” or “It is a frustrating situation,” you acknowledge that you are hearing and accepting the person’s feelings.
- **Offer the individual a time out, if needed.** Offering the person a short break gives him or her a moment to reconsider her or his behavior. Offer

to talk again after the person has had a chance to regroup.

- **Reconnect.** Effective leaders keep malcontents close. Even after you have effectively “defused” anger, conduct more frequent check-ins to monitor the person’s ongoing behavior. Be careful to be respectful and to avoid undermining the worker’s trust in you. Keep in mind that there is a fine line between “checking in” and “checking up” on someone.
- **Set limits.** While many angry people will cool down in response to these kinds of defusing methods, some may not. Set limits on how far someone can go in expressing anger in the workplace. If a person becomes verbally abusive, physically intimidating, or seems “out of control,” make it clear that this behavior is unacceptable. Offer the person a time out and set another meeting to discuss his or her concerns.
- **If needed, get help.** If your intuition tells you that someone has escalated to a point where he or she can no longer exercise self-control, take action to safeguard yourself or others within the workplace. Contact HR and security or, if necessary, the police.

Dealing with an angry person may cause a “fight or flight” response in you. If this happens, it is important to slow yourself down, get centered, and be deliberate with your actions. Act in ways that demonstrate that you are in control of your emotions regardless of how other people are behaving. Remember that part of your job is to role model the behavior that you expect to see from your team.

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