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# Diffusing Workplace Anger



By [Graham Ward](#) , INSEAD

**Dealing with your own or other's anger takes skill and care and it's crucial for a healthy workplace.**

*“Anybody can become angry – that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way – that is not within everybody's power and is not easy.” — Aristotle*

From time to time all of us will experience great rage. The question is how can we deal with it effectively?

Anger at work typically surfaces when we feel vulnerable or exposed. It shows up when we feel under attack, or when something we valued or hoped for is at stake. It is sometimes posited as a protective emotion, arising when we feel threatened. According to neuroscience, this triggers the amygdala which overrides rational thought and causes strident action and reaction. The “amygdala hijack”, as it has come to be known, is evident when you see a colleague “acting out”. Slamming down a phone or shouting at a direct report is nature’s way of externalising anger by venting aggression. A common alternative is suppressing anger. This has a pressure cooker effect and can lead to explosive results later on. Thus, both venting and

suppressing anger has negative consequences and can be injurious to our relationships, career and health. There is a middle path, however, one that requires us as humans to behave more skilfully. It is a course that requires awareness, effort and desire.

## **Identifying negative emotion**

First, we need to look at the origins of anger. Our relationship to this most primal emotion is formed early in life.

Our primary caregivers are the first “leaders” we encounter, in the sense that they give us protection, provide for our needs and model the way to behave. Their reactions to anger when we were children shape our own anger responses. For example, if a father becomes incandescent when a child is late for dinner for the umpteenth time, the child probably reacts in one of three ways: returning the anger (acting out), taking a neutral response (sulking or passive aggression), or moving away from the source fearfully (especially if Dad is a big fellow). If returning the anger was permissible in your household, then storming around the workplace later in life may seem quite natural. If you were neutral, you may have been suppressing your irritation. If you were scared, as many children are, then you probably built coping mechanisms to avoid making people angry, or if the anger was unavoidable, capitulating and backing down. If this was the case, you probably make an easy victim for a workplace bully today.

In the work I do at INSEAD in leadership development, I start by figuring out which of the primary negative emotions – anger, sadness or fear – my client is most subject to, by asking what happens when things don’t materialise the way they want. I have found that more than 60 percent of male respondents choose anger over fear or sadness. For women it is more evenly split.

Problems are exacerbated when anger is combined with authority. Both men and women resent angry bosses. They often feel helpless and unable to exercise their own authentic emotions as a response; the result of this “bottling” is a kind of anger turned inwards, which shows up as a loss of self-esteem. Sometimes this can lead to the person kicking down the frustration to his or her own direct reports or trying to buffer it. I often discover that suppressed emotions are leaking out somewhere else, either at home, or worse still through self-destructive behaviour like alcohol abuse.

Another nasty corollary is that conflict avoidance is value destruction. Business is business: Tough conversations or disagreements need having. Being passive, or even worse passive aggressive, leads to wrong decisions being made by overbearing bosses. In most cases, we have a responsibility to confront. This is easier said than done.

### **Addressing anger in the workplace**

Some advice to people who often find themselves in the “red zone”: Start by figuring out what makes you angry, whether it is lack of attention to detail in a presentation, or long rambling meetings that go off-topic. Ask yourself why these are your triggers and where in your past do they come from. Write them down. Seeing them outside yourself is powerful. Notice the feeling you get in your body when the anger starts to show up. It may be that your stomach feels knotted, your fists start to clench or you feel your face redden. Learn to become instantly aware when that is happening. Next, if you are in a meeting room, write down your emotion. For example, when a direct report is whining, or a meeting is dragging on, write the word “irritation” discreetly on top of your pad. Labelling is a way of externalising the feeling and not allowing it to build inside you. It’s like letting the air out of a balloon. Changing the context can help. Leave the environment and take five minutes to ask the question: “What is really going on here?” Be curious about the situation and try to see it objectively.

### **Take time to address anger**

Finally, acknowledge your intention: Learn to skilfully express the emotion cognisant that anger is the emotion that does most damage. “God, you guys have been rambling on for the last half an hour and we have gotten absolutely nowhere. What an utter waste of time!” certainly conveys your point. However, if your intention is to change behaviour and accrete value then you need a more skilful approach.

Use a feedback model like **SBI (Situation, Behaviour, Impact)**, and embellish it by adding an emotion and supplementing it with a future orientation. This will allow you to reveal your feelings and lessen the associated inference of threat: “I am very irritated (emotion), because for the last half an hour in this meeting (situation) we have deviated wildly from the agenda we set ourselves (behaviour) and the result is, with only a few minutes left, we are no closer to consensus (impact). My suggestion for the future is we have a much more rigorous chair (future orientation).”

If you are on the receiving end of both barrels there are also ways to counteract it. If the person has “lost it”, simply say something like, “You are clearly very annoyed and I don’t think we will come to a constructive conclusion here today. Let’s talk about this later” and then beat your retreat.

### **Find the right time to respond**

Another route is not to engage in the argument but practice active listening. At some point the angry actor will run out of steam. Using empathy is a way of calming others. Naming the anger will either resurrect it for a while or allow an opening to a constructive conversation and eventually a resolution. Trying to stand in the other person’s shoes and taking a compassionate viewpoint as to why they are angry may be a far better route to alignment than arguing your corner. Your moment will arrive when the heat has gone from the situation. That does not mean you should “roll over”. It means that you need to combine persuasive arguments with timing to influence others.

Of the three primary negative emotions, anger is a rough customer. But, approached with compassion, humour and skill, it need not be a destroyer of worlds.

### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/diffusing-workplace-anger>

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