

Managing Workplace Hostility: A Proactive Approach to Positive Working Environments.

By

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“Temper is the one thing you don’t get rid of by losing it” said actor Jack Nicholson to Adam Sandler in the recent comedy called Anger Management. This play on words carries a lot of truth and is also backed by research. Behaviours such as “letting it out”, “venting anger” or “losing it” are no longer considered to be healthy ways of expressing anger.

We live in a culture where an aggressive response seems to be the expected and sometimes accepted reaction to stress, frustration, conflict and threat. This is negatively affecting our lives in the community, in our homes and workplaces, in other words, our relationships in general.

This should be an issue of serious concern for employers because hostile working environments are very stressful places to work in. They are characterized by aggressive people who can destroy team morale, create anxiety among other employees, and engage in sabotage and other destructive behaviours. This creates potentially explosive situations that could result in aggressive and sometimes even violent outbursts.

The key to preventing and managing such situations is to understand what anger and hostility consist of, be aware of working conditions that lead to such behaviour, know how to manage aggression when it occurs, and most of all promote and ensure a working culture that is based on respect, understanding civil behaviour, and constructive conflict.

Understanding anger and the aggressive response

Anger is an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and even rage. Like other emotional states it is accompanied by physiological and biological reactions. Typically heart rate and blood pressure rise, as well as levels of adrenaline and noreadrenaline, the energy hormones. This reaction can be caused by both external events that are perceived as threatening or by internal processes such as negative thoughts and memories. As such the most natural and primitive way to express anger is to respond aggressively – the basic fight or flight reaction that evokes a powerful surge of energy that allows us to defend ourselves or fight when we are attacked. This response comes a part of the brain that is very old, closer to our ancestors than the areas in the brain responsible for higher-order reasoning. In times of physical danger such as attacks from saber-toothed tigers, it served us well. However, as a reaction to modern day frustrations, interpersonal conflict, and other stressors, the aggressive response to anger is a dysfunctional behaviour.

The good news is that there are alternative ways of expressing anger that are constructive, healthy, and conducive to positive relationships. Here are some common ways of dealing with angry feelings before they make us do things that we would later regret.

Self-awareness – An important step in managing other people’s anger is being in touch with your own reactions to angry feelings. Know what pushes your buttons so that you do not confuse your perception of a situation to the actual intention of the other person.

Self-esteem - A healthy self-esteem also contributes to the ability to remain calm and confident during trying moments with ourselves and with others. People with high levels of self esteem are less likely to perceive others as a threat, are more open to criticism, are able to laugh at themselves, and are confident in their ability to deal with difficult situations. This results in them feeling less trapped, a feeling typically associated with aggressive outbursts.

Stress management – Stress is often a trigger to aggressive responses. Learning how to keep our stress levels under control often serves as a preventive measure against outbursts of anger. There are, of course many methods and techniques to manage stress. The most effective are those that address both the body and the mind. This includes regular exercise, relaxation, sufficient rest and leisure time, a healthy diet, positive thinking, problem-solving, investing in positive relationships, and maintaining a spiritual life. Keeping these areas of our life enriched can go a long way towards staying calm in times of perceived threat and frustration.

Emotional Intelligence – According to Daniel Goleman, people who are emotionally intelligent have better control over how they express their feelings and are less likely to feel threatened by other people’s actions. He defines emotional intelligence as the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in us and in our relationships. Fortunately, emotional intelligence competencies can be developed, even in adulthood.

Effective communication – Communication is the key to positive relationships in all areas of life. Many situations of anger arise out of misunderstanding, unclear messages, aggressive approaches, or lack of assertiveness that eventually lead to an explosion. Learning how to listen well, and carefully assess a situation before talking will also help to diffuse angry responses.

Cognitive restructuring – This basically refers to looking at the way we think and making the necessary changes. Aggression is often an expression of our inner thoughts. People who are angry think in exaggerated terms and these in turn can lead to exaggerated behaviours. Learning how to “restructure” our thoughts to more realistic ones can help diffuse angry reactions.

Managing other people's anger

The above are some methods and techniques that can help us deal with anger in a constructive way. However, oftentimes, it is not our anger that causes problems at work, but the angry outburst of other members of staff. This means that we also need to know how to handle anger in other people. As employers, directors, managers, supervisors, and leaders in organizations we need to have the ability to manage hostility when it occurs and most of all to create environments that discourage aggressive or threatening behaviour. An important aspect of managing aggression from employees is the ability to read early warning signs. John D. Byrnes, president and founder of the Centre for Aggression Management in Winter Park, Florida notes how a change in an employee's usual behaviour is a key indicator for aggression, and managers need to know their staff well so that they can be sensitive to changes. Someone who is normally organized and structured, may become scattered for example. He suggests that a manager should talk to the employee pointing out the change empathically and then allowing the person to talk.

Another important aspect is the ability to observe changes in a person's body language, indicating that they are getting angry. Typical warning signs are an aggressive fixed stare, dry mouth, clenched teeth, shallow breathing, perspiration and general muscle stiffness. At this point it is important for a manager to assess and diffuse the situation, possibly by not pursuing the issue further at that moment. People often become aggressive because they feel wronged, misunderstood or unheard. Byrnes suggests the following tips in trying to diffuse potentially explosive situations.

- Confront the employee privately to prevent embarrassment.
- Don't lose your temper, overreact or gesture aggressively; these will trigger a similar response in the employee.
- Listen without judgment. Many people simply want someone to hear what they have to say.
- Validate the employee's feelings or position. Say, "You have a good point," or agree that there is a problem.
- Help the employee save face during an anger situation. Don't pounce on a rash statement or pursue a muddled line of reasoning.
- If necessary, suggest a delay so people can cool off.
- Withdraw if necessary.

A preventive & proactive approach to aggression free working environments

Every leader in an organisation is responsible for encouraging and promoting working environments where people can work freely without the constant fear and tension of aggressive outbursts from their colleagues, managers, or other employees accountable to them. In an article on reducing workplace negativity that can lead to hostility, Susan Heathfield, a leading management consultant

specialising in human resources suggests the following organisational strategies that can help achieve this objective.

Provide opportunities for people to make decisions about and control and/or influence their own job. A frequent source of hostility in the workplace is when managers or organisations make decisions about people's work without consulting them for their opinion. Almost any decision that excludes the person doing the work is perceived negatively and can give rise to feelings of anger and hostility towards the organisation.

Make opportunities available for people to express their opinion about workplace policies and procedures. Recognise the impact of changes in such areas as working hours, pay, benefits, assignment of overtime, compensation payment, dress codes, office location, job requirements, and working conditions. These factors are close to the heart and mind of employees and changes can cause serious negative responses. Provide timely, proactive responses to questions and concerns that employees may have.

Treat people as adults with fairness and consistency. Develop and publicise workplace policies that organise work effectively. Apply them fairly and consistently. When processing a request for something, apply the same factors that you would apply to all employees. Another important point is to limit the number of regulations directing the behaviour of adult people at work as this can be very frustrating. Do not create rules for all employees when only a few are abusing or violating the norms.

Help people feel like members of the in-crowd. Every employee has the right to be up to date on company developments at the same time as everyone else. Communicate information effectively and constantly. If a number of options for action are being considered, communicate all that you know as soon as you know it. Reserve the right to change your mind later, without consequence, when additional information affects the decisions. This will reduce the possibility of people feeling left out, ignored, or side-tracked. Also, by increasing transparency you increase trust and credibility and reduce the stress and anxiety created by uncertainty.

Afford people the opportunity to grow and develop. Training, opportunities for promotions, lateral moves for development, and cross functional training are clear signs of an organisation's commitment to the staff. In this respect it is crucial that such opportunities are offered fairly and that employees do observe that unfair discrimination is being made. Employees who feel they have been wronged, deceived, cheated or backstabbed can become very volatile and potentially dangerous.

Provide appropriate leadership and a strategic framework, including mission, vision, values and goals. People need to feel that they are part of

something bigger than themselves. It provides a sense of safety and direction. If they understand the direction, and their role in achieving desired outcomes, they can effectively contribute more.

Provide appropriate rewards and recognition so that people feel they are valued. Reward and recognition are some of the strongest sources of motivation and raising staff morale. It also increases employee's sense of loyalty and pride towards the organisation.

Create an environment where healthy conflict and disagreement are regarded as normal and essential aspects of organisational growth. Conflict does not necessarily lead to aggression if managed well. Encourage people to speak up when they disagree or have a different opinion. Respect and reward this behaviour as long as it is respectful of other people. Creating a healthy outlet for the expression of disagreement, grievances, etc. helps to regularly diffuse potentially cumulative feelings of anger that could result in emotional outbursts. Know how to manage and deal with conflict and where necessary provide the training needed.

Conclusion

There will always be aggressive personalities at work and whether they are justified or not in their cause or claim, aggression should never be accepted as part of an organisational culture. Creating opportunities for employees to learn about anger and how to deal with it through some of the techniques highlighted in this article can educate people to gain control over their impulses. Equally important though is for leaders to avoid being aggressive themselves, and to create working environments where employees feel respected and valued. Nothing can replace a positive working relationship between staff members and with their leaders. Leaders need to learn to tune in to their people and be sensitive to the human dynamics occurring in their organisation. In this context developing emotional intelligence and emotional competence are key ingredients for the successful creation of healthy, aggression free, working environments.

On the 27th and 28th October, 2004, Patrick J. Psaila BA, M.Ed., and Katie Birch PhD. will be delivering an eight hour programme on the subject of managing workplace hostility. For information and booking e-mail pipsaila@workassistmalta.com or katie@onvol.net or info@reachbeyondmalta.com This programme is another initiative of the reach BEYOND Malta Foundation.

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