

Sometimes Blowing Your Top Is a Good Thing

Point:

Anger is discussed throughout this chapter for a reason: it's an important emotion. However, what about our responses to feeling anger? Work cultures teach us to avoid showing any anger at all, lest we be seen as poor service providers or, worse, unprofessional or even deviant or violent. While, of course, there *are* times when the expression of anger is harmful or unprofessional, we've taken this view so far that we now teach people to suppress perfectly normal emotions. It is inappropriate to ask people to behave in abnormal ways, and there is even more evidence about the organizational and personal costs of such suppression.

Emerging research shows that suppressing anger takes a terrible toll on individuals. One Stanford University study showed, for example, that when individuals were asked to wear a poker face during the showing of the atomic bombings of Japan during World War II, they were much more stressful conversation partners once the video was over. Other research shows that college students who suppress emotions like anger have more trouble making friends and are more likely to be depressed, and that employees who suppress anger feel more stressed by work.

There is a better way. One recent study showed that even when employees displayed anger deemed inappropriate by co-workers, if co-workers responded supportively to the anger (for example, by listening to the angry employee), favorable responses such as constructive work changes were the result.

Yes, managers must work to maintain a positive, respectful, and nonviolent culture. However, asking employees to suppress their anger not only is an ineffective and costly strategy, it ultimately may backfire if appropriate ways to express and release anger are blocked.

Counterpoint:

Yes, anger is a common emotion. But it's also a toxic one. The experience of anger and its close correlate, hostility, is linked to many counterproductive behaviors in organizations. That is why many organizations have developed anger management programs—to blunt the harmful effects of anger in the workplace.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that 16 percent of fatal workplace injuries resulted from workplace violence. Do we think the individuals who committed these acts were feeling joyful and contented?

To reduce anger in the workplace, many companies develop policies that govern conduct such as yelling, shouting profanities, and making hostile gestures. Others institute anger management programs. For example, one organization conducted mandatory in-house workshops that showed individuals how to deal with conflicts in the workplace before they boil over. The director who instituted the training said it “gave people specific tools for opening a dialogue to work things out.” MTS Systems, an Eden Prairie, Minnesota, engineering firm, engages an outside consulting firm to conduct anger management programs for its organization. Typically, MTS holds an eight-hour seminar that discusses sources of anger, conflict resolution techniques, and organizational policies. This is followed by one-on-one sessions with individual employees that focus on cognitive behavioral techniques to manage their anger. The outside trainer charges \$7,000–\$10,000 for the seminar and one-on-one sessions. “You want people to get better at communicating with each other,” says MTS manager Karen Borre.

In the end, everyone wins when organizations seek to diminish both the experience and, yes, the expression of anger at work. The work environment is less threatening and stressful to employees and customers. Employees are likely to feel safer. And the angry employee is often helped as well.

Sources: B. Carey, “The Benefits of Blowing Your Top,” *The New York Times* (July 6, 2010), p. D1; R. Y. Cheung and I. J. Park, “Anger Suppression, Interdependent Self-Construal, and Depression Among Asian American and European American College Students,” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 16, no. 4 (2010), pp. 517–525; D. Geddes and L. T. Stickney, “The Trouble with Sanctions: Organizational Responses to Deviant Anger Displays at Work,” *Human Relations* 64, no. 2 (2011), pp. 201–230; and J. Fairley, “Taking Control of Anger Management,” *Workforce Management* (October 2010), p. 10.