



## Understanding Anger in the Workplace

The emotion of anger can be triggered by a vast range of things. Fundamentally, it relates to the belief that someone has harmed or threatens to harm ourself or someone we care about. Harm in this case refers not only to physical harm, but also to various types of psychological or social harm, such as hurting our pride or attacking our reputation. In merit-based environments like the workplace, real or imagined threats to how people perceive you (reputation, trustworthiness, reliability, etc.) can readily result in anger, and work pressures can exacerbate the emotion. It is helpful for managers to understand anger fully in order to deal with workers who are experiencing it or causing it.

Some triggers for anger may be more likely than others to occur in the workplace. Anger in the workplace can arise, for example, when we believe that:

- We are not receiving our fair share of something desirable (e.g., break time).
- We are receiving more than our fair share of something less desirable or more onerous (e.g., workload).
- Someone has caused, or threatens to cause, our rights to be violated.
- Our pride or ego feels attacked (we feel slighted, wronged, disrespected or insulted).
- Someone threatens our position or prestige.

Certain characteristics of anger are important to understand when managing negative emotions in the workplace:

1. **Anger can relate not only to things that have taken place, but also to our speculations and assumptions about people or situations.** Sometimes we become angry, for example, when we simply assume that others have hostile intentions toward us.
2. **Thoughts associated with anger can have blaming or judging elements.** E.g., *"They made me do this, so it's their fault"*; *"She's so selfish"*; *"He shouldn't have done that"*.
3. **Angry thoughts can have a greater impact when they are worded or imagined in extremes.** E.g., *"My whole project is ruined"*; *"They never get it right"*.
4. **Anger can intensify when people continually dwell on negative images and thoughts.** Unresolved anger can continue to grow.



5. **Anger can be expressed overtly or passively.** A worker may demonstrate anger overtly with a raised voice, for example, or passively through sarcastic or purposefully ambiguous remarks. Passive-aggressiveness tends to occur when a worker feels it is unsafe to openly express anger, such as when they are angry with a manager.
  
6. **Anger may be fueled by a previous incident.** Any angry reaction may seem out of proportion for the current situation, but could be related to incidents or experiences that have happened in the past. For example, someone who has been teased repeatedly in the past may seem to over-react to a seemingly mild tease.

It can also be important for managers to understand that anger can be accompanied by involuntary bodily changes of the sort that would allow us to attack others or defend ourselves against threats. The experience of anger varies from person to person, but generally involves physical responses like increased blood pressure (causing raises in skin temperature and flushed skin), rapid heart rate, sweating, teeth grinding or clenching, increased energy and restlessness. The surge of energy triggered by anger can cause us to behave more aggressively, for example pacing around, slamming doors, snapping at others, yelling, or saying nasty things that are intended to hurt. These factors can threaten to escalate anger emotions in the workplace to a degree where they are a significant threat to psychological health and safety.

The table below contains examples of situations in which experiences of anger can affect the way we think of ourselves and the way we act. Notice how actions could or would be different if the thoughts were different.

Situation	Anger-Provoking Thoughts	Anger-Driven Actions	Anger-Moderating Thoughts
A worker keeps interrupting you while you are communicating something important.	<i>"He thinks he's smarter than me."</i> (mind-reading)	Raise your voice, speak in a stern tone, make sarcastic remarks about the person.	<i>"He's anxious and perhaps worried about what I may say."</i>
A worker does not do	<i>"She is purposely</i>	Glare at the worker,	<i>"She may be</i>

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what you have instructed her to do.	<i>undermining my authority. She wants to embarrass me in front of the other workers.”</i> (assuming hostile intentions)	try to assert your authority by speaking louder and in a stern tone. Be extra observant of this worker’s weaknesses.	<i>unclear about what she needs to do.”</i>
A manager is convinced that workers favour another manager.	<i>“They like the other guy more. They won’t appreciate me no matter how hard I work or how much I do for them.”</i>	Become silent and disengaged during meetings, put less effort into work, give up on trying to excel.	<i>“My job is to perform effectively in my position – not everyone needs to like me.”</i>
A manager is required to reorganize his schedule because of last minutes changes in deadlines implemented by administration workers.	<i>“What a rotten job. The administrative staff is so incompetent. I can’t get anything done around here.”</i> (thinking in extremes)	Become unmotivated at work, waste time surfing the net, look for a new job.	<i>“Last-minute changes are frustrating, but there’s nothing I can do now. The best thing is to figure out how I can adjust to the changes.”</i>
A manager has been asked to do what she feels are menial tasks outside of her job description.	<i>“My boss thinks I’m more suited for lower-level work. She thinks she can do whatever she wants just because she runs the department.”</i>	Talk negatively about boss behind her back.	<i>“Not all parts of my job are going to be enjoyable. It’s unfortunate, but part of the deal. It would be unrealistic to expect to always be perfectly happy.”</i>
During a meeting, a worker makes a casual remark that sounds like	<i>“He is challenging my authority. I have to rise to the occasion and</i>	Think of a good “comeback” remark, glare at worker,	<i>“People tend to know he’s got an abrasive</i>



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a derisive comment about the manager's work ethic.	<i>confront him aggressively on this or else I will lose face."</i>	become sarcastic with worker for the rest of the meeting.	<i>style...his comment reflects more poorly on him than on me."</i>
A manager needs to push back target deadlines because a worker was unable to deliver her part of the project on time.	<i>"She is not at all trying to be efficient. She is so useless and lazy."</i>	Talk to worker in an irritable tone, make subtle disparaging remarks in front of other workers, like "we'll see how long she takes this time."	<i>"She's overloaded and struggling with her own work demands. I should see if there's a way I can help."</i>

Although verbally or otherwise outwardly expressing anger may provide short-term emotional relief and the satisfaction of revenge, the long-term consequences can be dire. Understanding how managers and workers might feel in contentious situations can help managers detect and moderate unhealthy, anger-based behaviours before they cause too much damage. It can be helpful to be mindful of angry thoughts and ways to reframe those thoughts.