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Facing the Perfect Storm: Managing Employee Anger in the Workplace

By Ajay M Pangarkar, Teresa Kirkwood • astd.org • July 2nd, 2013

A perfect storm is forming in the workplace if it hasn't occurred already. Employees are coping with an unpredictable economy, increasing personal debt levels and taxes, and daily gridlock. They feel overworked and under paid, while also facing precarious employment conditions. It's safe to say that the anger threshold is high and people volatile.

Anger can move people to improve and surmount challenges or it can destroy an organization from the inside out. Anger is unpredictable, but when recognized early and managed properly, it's a powerful motivational tool. Managers must take control of this emotion and leverage it to the benefit of the organization. How an organization's leadership handles anger and conflict will set the tone in the workplace.

Employees are expected to be professional and respectful to others. Most of the time this is the case. But it's only natural for people to express emotion and for employees to be on edge and ready to vent. In the current economic climate, employees are more reticent to express frustration for various reasons. Unexpressed anger is dangerous, however, and often career debilitating.

Unexpressed anger typically surfaces surreptitiously through activities like backstabbing, uncooperativeness, gossip, and poor performance. It's important to clue into the signals since most of the time peers and employees will hide their frustration, especially if it is toward a superior. Don't let anger fester. Airing emotions sooner rather than later fosters a positive work environment. It also demonstrates to others that it's safe to express themselves.

First, it's important to manage anger appropriately. To mishandle or misinterpret it could be more detrimental than ignoring it in the first place. Be aware of mixed messages. An employee might attempt to divert your attention by stating something that is not the actual issue. Provide an opportunity for them to express issues honestly and openly.

Second, behavior speaks louder than words. Even if you've addressed an employee's concerns privately, other employees will learn about it. Like it or not, employees watch what you do to resolve an issue. Act appropriately, decisively, and professionally—especially if the anger is directed at you.

Finally, listen to what an employee or coworker shares with you. They might be passionate and hostile, but don't retort or become defensive. Reacting instinctively will only fuel their anger and have them possibly shut down.

When you suspect any type of anger, don't get confrontational. Meet with your employee over a coffee and be clear about your intentions. Get the person to open up by asking unassuming questions. Don't delay when addressing their concerns. This will demonstrate a lack of compassion, accentuate the anger,

and could foster resentment from other employees. Share ownership of the issue by valuing your employee's feelings and perceptions.

Discretion and privacy are essential to employee trust. Whether you're a colleague or manager, privacy is important for two reasons. First, it allows employees to share their feelings in a safe environment. Second, it mitigates the anger that could be spreading throughout the workplace. If anger seems to spill into the workplace, be proactive. Work together with your employees to find solutions. Avoid the blame game.

Anger is a strong and deceiving emotion, so respect and address employees' perspectives. Their feelings are relevant, but clearly asking them to clearly list the facts makes a situation more objective and less personal. Try to reach agreement about some of the facts; this helps to develop trust and gives you a common goal.

Allow your employees time to determine how and when they want to address the issue. Respect their timeline but follow up soon after you talk to demonstrate your commitment to assist them. Once addressed, ask the person if they are satisfied with the result. Listen to their tone and watch nonverbal cues to determine their acceptance.

In the end, telling employees that an issue is resolved is less effective than having them participate in developing the solution. Employee participation is essential and will quickly diminish or eliminate anger. More importantly are your actions in addressing issues and implementing a solution. Not acting—or worse, not following through—will unquestionably undermine your leadership credibility.

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