Given the complex relationships, performance pressures, high stakes, and lack of control found in many workplaces today, it is not surprising that a workplace environment can provoke feelings of anger. Anger is a normal, basic emotion that ranges from mild irritation to intense rage. It can get expressed in the workplace in many different forms ranging from someone shutting down and not speaking, to someone having an out-of-control temper tantrum. In rare cases anger leads to acts of violence.

No matter what the form, the consequences of poorly managed anger in the workplace can range from increased turnover and reduced productivity, to property damage, physical injury, and worse. It would be impossible to quantify the real cost of anger if we factor in the cost of how it affects employee morale, performance, health, and safety.

Anger can be harmful to the workplace and employers today have a duty to provide a workplace free from harm. This means managers and supervisors have to learn to identify and manage hostile feelings and aggression.

**What managers need to know about anger**

Rachel Mallory, one of Human Solutions' Directors of Professional Services, says that the first thing managers need to do is understand where anger comes from. “There can be any number of things going on in that person’s life. Frustrations at work can simmer away until there is some sort of incident that makes the person fly into a rage. He or she may or may not have tried different official avenues to resolve the issue, but perhaps the only avenue they can see right now is to get angry.”

“For other people it may be that things are not going well for them at home and they are having difficulty coping as a result. Typically the workplace is the last place people show their stress — if they are having outbursts at work this usually means they are not coping well elsewhere, and haven’t been for a while.”
Dr. Mallory says there may not be specific warning signs for anger as opposed to other stress-induced behaviours. “The primary thing to look for is any kind of change. If someone is very outgoing and they become quiet, or a very quiet person starts to have strong negative reactions to normal workplace situations, then this will often indicate that some kind of stress is going on in his or her life.

“One of the keys to preventing anger and other kinds of inappropriate behaviour is to check in with the person you are concerned about and say to them: ‘Things seem a bit different for you, is everything okay?’

“People worry about saying something to someone who may be upset. They fear the person is going to start telling them all kinds of things that they don’t want to know. One option is to say to the person, ‘I don’t need to know the details, but I am noticing that you seem different than you usually are, and if there is anything I can do, let me know.’”

Before having a conversation with a troubled-looking employee, managers need to be proactive and know the options they can offer the employee. “You might want to talk with HR and find out if, for example, a shorter work week or some time off may be options, and what support would be available through the EFAP or other benefit programs.”

“You may or may not have the power to change the problem, but an important part of creating trust in you as a manager is to at least see if something can be done,” she says.

**Common causes of anger**

Some of the common causes of workplace anger include:

- Any type of harassment or bullying
- A perception that there is favouritism
- Promises made and not kept
- Being asked to do something a person believes is wrong
- Expectations a person believes are too high
- Feeling better qualified and skilled than the supervisor
- Another employee is doing the same job but makes more money
- Rejection of a work project in which the person has made a big emotional investment
- Insensitivity, lack of flexibility, or micro-managing by the manager/supervisor
- Lack of resources or training to do the job
- Being criticized in front of others
- Poor communication
- Withdrawal of earned benefits
- Negative feedback

**Tips for talking with an angry person**

- **Don’t wait.** Unless the person needs time to simmer down, it’s best to not allow them to fret until their anger boils over and becomes destructive.
- **Be respectful.** Show respect for the person’s point of view, feelings, and where he or she is at emotionally.
- **Ensure privacy.** Let the person vent in private.
- **Listen.** Allow the person to talk without interruption. Then repeat back what you heard to let the person know he or she is being heard.
- **Give brief responses.** Respond to accusations with honest, brief responses that show respect. Don’t get into a debate, justify your actions, or place blame. Be careful not to let yourself get sucked into the emotions of the moment.
- **Find out what is really going on.** Ask open-ended questions that require thoughtful answers that will help clarify the problem.
- **Find common ground.** Find points you agree on, even if it is just that there is a problem, and work from there.
- **Seek a solution.** Explore options together, be creative and think outside of the box.

**Behaviours to watch for**

- Sarcastic, irritable, or moody behaviour
- Habitual lateness
- Apathetic and/or inconsistent work performance
- Prone to making direct or veiled threats
- Aggressive and antisocial behaviour
- Over-reaction to organizational policies or performance appraisals
- Strained relationships with other workers
- Obsessive involvement and/or emotional attachment to the job

“You may or may not have the power to change the problem, but an important part of creating trust in you as a manager is to see if something can be done.”

Dr. Rachel Mallory
Human Solutions™ Director of Professional Services
When anger becomes aggression
If someone is displaying aggressive behaviours at the workplace, a manager needs to think about whether this person can be at work right now. Is it safe (physically and emotionally) for other people? No one wants to work with someone who might lash out at them at any time.

In the event that a worker’s anger escalates to the point of hostile behavior, a manager needs to know what to do in order to be able to take immediate action. If the anger is totally out of control then the person may need to be escorted out of the building by security. Otherwise, Dr. Mallory recommends the first thing a manager should do is contain the behaviour.

“Quietly ask the person to come into your office where you can talk privately. Be calm and supportive in your approach. If he or she is obviously agitated, I suggest not going there alone. Instead you might tell the person to have a seat, and then go find another person, ideally someone who is perceived as caring and supportive, to join you just to be on the safe side.

“If someone says anything about harming themselves or somebody else, take this very seriously. It’s better to err on the side of caution in your response. It is a myth that if people talk about it, they won’t do it.”

Dr. Rachel Mallory, Human Solutions™ Director of Professional Services

There are a number of different possible options that could be helpful for someone who is having anger difficulties. “If counselling is needed, then that is something that could be set up through the EFAP and/or other resources. If the person is away from work for a while, then a return-to-work plan may need to be developed. If it is a complex situation, then perhaps outside help should be brought in — for example, mediation may be needed to help re-integrate the person back into the workplace,” Dr. Mallory explains.

“The important thing to remember is that anger is treatable. With appropriate help and a commitment to change from the person, change may come quite quickly. There are times when the anger is part of a more complex picture, and in that case the person may need longer-term help in a variety of areas.”

What the workplace needs to do
The workplace can do much to ensure stress doesn’t turn into anger and anger turn into aggression.

Harassment policies. Provide information and training about harassment policies to employees, managers, supervisors and other key personnel. Include information about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in the workplace.

Supportive work environment. Take steps to ensure that employees do not feel stigmatized when they have difficulties coping for any reason. Everyone needs to know that it is okay to ask for help, and that support is available.

Management procedures. Provide information and training to managers, supervisors and other key personnel about the policies and procedures for dealing with difficult people and situations. Monitor and ensure that these procedures are followed. This is especially important if illegal behaviours, such as threats to others, are involved.

Training in defusing. In some workplaces there are particular individuals who have been trained to know how to defuse difficult situations. Having a formal program of this type is often an option to consider if the nature of your business is highly stressful (e.g. an industrial environment where accidents could have very serious consequences). In other workplaces, there are often several people who are formally or informally identified as having good skills in volatile workplace situations. HR professionals, for example, are often effective in dealing with these types of situations.

Third party intervention. Establish protocols for bringing outside expertise into the organization to do conflict resolution or mediation work.

Stress management. Deliver workshops and information seminars (e.g. lunch and learn events) to all employees. Helpful topics include: conflict resolution, problem-solving, stress and/or anger management, and change management.
New Developments

New e-learning course: Taking Control of Anger
A seven-week online course to help manage anger

Do you, or someone you know, have trouble managing angry feelings or angry behaviour? Are you concerned about the consequences of anger to your health, relationships, and job? In this course, written by a Human Solutions™ psychologist and based on proven and effective strategies, participants learn:

- To reduce the frequency and intensity of angry feelings and the likelihood of anger occurring.
- A model to help explain where anger comes from and options for managing it.
- Ways to reduce anger-related tension.
- Constructive problem-solving as an alternative to aggression and angry behaviour.

Course Schedule (self-directed):

Week 1: Examining your anger.

Week 2: Where anger comes from and what to do about it.

Weeks 3–4: Techniques to reduce tension.

Week 5: Changing anger “triggers” by changing thinking.

Week 6: Constructive problem-solving.

Week 7: Maintaining progress.

Visit the Member Services area of www.humansolutions.ca to learn more or register.

Service and programming questionnaire
Finding out what’s important to our customers

Human Solutions™ is dedicated to ensuring we provide the best possible service and programming to our customers. One of the ways we measure whether we are on track is to ask. With that in mind, we’ve developed a brief questionnaire, accessible online.

If your organization has not received the email with the link to the survey please contact Lorene Beckett, Human Solutions’ National Director, Account Management. Lorene can be reached by email (lbeckett@humansolutions.ca) or phone (1.888.689.8604).

Please complete the survey as soon as possible so you can let us know how we are doing and what else we could do to help you and your organization create a healthier, more effective work environment. When the results are in, we plan to review them carefully and use them to make improvements to existing products and services and develop future programming to better serve you.

We will report the survey results in our next issue.

Want to know more about these new developments? Contact your Human Solutions™ Account Manager.

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