

All the rage?

We all get frustrated by the pressures of life but some people, it seems, get into a rage all the time. Carole Spiers examines how to deal with other people's anger without getting into conflict ourselves.

Rage is all around us: road rage, desk rage, computer rage, air rage, trolley rage. So what do you do when you find yourself in a situation which has suddenly got out of hand?

Some people will do all they can to avoid conflict. They may find themselves backing away from situations where they should, ideally, be taking control. They may find that their own situation or neutrality is compromised. So what are their alternative strategies?

There are three basic ways to resolve conflicts. In negotiation, the parties discuss the issues themselves and produce a solution. In mediation, a third party helps the disputants discuss the issues and produce a solution. And, in arbitration, a third party reviews each party's case and makes a decision.

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There is a fourth way, which is even more productive and helpful: prevention. Conflict can often be prevented from arising in the first place by the use of effective, assertive communication. This requires people to feel safe to explore their concerns. They must be assured that they are being genuinely heard. They need to know that the listener is paying attention and understanding what they are saying. This is done through:

- **Empathy** – understanding what someone tells you by seeing things as they



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see them and communicating your understanding to them so they can see that you understand (or are at least doing your best to do so). This does not include saying, "I understand how you feel." The skills of active listening and paraphrasing in particular can help to show empathy, as can an acknowledgement of the person's present emotions, for example: "I can see that has made you angry" or "I can see how upset you are."

- **Active listening** – ensuring the person can see signs that you are paying proper attention to them. Good eye contact should be maintained. You should nod and use frequent minimal prompts ("Hmm, yes, I see," and so on). Body posture should be relaxed and open – perhaps slightly leaning forward and looking alert. Facial expressions should be appropriate and matching the person's mood.

- **Paraphrasing** – putting what someone has said into your own words and saying it back to them. It enables you to check your understanding of what they have said and for them to correct you if necessary. It also allows them to hear that you have understood what they are saying. A paraphrase is a powerful tool in

establishing an empathetic relationship. Paraphrases often begin with the word, 'so ...'.

- **Using open questions.** An open question is one that cannot be answered by a 'yes' or 'no'. Open questions usually begin with the words, 'how', 'what', 'where' or 'who'. Try to avoid 'why', as it is inclined to make people feel defensive. Generally, open questions have the effect of helping people to move on and explore their concerns in more detail.

- **Summarising** – means giving a short summary of what a person (or group) has said. A summary is longer than a paraphrase and is often used at the end of a discussion to pick out themes or particular concerns. It can be used to check that you have understood facts, especially if someone is confused or is confusing you. Using a summary can help you and the person/group to put facts in the right order, reduce confusion and focus on the more important parts of what has been said.

- **Using silence.** This is not an easy skill to master. Many of us feel silence is awkward and have to say something to fill it. Silence can be used to allow an individual or group to reflect for a moment on what

they have just said or are going to say next, and so move the discussion on in the direction they wish.

● **Focusing** – helping individuals to pick out a major concern from a number of issues so that this can then form the focus of the discussion. It addresses the tendency that some people have to flit from subject to subject, possibly avoiding the most important issues.

● **Reflecting** – picking out a word or phrase and using the same word or words back to the person with a slightly questioning inflection. The word or phrase reflected should be one with an emotional 'load' behind it, and reflecting this to them will often cause the person to explore what is behind it, thus moving the discussion on.

● **Challenging/reality testing** – helping someone to see a discrepancy between their perception of what is happening and reality. Sometimes people have a faulty perception of things they have done or how others perceive them. They need to be helped to examine reality by careful questioning. You may ask them, for example, what evidence there is to support their negative view and so help them see things from a different perspective.

These skills will help people express their feelings and so reduce the chance of a conflict escalating – but how do you deal with anger when it occurs?

Your response to someone else's anger will be affected by how anger was dealt with in your family and upbringing. For example if:

- you were frightened as a child by angry outbursts, you are likely to feel frightened when someone is angry.
- your family sometimes shouted at each other and then forgot it and moved on, you are likely to feel reasonably comfortable with anger.
- anger was seldom expressed in your family, you are likely to feel confused and

inadequate.

When confronted by an angry person, it does not help to try to defend yourself or your company, to get into an argument or become angry yourself. It may help to break eye contact – as two people both refusing to drop their eyes is highly confrontational. It is also likely to make the situation worse if you are confrontational, invade the other person's body space or give them a verbal trigger that escalates the difficulty.

Using the skills described above allows a person to express their anger and you to acknowledge how they feel. Ask open questions to try to find out what they are angry about. Tell them you are sorry they are feeling like that and, if there is something that has been done to contribute to how they are feeling, an expression of genuine regret will help. It also helps if you can agree with any part of what they are saying and acknowledge that this could be making them angry.

As Charles Handy says in

'Understanding Organisations' (1999): 'Neglected, conflict is like weeds, it can stifle productive work'. But when conflict is dealt with constructively, people can be stimulated to greater creativity that can lead to a wider choice of actions and more beneficial outcomes.

By Carole Spiers



Carole Spiers.

Top 5 Anger Management tips

- Try to differentiate between current and 'regressed' anger. If you're angry with someone for more than 20 minutes, the chances are they've triggered a response to something that happened to you in the past. This may not even be their fault.
- Think about the person you're angry with. Will you still be angry with them in an hour, tomorrow or next week? If not, why ruin their day – and yours?
- Try to relax. Take some deep breaths and calm down. Maybe 'count to ten'. Get your emotions back under control and try to think rationally.
- If you're still angry, try using exercise as a release for your emotions and to stimulate the production of endorphins that will improve your mood. If this isn't an option, find somewhere private where you can 'shout out' your anger, or call a friend to whom you can offload your emotions.
- Remember: nobody 'makes' you angry – it's

your choice whether that's how you respond. And you'll almost certainly feel happier with yourself if you deal with your anger positively and forgive them, rather than letting anger get the better of you.

Special offer for TTHR readers: email sb@carolespiersgroup.com for a FREE ebook - a 'Great Gold-Mine Of Easy 'Managing Anger' Tips Ever Crammed Into One Free Ebook.

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