

Helping Employees Cool It

Anger management training can address hostile workplace behaviors that reduce productivity and increase turnover.



By Kathryn Tyler

We had a lot of conflict. It was a hostile work environment," says Connie Schmoll, executive director of Shelter House Inc., a nonprofit women's and children's domestic-abuse shelter in Willmar, Minn. The conflict involved staff members, not residents, and it led to some mistrust and disrespect and "a lot of gossip."

So, to resolve the tensions, last September Schmoll and the board of directors invited anger management training specialist Anna Maravelas, founder of TheraRising, a training company in St. Paul, Minn., to conduct in-house workshops and individual and two-person sessions. The training was mandatory for all 39 employees.

"I met with ... people individually to get a history of their relationships," Maravelas says. Then during two-person sessions, "we identified the patterns that caused rifts and specific changes to each person's behavior in the future." She also helped the organization develop a code of conduct.

The results were positive. Now, "people truly care about one another," Schmoll says. The training "gave people specific tools for opening a dialogue to work things out. Communication is much more open."

In a 2008 study by CPP Inc., a research and training company in Mountain View, Calif., about 85 percent of workers surveyed said they deal with conflict on the job, 22

percent said conflict has led to illness or absence from work, and 10 percent said a project has failed as a direct result of conflict.

To curb or forestall the effects of conflict, some managers are turning to anger management training, often called conflict management training. And it may be especially useful now: A down economy and persistent unemployment—or potential unemployment—are sources of stress that can make people quick to anger.

When the Pot Boils

Simon Rego, director of clinical training at the American Institute for Cognitive Therapy in New York, likens anger buildup to a pot of water on the stove. "If you turn the dial on 3 or 4, you can stay most of the day like that," he says. "But every stress in your life raises the dial: The kids are sick, the school is raising tuition, your partner lost her job, you're taking on more projects and working later ... until the slightest thing sets you over the boiling point."

Workplace stress is high these days because many employers have reduced staff size. "Employees are given more responsibilities without added compensation," Rego explains. "It leads to longer hours and paranoia about who is doing what. If a person already has anger issues, it's a pretty lethal combination."

However, a person can have problems with anger without screaming obscenities or banging his fist on the table. "Anger comes in two flavors: hot and cold contempt," says Maravelas, a therapist and author of *How to Reduce Workplace Conflict and Stress* (Career Press, 2005). "Hot contempt is what we think of as traditional

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anger: red face and bulging veins, what I call 'flooding.' But 90 percent of workplace conflict is cold contempt: gossip, back-stabbing, withdrawal, simmering resentment and the desire to see the other person fail."

Either type of anger can cost a company in lost productivity and higher health insurance premiums. "A steady diet of anger can be a better predictor of heart disease than smoking or high cholesterol," Maravelas says.

In fact, the May 2000 issue of the American Heart Association journal *Circulation* reported on a study that found "prone to anger" increased individuals' likelihood of having heart disease and heart attacks, regardless of established biological risk factors such as high blood pressure. In the study, the angriest people had twice the risk of coronary heart disease as did their calmer counterparts.

"Anger is probably one of the most important but ignored topics in the workplace," Rego says. "There are so many people with different belief systems thrown together, it's a ripe place for anger issues to emerge."

Identifying the Subjects

Intensely angry employees who need conflict management training are easy to spot. They are in constant conflict, often face disciplinary action and cause complaints by co-workers. They swear during meetings and fire off scathing e-mail messages afterward. Employees with intensely angry managers may have unusually high rates of absenteeism and turnover.

In extreme cases, conflict management training may not be enough. "Any behavior involving physical harm or a threat of harm to another employee, customer or vendor" indicates an employee who needs help from an employee assistance program, says Paul Damiano, organizational psychologist and president of Good Works Consulting in Summerfield, N.C.

It's just as important to identify and address less-obvious anger and passive aggressive behaviors, experts say. "An employee has trouble with anger if she sits in stony silence and colleagues avoid her for fear of setting her off," Maravelas says. "My clients estimate their managers spend about 40 percent of their time mopping up messes created by anger and withdrawal."

To identify employees with less-obvious anger problems who need conflict management training, Karen Borre, organizational development manager at MTS Systems Inc., an engineering company in Eden Prairie, Minn., says: "I don't sit at my desk much. I watch who says what to whom, how processes are working." She also talks to supervisors about potential conflicts in their departments.

How to Go About It

Anger management training—like anger itself—takes different forms and covers many topics.

Determine the approach. There are three approaches to anger management training: one-day workshops, small-group facilitations and one-on-one therapy ses-

Don't label the program 'anger management'; call it 'constructive conflict.'

sions. HR professionals should select an approach based on the type of conflict that needs to be addressed.

Employees who show signs of passionate anger, such as throwing chairs or banging fists, should receive one-on-one counseling in cognitive behavioral techniques to manage their anger. If the anger is more than just conflict, Borre refers them to the employee assistance program.

However, the vast majority of employees don't exhibit these obvious outward signs. For those who have problems with resentment, a workshop followed by small-group facilitation can work well. For instance, Borre says, MTS holds "an eight-hour seminar, and then has the facilitator do one-on-one interviews before sitting down with the whole group and brainstorming" how to move forward. Her outside trainer charges \$7,000 to \$10,000 for the main workshop and facilitation sessions.

Rego recommends that HR professionals consider a preventive, holistic approach. People often get referred to anger management training, he says, "because of an acute incident where they 'lost it.' There's a cost savings in targeting the most problematic employees." However, he

adds: Potentially, many people have issues with anger; they just aren't as extreme. Data show anger management training benefits groups as a whole and can impact productivity and absenteeism.

Market the program. Damiano advises HR professionals to be diplomatic in naming the program. "Anger management is actually a broad label for training that typically covers conflict management, stress management, constructive communication and emotional intelligence," he says. He advises HR professionals to "take away the label 'anger management' and simply call the program 'constructive conflict.' Let the employee know that you are sending him because the organization values him and wants to continue investing in his career."

Borre says conflict management training is optional but strongly recommended for all employees at MTS. "Most people say, 'I don't need that; I'm fine.' I try to characterize it with the right language" to encourage "targeted" employees to attend, she says. "You have to sell it. You want people to get better at communicating with each other."

Structure the curriculum. Damiano says the training should include communication skills such as active listening, non-threatening dialogue and constructive confrontation. It should embody conflict resolution skills such as the use of active rather than passive verbs, and constructive rather than destructive behaviors.

"The training must recreate some of the emotional context in which the participants' anger becomes manifest," he adds. "This is best done through practice sessions and role-plays. Videotape these experiential activities because it is the only way the participants can see how their body language can escalate conflict."

Get at underlying causes. As in a marriage, so too in the workplace: The hot button for employee conflict is often money. Review compensation formulas and performance criteria for potential clashes.

Online Resources

To discuss training for angry employees, or for additional resources on recognizing and dealing with anger in the workplace, and for names of associations that can provide referrals to qualified psychologists, see the online version of this article at www.shrm.org/hrmagazine.

"Anger is a symptom," Maravelas says. "You need to go for the root cause." She tells of a high-technology manufacturer where "the top 12 vice presidents were literally yelling at each other in meetings and going home with migraines." After the conflict management workshop, they started tackling the reasons for conflict.

Maravelas discovered a catalyst was the way bonuses were calculated. The metrics were different for each executive and were not in alignment with one another. As a result, one executive's methods of achieving goals could interfere with another's. "We changed their bonus program," she says. "The anger was gone in 24 hours."

Another situation she's encountered: "Sometimes there's one person who has been identified in need of anger management training. But when I probe, I find a person whose job is structured in an impossible way, or a conscientious employee who is being made a scapegoat by the group. ... I find 97 percent of the conflicts aren't due to an [angry] person or personality. Something is shaping behavior in a negative way."

Find a provider. Many consultants and psychologists offer anger management training. How can you choose? Experts recommend selecting a provider certified in mental health issues. Apart from being well-versed in behavioral therapy, psychologists can determine if an employee needs intensive, one-on-one therapy.

"The trainers should be certified in a respected anger management program or have an advanced degree in the behavioral-psychology, counseling-psychology or medical fields," Damiano says. "Given the sensitive nature of the training and the skill required to deliver it competently, only

highly credentialed and experienced people should be providing it."

Assess effectiveness. The effectiveness of anger management training can be measured by using typical business metrics. For instance, Damiano recommends tracking the number of complaints to HR about a given employee.

HR professionals can also document department absenteeism and turnover. Employees constantly embroiled in conflict often call in sick or resign.

A Pre-emptive Possibility

Most workplace anger, Maravelas says, is an employee's response to perceived unfair treatment or lack of acknowledgment for efforts and sacrifices. When they receive expressions of gratitude, "most people relax into a receptive place where they can absorb positive appreciation." A sincere compliment can be as rewarding as a tangible gift; a nice card or a catered lunch can go a long way toward smoothing ruffled feathers. ■

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