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Ronald L. Krannich, Ph.D.,
and "Zoe"

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Career Tips From the Experts

DEALING WITH ANGRY CO-WORKERS

By Lynne McClure

Angry co-workers can make it harder for you to do your job.

Managers and supervisors can use their authority in addressing employees' angry behavior. But even as an employee - without any authority - you can deal effectively with angry co-workers by taking the following six steps:

1. **Stay calm.** If you get angry in return, you'll only fuel your co-worker's anger. You're not responsible for his or her anger, but you can help lower the intensity by staying calm yourself.
2. **Decide.** Should you ignore your co-worker's angry outburst and give him or her space to "let off some steam"? Should you get away because he or she may become violent? Is this a good time to get him or her to talk? You know most of your co-workers well enough to decide the best - and safest - thing to do right now. This is true even if you are the target of your co-worker's anger.
3. **Acknowledge his or her anger - when your co-worker is ready.** Whether it's at the moment or later, tell your co-worker that you understand he or she is angry. Even if you think it's too obvious or simple to say, "I see that you're angry," this type of comment will help lower your co-worker's level of anger. And even though your comment won't resolve the anger, it will decrease the intensity.
4. **Stay out of the anger.** You've acknowledged his or her anger - but you do not want to become part of it. Even if you agree with your co-worker about whatever is making him or her angry, you want to avoid being associated with his or her emotional way of expressing it. If you are the target of his or her anger, you still want to stay out of the intense feelings.
5. **Talk about the issues - when your co-worker is ready.** When you decide it's time to talk, focus on the issues your co-worker is angry about, not about his or her anger. "I understand that you're angry about the schedule," or, "I understand that you're angry at me for forgetting to give you the message" are examples of sticking to the issues.

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6. **Choose your role - carefully.** You can apologize and promise to be more careful about giving messages. You can say you understand his or her views about the schedule. But avoid "taking on" his or her problem. Do not add your own complaints about the schedule or the other things you dislike about what's happening at work. Let the issues belong to your co-worker, and avoid getting tangled up in them.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

By taking these steps, you will help your co-worker deal with his or her anger and, at the same time, you will protect yourself from it.

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Check out these books by Lynne McClure:

- [Anger and Conflict in the Workplace](#)
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Dealing With an Angry Person

7 Ways to Handle a Hothead -- Without Blowing Your Top

By Paula Spencer Scott, Caring.com contributing editor



It's never fun to deal with an angry person, whether we're talking about a hothead who's quick to anger or a chronically angry grouse. Unfortunately, none of the natural reactions that an angry person inspires -- defensiveness, fear, or getting mad yourself -- tend to be productive.

What's more effective: these seven tactics. According to experts, careful responses can help you counter a hothead without losing *your* head.

1. Let the angry person know you understand that he's upset.

What this sounds like: "I understand that you're really angry right now that I missed our appointment." "Oh, wow, you seem really mad that the doctor's office never called back." "You're mad that I ate that last brownie -- is that it?"

It's important to be specific, to hit home the message to the other person that he or she is truly understood. Don't just say, "I understand what you're saying."

Keep the focus on the other person's emotions. Don't say, "I understand because I've been there, too." The upset person doesn't care; in the heat of the moment, he feels like his experience is unique.

Why it helps: The tactic known as "reflective listening" or "active listening" is a basic building block to all kinds of effective communication, says psychologist Steve Sultanoff, an adjunct professor at Pepperdine University. Especially with someone who's seething with anger, it's not enough for you to realize that he or she is upset (which tends to be pretty obvious). You need to *demonstrate* that realization to the upset person by saying so.

The effect of simply stating what's behind the anger is like pouring cool water on a fire. "As humans, we have a tendency to feel connected when another person gets us," Sultanoff says. "Repeating back what you're hearing the angry person say is both connecting and calming."

How Asking the Right Questions Can Help You Deal With an Angry Person

Solicit what the angry person wants from you.

What this sounds like: "What is it you want or need right now?" "How can I help you?" "How do you envision the outcome of this in terms of what I could do?"

Why it helps: Most anger develops when the person perceives the world (or situation) as unfair, according to Sultanoff. "Anger is generating energy to get the unfair thing fixed," he says. Sometimes the anger stems from a perceived wrong: You or someone else did (or is perceived as having done) something upsetting -- forgot a birthday, broke a prized possession. Sometimes, though, the anger stems from a bigger sense of being wronged -- the person lost a job, his or her partner left, or he or she has a tough medical diagnosis, for example.

But nobody wants to listen to endless ranting. So cut to the chase by moving the conversation (even if it's mostly one-sided barking, so far) to a more proactive realm. Basically you're saying, in a nice way, "So what do you want me to do about it?"

How Offering Help Can Help You Deal With an Angry Person

Offer what help you can -- or say clearly what you can't do.

What this sounds like: This can take several forms. You may be able to fill the desire: "Let me see if I can call the doctor for you and find out what the delay is." You may hear that an apology is desired, if you accept some fault for the situation: "I'm sorry, I didn't realize the snack I ate was something you were saving for yourself. Please accept my apology -- I'll buy you a replacement."

Or you may decide that it's not within your power to help. If so, express that clearly: "I wish I could stay longer today to help, but I can't." Or, "I know you're mad about being fired and want your old job back, but I can't do anything about that. It is what it is."

Sometimes it's within your power to help, but you choose not to -- that's setting a boundary, and it's perfectly OK. Express it as a "can't" rather than a "don't want to": "I'm sorry, I wish I could help you with that, but I can't today."

Why it helps: You want to keep moving the situation along in a productive way. After the person expresses what he or she wants, decide what, if anything, you're able to do, and say so.

How Setting Limits Can Help You Deal With an Angry Person

Set limits on what you'll tolerate.

What this sounds like: "I can see you're really angry, but you're taking it out on me -- and if you care about me, you'll stop." Note that this works better with strong, close relationships, such as between family members or close friends.

For anyone, it's reasonable to say calmly: "Look, I'm willing to listen, but you have to stop shouting at me." Or, "I can see that you're upset about X. But if you want to talk about it and get my help to resolve it, you have to quit attacking me."

Still being berated or screamed at? It's OK to quit the conversation. And if you feel physically threatened, leave. You always have that power in the conversation.

Why it helps: Some angry people need to vent it out of their system before they'll engage with you, says Ken Robbins, a geriatric psychiatrist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Even if the person is overreacting and exhibiting anger that feels out of proportion, don't argue or get drawn into a defensive Ping-Pong match."

While the other party has a right to feel anger (or any other emotion), he or she doesn't have the right to turn it on others in a threatening way.

If the ranting persists, calling the person on it in a nonaccusatory way can sometimes help him or her snap out of it.

How Reframing Can Help You Deal With an Angry Person

Accept that the aggrieved person is probably doing the best he or she can.

What this sounds like: Literally say to yourself something like, "Bob must be having a bad day." Or "Sue misunderstood me, but blowing her top is just the way she copes."

Why it helps: Reframing another person's anger actually changes the way your brain responds to it, according to a new study in the November 2011 issue of the journal *Psychological Science*. By consciously telling yourself, "It's not my fault he's angry" or "She must be having a bad day," you can actually eliminate the electrical signals associated with the negative emotions that are triggered when we see angry faces, the researchers found.

"You can see this as a kind of race between the emotional information and the reappraisal information in the brain," says Stanford researcher Jens Blechert, who trained subjects to adjust their attitudes before viewing an angry face, then evaluated brain activity. Emotional processing (how we react to anger) moves through the brain through one circuit, but consciously reappraising the situation uses another route and modifies the emotional reaction.

Mustering some empathy for a barking boss or seething family member isn't easy, Pepperdine's Sultanoff says. But doing so helps move you out of the natural gut reaction to being yelled at, which is defensiveness. "When we're defensive, we're taking care of us, not the other person," he says. And that, he adds, can lead to a downward spiral.

Instead, try telling yourself that the angry person is doing the best he or she can, given the situation -- "even when the best they can do is pretty crappy," Sultanoff says.

How Cutting Yourself Some Slack Can Help You Deal With an Angry Person

Accept that you're doing the best you can, too.

What this sounds like: "I wish I could have stayed with Jack long enough to fix his computer, but I already stayed an hour and I'm late for the gym. . . . I know that others will be upset when I take care of myself, but I have to. I can't always give and give and give to others; it's OK to give to myself." Or "I wish I could help Jill, but there's nothing I can do about her ex-husband being a jerk. I know I'm a good friend and I'll be there when there's something specific I can solve, but right now all I can do is listen and say, 'Look, I can't do anything to change that.'"

Why it helps: Cutting yourself some slack about how you're dealing with a volcanic personality helps to inoculate yourself against feeling angry or fearful about the interaction.

This inner dialog may sound hokey. But you'd be surprised how effective self-acceptance is. Often what's difficult about disentangling from an angry person is that we try to "fix" their situation even when we can't. That sucks us into the other person's emotional outburst and leaves us angry and frustrated, too, or renders us feeling powerless or afraid.

How Humor Can Help You Deal With an Angry Person

Try humor.

What it sounds like: Sultanoff suggests lines like these: "This is beyond my capabilities -- let me consult my other personalities." "I'm sorry I forgot to pick up your prescription -- OMG, you caught me playing with my mental blocks!" "I wish I had a magic wand -- I'd wave it for you and fix everything."

Why it helps: Humor can defuse situations that have grown tense, especially within relationships that are close or playful. "Humor can shift the moment," says Sultanoff, who's the former president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor. Just be sure not to make fun of the person you're trying to help, he says. Humor is best targeted at yourself or the situation.

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