



The Best Ways to De-escalate Anger in the Workplace

John Schinnerer, Ph.D.

[Guide To Self, Inc.](http://www.GuideToSelf.com)

‘Excuse me’, I said in my kindest voice, ‘there is a mistake in this report.’ My coworker, a woman twenty years my elder, reacted with fury, ‘And I assume you’re perfect?! My reports don’t have mistakes in them. Why don’t you take that report and shove it up your a..!’ She continued with her tirade while I did a quick visual scan for any nearby sharp objects she might use on me. After what seemed like ten minutes, she snatched the pages from my hand and stormed away.

While this took place nearly twenty years ago, I remember it vividly as it was an early lesson that the anger of coworkers is not always directed at the right person, to the proper degree and in the best manner. More often, the anger of coworkers, customers and supervisors is misdirected at people who had no involvement in creating the anger in the first place.

So how do you handle it when someone else’s anger begins to escalate in the workplace?

The ability to de-escalate the anger of others is a critical political and emotional ability necessary for long-term success. As an executive coach and speaker, I have seen and heard about anger taking on a life of its own, destroying relationships and derailing careers. While we do our best to act the part of rational, reasonable business people, the truth is that we are also emotional beings.

The Emotional vs. Rational Brain

The emotional brain (primarily the limbic system) has been in existence in human beings for 3 to 10 million years. On the other hand, the rational brain (the cortex) has only been around for roughly 50,000 to 1 million years.



The emotional brain has been through countless revisions and is nearly perfect in its ability to keep humans safe and act as a general guidance system (approach vs. avoidance). The emotional brain has the ability to take over the rational brain when someone comes between you and your goal (leading to anger) or when danger is sensed (leading to fear).

The rational brain is still in the earliest stages of revision on an evolutionary scale. It is prone to mistakes in thinking, and can be overpowered by the emotional brain in a matter of .33 seconds.

All of us are simultaneously rational and emotional. So anger is inevitable when you have groups of people who care passionately about their companies, their jobs and a wide assortment of individual, team and corporate goals. As goals come into conflict with others, anger is bound to result.

Anger exists on a spectrum. Think of the intensity of anger along a 1 – 10 scale where 1 is calm and 10 is enraged.

Top Ways to Defuse Anger at Work

1. The first step to take when someone is angry with you is to do a body scan. This is simply a mental scan of your body to monitor your own anger level. If your anger gets above a 5 on the anger scale, tell the person that you are getting upset and ask them to continue the conversation later (after you've calmed down). In my work helping executives with anger, I've found that anytime you get above a 5 on the anger scale, hurtful words are spoken and destructive acts are committed. It becomes highly difficult to manage yourself when your anger level is above a 5. And it becomes nearly impossible to help another person manage his or her anger if your anger spikes.
2. Be aware that anger is one strategy that people use to get their own needs met. I call the use of destructive emotions to get what one wants 'emotional bullying.' Keep that phrase in your mind and see if emotional bullying is taking place in your situation. If so, calmly state to the other



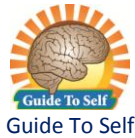
person that they cannot use emotions to get what they want. Or you can choose to tell them that you are happy to speak about the situation further when they have calmed down.

3. Take a deep breath. Studies show that focused breathing reduces the intensity of negative emotions such as anger, anxiety and resentment. Negative emotions lock the body into certain patterns of movement and thinking. For instance, anger locks you into shallow breathing, tightened muscles, and thoughts which reinforce the anger. Deep breathing into your belly is the most important step in unlocking anger.
4. Avoid criticizing or blaming the angry person. Criticism, blame and judgment are highly likely to heighten the intensity of the anger.
5. Look for common ground between your experiences and the focus of their anger. There is usually a kernel of truth in angry statements, even if it is a tiny kernel. Your job is to seek out that truth and magnify it. If you can relate to their experience, let them know, 'If I put myself in your shoes, I'd be angry too. Let me see what I can do to help you make this situation better.'
6. Tune in to the early warning signs. These can tip you off that a coworker is getting progressively angry. It's powerful to know someone is ready to blow their top before they actually lose their temper. There are physiological indicators of anger for which you can be on the lookout. These include clenched jaw, furrowed brow, upper lip curled up on one side (disgust), muscle tension, narrowed eyes and shallow breathing. Beyond that, you can look for deviations from typical behavior patterns. For instance, when a coworker who is usually boisterous and outgoing turns silent and withdraws, it may be a red flag for anger. When you notice such changes in people, simply call attention to them gently to diffuse them before they erupt. For instance, 'Hey Jan, I notice you have become quiet all of a



sudden. What's going on for you?' or 'Bob, you seem to have an irritated look on your face. Is there anything we may have missed?'

7. If you cannot prevent the angry party from exploding in rage, there are several approaches of which you will want to be practiced. This includes active listening, apologizing, acknowledging their feelings, and offering to make an attempt to rectify the situation.
8. Active listening is the process of genuinely and sincerely attempting to truly hear what it is the angry party is trying to convey. It involves listening at several different levels simultaneously including
 - a. the text (interpreting the words they are speaking to you),
 - b. the subtext (what is not being said yet is still part of the problem),
 - c. the emotional (which emotions are involved in the anger such as resentment, disappointment, fear, sadness, contempt, disgust and more)
 - d. the physical (the body language of the angry individual, how agitated are they, how tightly are they holding their hands, how contorted are their facial expressions, etc.)
9. Attempt an apology if you feel one is warranted or appropriate. Apologies consist of five parts. First, you want to sincerely admit to the wrong doing (assuming you or your company made a mistake). 'I know that I made an error when I filed the report with mistakes in it.' Second, you want to apologize, 'I apologize.' Third, you want to ask what you can do to make things right. Ask them, 'Do you have any constructive criticism for me?' Fourth, let the other party know that you will behave differently next time. 'Next time, I will make sure there are no errors in the report before I file it.'



Finally, ask for their forgiveness. 'Will you forgive me for filing the report with errors?'

10. Acknowledge their feelings. Help the angry party feel heard. Say something along the lines of 'I think I understand how you feel. You are very upset. I hear you. Your anger makes complete sense to me. What can I do to help?'
11. Attempts to reason with angry individuals are likely to fall on deaf ears. When anger gets intense, the emotional mind is firmly in control of the angry person and little if any information gets in. The exception to this is information that reinforces their anger. This sort of info will get in, will be focused on and will be magnified.
12. Act with compassion. Compassion is empathy, the ability to put yourself in another's shoes. The goal is to understand the situation from the perspective of the other person. The better you get at this learnable skill, the easier it is to unlock their anger.
13. In some instances, these de-escalation skills will not be enough to defuse a rage. You always want to be aware when dealing with angry individuals that they may not be thinking completely rationally. As a result, you want to ensure your own safety. This means you must be mindful of an escape route should things take a turn for the worse and become violent or abusive. Make sure the angry party is not blocking your path to the door or a window. Keep this in mind if the conversation escalates and slowly, calmly work your way towards a better escape route. If the situation escalates to a point where you feel it is out of control, do not hesitate to call the police to ensure your safety.
14. Learning proven methods to stay calm in emotionally charged situations is critical in business. Meeting anger with anger is usually a recipe for turning irritation into a full blown rage.



If you are interested in coaching around anger issues or de-escalation skills for yourself or your staff, feel free to call Dr. John Schinnerer at 925-944-3440 or email him at Info@GuideToSelf.com or check out the website at <http://www.GuideToSelf.com>.

About the Author

John Schinnerer is in private practice helping people learn anger management, stress management and the latest ways to deal with destructive negative emotions. He also helps clients discover optimal human functioning via positive psychology. His offices are in Danville, California. He graduated from U.C. Berkeley with a Ph.D. in psychology. John has been an executive, speaker and psychologist for over 10 years. He is President and Founder of [Guide To Self](#), a company that coaches executives to happiness and success using the latest in positive psychology. Dr. John Schinnerer hosted over 200 episodes of Guide To Self Radio, a daily prime time radio show, in the SF Bay Area. His areas of expertise range from positive psychology, to emotional awareness, to anger management, to executive coaching. He wrote the award-winning, "[Guide To Self: The Beginner's Guide To Managing Emotion and Thought](#)," which is available at Amazon.com. His blog, [Shrunken Mind](#), was recently recognized as one of the top 3 in positive psychology on the web (<http://drjohnblog.guidetoself.com>).