





# Tame Your Temper

Managing Anger  
to Achieve Excellence

Checking your emotions can  
enhance your leadership ability

By Alicia Backer, PTA

EVERYONE EXPERIENCES ANGER. WE HAVE ALL FELT it and lost our ability to control it: whether as just a mere irritation or as a full-blown tantrum. Although hard to believe, anger is a healthy emotion because it alerts us to know when something is distressing. Anger can be brief, or it can be the center of our existence. Some people seem to be most content when they are angry, while others avoid showing anger with every bit of their being. Neither of the extremes are healthy for the individuals themselves or for those around them. When anger is left uncontrolled it will undoubtedly cause destruction and harm, some of which will be irreversible.

Many studies show that among all of life's pressures, job stress is by far the most significant source. In addition, recent research from Gallup reported that daily rates of anger, stress, worry, and sadness among American workers have risen over the past decade.<sup>1</sup> Leadership is a deeply emotional process, and the highs and lows of leading others is an assumed responsibility. Private practice owners are highly invested in the overall health of their clinic - strategic planning, general business operations, employee satisfaction and engagement, and achieving optimal customer outcomes

create overwhelming expectations. Shrinking reimbursement rates causing formidable demands for higher productivity levels and staff engagement continue to contribute to the rise in frustration levels of all clinic leaders including CEOs, clinic directors, physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, front office staff, and all other team members. Add the more recent frustrations of working or not working through a pandemic, racial injustices, and increased turnover to the mix and we are left with even greater barriers to creating a culture of safety and trust.

Anger will destroy your culture. The inability to be an effective communicator will create gaps in listening to and understanding your team — their concerns and their frustrations. Friction is an unavoidable part of life. We must know and believe that. Regardless of how cohesive and highly engaged your team may seem and no matter how hard you've tried to create an environment of happiness, there is going to be friction. There is absolutely no way of getting around it. If you disagree with that statement, then you're probably already in trouble. Understanding and responding to the emotions of your team and managing those emotions are critical competencies of being an effective leader.



## USING ANGER TO MOTIVATE ACTION

When first thinking of anger we probably anticipate feelings of frustration, bitterness, and annoyance – destructive anger. Destructive anger is expressed in an unhealthy way and causes harm: to others and to oneself. Anger is generally perceived in a negative way, but can be used productively, it's a matter of choice. Constructive anger may sound like an oxymoron but using negative emotions in positive ways can energize and motivate us to fix what is broken. Expressing constructive anger shows respect for those involved in the conflict and lets us be heard in a way that is considerate, open-minded, and shows concern. Constructive anger presents healing opportunities with others that will likely result in better understanding, promote a safer and trusting environment, and strengthen relationships.

In order to better manage anger, we must embrace it and all that it tells us. Anger stems from dissatisfaction – a natural component of life. Life is full of problems and our deep desire to feel connected with others drives the basic emotional intelligence that keeps anger in check. As leaders we must learn to separate the source of anger from the actual emotion. Understanding feelings or the source of those feelings is not always an easy task but as leaders it is our obligation to recognize and understand the feelings of our team. We must be compassionate while also remaining rational in our response. Anger is a deeply personal experience and dealing with these emotions requires practice. Some people manage their emotions effortlessly while others tend to struggle keeping their emotions from hindering their performance. Exceptional leaders learn to control their emotions and influence the emotions of others. They will help ignite the team to share purpose, elevate performance, and accomplish what matters most, healing others.

## TRANSFORMING ANGER

### *Evaluate your emotions first*

American poet Ambrose Bierce said, “Speak when you are angry — and you’ll make the best speech you’ll ever regret.” It is critical to learn the habits and triggers of anger. Leaders and their teams alike need to understand what habits and behaviors will lead to friction and address them in a productive and caring way. Many times, anger can be triggered by blind spots. According to Robert Bruce Shaw, author of *Leadership Blindspots*, blind spots are defined as unrecognized weaknesses or threats that can hinder a leader’s success.<sup>2</sup> Typically weaknesses that we are aware of will not disrupt our professional or personal goals but the ones that are not can be extremely dangerous. Blind spots often occur when pride meets arrogance. When arrogance takes over leaders can become overconfident and abuse power, this is when the team will suffer.

Blind spots can provoke resentment in leaders and other team members. As clinic leaders, we must make it our priority to lead by example and make an intentional effort to educate our staff on anger management strategies and create a system to minimize triggers. We must create a system that will encourage transformation of anger from a destructive reaction to a constructive blessing. In the book, *Anger Trap*, Dr. Les Carter dissects the ownership of your own anger in a concept called, “freedom thinking.” This allows us to assess our response to anger-generating situations and determine whether that response is correct. This requires a higher level of emotional intelligence and enables us to control our own anger. At that level, we are free to make any decision rather than being ruled by our natural tendency of reactive behaviors.<sup>3</sup>

We cannot eliminate anger, so we must learn how to best manage it. It’s natural that your teams’ emotions will affect you. Failing to check in with your emotions first may result in being dismissive or defensive to the concerns of your team and will only cause more distance and hurt. Evaluating your own emotions before reacting to theirs is critical. When anger presents itself, take time to determine the source of the anger and what the best approach will be to resolve it. Check in with your emotions first then be purposeful with creating a solution. Finding patience and control during stressful times is very difficult but when handled correctly everybody wins.

### *Accept anger with intent to learn*

As leaders we should use anger as an opportunity to learn how to accept feedback without judgement. Seek out more information and be intentional about listening without interjecting. Having hard conversations is an expectation in life, and in leadership, is required to gain raving fans — employees who are loyal to the values and vision of the company. Plan regularly scheduled meetings with your staff to grow a better understanding of who they are and what they need to grow. This will offer a safe space for them to also share concerns or frustrations. Practice exceptional listening skills during your conversation and be intentional with what you will do with the information that they have given you. Listening before speaking is always the best policy. Avoid interruptions or blame. Regardless of what your own feelings are in that moment, you must be deliberate in listening and how you respond to their frustrations.

### *Reconstruct goals together*

Once emotions have simmered you can discuss best practices for channeling frustrations so that you can achieve more constructive outcomes. Guiding your team to regulate their emotions will benefit everyone and can spark creativity on what changes to make. When setting goals and expectations you can leverage anger to promote more vigor and grit in their performance. Co-creating goals with your team will set them up for greater success and will transform negative emotions into opportunities to grow. Highly effective leaders do more than perform at a high level. They inspire and motivate their people to do the same.

Be proactive in setting common goals to reduce friction. Commit to regularly scheduled meetings with your entire squad and one-on-one meetings with each member of your team. During these moments discuss and prioritize goals both personally and as an organization. Collaborate to create goals that everyone agrees upon and will raise the team to a new level of excellence. The best goals motivate you, scare you, can be measured, and have a deadline. Set reasonable timelines and immediately schedule follow-up meetings to ensure the path to achieving those goals is clear and attainable. Finally, be sure to celebrate those goals in whatever way is appropriate to match the appreciation language of the individual or the team!

### *Take ownership*

It's imperative that we consider our own blind spots that may be contributing to frustrations in your team. Although you may not be the direct cause of your team's anger, the way you engage and address the issue will directly affect the situation. The best leaders are constant learners. They are receptive and on a continuous mission to learn while using that information to influence positive development. Transform negative perceptions by listening intently to feedback from your team and make a public and consistent effort to change. By demonstrating purposeful change from constructive feedback, you will also teach your team how they too can better manage anger and change negative emotions. A deeper trust can be gained when approaching situations with humility, transparency, and gratitude. Leading with purpose can help revolutionize anger into culture-changing outcomes.

We cannot lead others if we cannot first lead ourselves. Understanding anger, using it to influence action, and transforming those negative emotions are all behaviors of a highly competent leader. Creating an environment that will allow us to reflect, respect, and respond to the feedback from others will foster a culture that is thriving. No leader is perfect, but great leaders work toward a better version of themselves to influence the excellence of those around them. **1**

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## REFERENCES

1. Chhaya N. "Managing Anger, Frustration, and Resentment on Your Team." *Harvard Business Review*. Published February 16, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3GTWYJp>.
2. Shaw RB. *Leadership Blindspots: How Successful Leaders Identify and Overcome the Weaknesses That Matter*. Jossey-Bass; 2014.
3. Carter L. *The Anger Trap: Free Yourself from the Frustrations That Sabotage Your Life*. John Wiley & Sons Inc; 2004.



## ACTION ITEM

1. Evaluate your emotions FIRST: take time to assess your feelings before you respond
2. Use anger as an opportunity to learn: determine the source, listen to others, and problem solve
3. Schedule one-on-one meetings: discuss goals and create clear steps of execution with each member of your team
4. Take ownership: recognize your own blind spots and be deliberate with making changes