

Training can help all employees—not just the worksite hothead—deal productively with emotions.

By Linda Wasmer Andrews

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Turnout was good at Aon Services in Chicago when the company brought in a psychologist to give workshops on anger management. But Chet Taranowski, the company's internal employee assistance program (EAP) coordinator, noticed something odd: "A lot of people who came had someone else in mind. They were there because someone in their lives had an anger problem, not because they felt they had a problem themselves."

That's one of the ironies of addressing anger in the workplace. Employees certainly aren't oblivious to the hothead sitting in the next cubicle or standing by them on the production line. "But people who have anger problems don't necessarily recognize it in themselves," Taranowski says. "They're often surprised and shocked when someone confronts them with it."

In the past, many companies conspired with employees to look the other way. After all, confronting an employee in denial is a thankless job, and it's likely to make an anger-prone person...well, angry. But in a security-conscious world, this nonsolution is a nonstarter, so more companies are looking for ways to help employees get their anger under control. A 2003 Society for Human Resource Management survey illustrates this trend: Of 270 HR professionals responding, 16 percent reported that their companies offered anger management courses to employees, double the percentage in 1999.

"The real impetus for this growth came after 9/11," says George Anderson, director of Anderson & Anderson, a Brentwood, Calif., firm that has taken a lead role in training anger management facilitators. Recent, highly publicized incidents of workplace violence also raised the field's profile. "Then came the movie 'Anger Management,' which popularized it," says Anderson, referring to a 2003 comedy for which he served as technical adviser. Today, more HR professionals are looking for practical ways to keep a lid on workplace anger.

### **It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad Workplace**

Anger is undoubtedly a factor in some of the 1.7 million violent victimizations—mostly assaults—that Americans experience while working each year. (This includes incidents involving customers, clients, students and other nonemployees.) Employers that don't address potential problems could pay a heavy price.

If an employer ignores warning signs leading up to a violent incident, it could be held legally liable. "But even if the company has done things right, the cost of defending itself averages \$700,000," Anderson says. Clearly, it's in a company's best interest to deal with hostile employees before they become violent perpetrators.

Fortunately, the majority of angry employees aren't assailants in the making. "Most of the people I see are not violent," says anger management provider Ari Novick, president of the AJ Novick Group in Laguna Beach, Calif. "Instead, they're simply people who have a difficult time expressing anger in an appropriate way." For some, rage is less an explosion than a slow burn.

"Yet even lower levels of chronic anger and worker conflict can increase absenteeism and decrease productivity," says Bernie Golden, a clinical psychologist and founder of Anger Management Education in Chicago. "It creates a less cohesive workplace and damages morale. Anger also competes with focused attention, so it impairs judgment and increases reaction time." These effects, in turn, raise the risk of critical errors and accidents.

Plus, intense or long-lasting hostility has been linked to medical problems—such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and heart attacks—that may drive up health insurance premiums.

### **Stop the Madness**

For employees who are always simmering, anger management training may help them control their feelings and keep them from boiling over into destructive behavior.

Many employees are referred to training directly by HR, while others come via their company's EAP. Since anger per se is not a diagnosable mental disorder, health plans typically don't cover anger management treatment. Instead, the employer or EAP usually picks up the tab, although some companies require employees to pay it for themselves. The training is typically presented in either small group classes or one-on-one coaching sessions.

Not surprisingly, group training is the less expensive alternative. Since the field is so new, there are no statistics on average fees nationwide. As a benchmark, though, Anderson says his classes generally run about \$500 per employee: \$70 for the initial assessment, \$30 for a client workbook, and \$40 per hour for an average of 10 one-hour classes. Anderson also provides one-on-one coaching, but, at \$250 per hour, he says, most companies reserve this option for executives.

Despite the expense, however, some providers argue that individual coaching may be more cost-effective in the long run. "It can be tailored specifically to what that person's issues and dynamics are," says W. Barry Nixon, SPHR, executive director of the National Institute for the Prevention of Workplace Violence in Lake Forest, Calif. "People aren't going to reveal themselves as much with other people around."

Whether the anger management program consists of group training or one-on-one coaching, most providers space out the sessions at weekly intervals. Some also offer accelerated classes that cram several hours of training into a single day. At times, there may be pressing reasons for choosing this route. For example, Anderson has one large corporate client that takes its employees off the clock until they complete their training. Obviously, it's important to get employees back to work as quickly as possible. "But if someone were to ask me if I recommend this approach, I would say no," Anderson says. "If the option is there, it's best to spread out the training over time, because one key to good results is practicing between classes."

### **Anger Management 101**

At a typical anger management session, you won't see people analyzing how their parents' botched approach to toilet training warped their personality. The focus of an effective session is on teaching people life skills, not providing therapy. Unlike depression and anxiety, anger is not recognized as a disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the main reference manual of the mental health professions.

"We are there to help people unlearn negative ways of dealing with anger and learn more positive ones," says Nixon. "You don't teach a person not to get angry—it's a natural emotion. The goal is teaching people how to channel their anger and how to behave when they do get angry."

Most anger management training incorporates skills such as stress reduction, communication, conflict resolution and problem-solving. In theory, this sounds like a good mix, but hard data on outcomes are lacking. "The effectiveness of many anger management programs is simply not known," says Jerry Deffenbacher, a psychology professor at Colorado State University who has researched anger for more than two decades.

One possible drawback to group classes is that it may be difficult to reach all of the participants. For example, class participants may include both people who are psychologically ready to change and those who are still in denial.

"These are two very different types of people," Deffenbacher says. "They may be equally angry, but putting them together in a common class may not be the best way to go. Also, there's good literature in other areas of psychology to indicate that, if you aren't ready to change, the intervention probably won't take hold."

Keep in mind that anger management training is geared to folks with garden-variety anger issues. At times, though, angry or irritable behavior may be a symptom of a more pervasive psychological problem, such as addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder or depression. Any anger management program should include an initial assessment that sorts out people who are likely to benefit from anger education from those who really do need therapy or medical treatment.

### **Warning Signs**

How do you know when an employee might be a good candidate for anger management training? Some warning signs are relatively straightforward, such as being chronically irritable, impatient, short-tempered, argumentative or sarcastic. "Fellow employees may report that there is frequent conflict, or increased tension or lack of cooperation," Golden says. "There might also be increased absenteeism or tardiness."

Be alert, too, for signs of "cold contempt," says Anna Maravelas, president of TheraRising in Arden Hills, Minn., and author of *How to Reduce Workplace Conflict and Stress* (Career Press, 2005). "At work, a lot of anger isn't expressed by yelling, because people don't want to get fired or disciplined for it." Instead, some employees may express their anger in less direct ways, such as backstabbing, rumormongering and turf wars.

Angry employees are found on every rung of the corporate ladder, from minimum-wage workers to top-level executives. But according to Golden, one thing many of these employees have in common is unrealistic expectations.

"Let's say their firm is downsized, and suddenly they're doing not only their own job, but also the tasks of others who have left," Golden says. "They maintain the expectation that they will be rewarded for the extra time and effort." While that might be a reasonable expectation, it is not necessarily a realistic one in the current economic climate.

When employees don't get the rewards they expect, they can wind up disillusioned, resentful and angry.

### **Practical Pointers**

Suggesting that an employee go to anger management training is one thing. Getting the employee to actually show up is another.

In some cases, you may be able to mandate attendance as a condition of continued employment—for instance, if an employee has behaved in a way that would otherwise be proper grounds for discipline or termination.

But a caveat: If the employee's behavior might have been caused by a "mental impairment" as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), you'll need to take special care, warns Karen Karr, an employment attorney at the Steptoe & Johnson law firm in Phoenix.

"If an employee acts violently, the employer may suspend or terminate that employee, even if the behavior results from a disability. The ADA does not require an employer to accommodate an individual who poses a direct threat," says Karr. But a dilemma arises when an employee whose behavior might be caused by a mental impairment merely threatens violence.

Says Karr, "In this case, the employer may discipline the employee only if there is objective evidence that would lead a reasonable person to conclude that the employee is a threat to the workplace. Otherwise, the employer must accommodate the disability."

One way to gather objective evidence is with a formal threat assessment. If the assessment indicates that a particular employee is at risk for becoming violent, the employee may be disciplined—or, alternatively, sent to anger management training. Says Nixon, "If, as a result of the threat assessment, it's determined that this employee needs to work on anger issues, that is something the company can require."

In most cases, though, you'll probably be strongly encouraging an employee to go to training rather than actually requiring it. Often, the response you get may come down to how you present the situation. "You wouldn't want to enter into a power struggle with an employee who already has anger issues," says Steven Uhrig, an HR consultant from Villa Park, Ill. Instead, ease into the conversation with a few positive comments. Then state the problem, and be ready to back up your points with documentation. "Base everything on performance or attendance," Uhrig says. Spell out the consequences for continued problems as well as the potential benefits of addressing them.

"Document everything, but be careful about what you put in the employee's permanent record," Uhrig adds. "Use nonjudgmental, behavioral descriptions of the employee's actions, and be able to demonstrate their effect on the workplace." Instead of writing that "the employee was referred to anger management class," Uhrig recommends using the phrase "appropriate company resources were provided to the employee." That way, if the employee's file is ever seen by anyone, including the employee or an opposing attorney, it doesn't contain anything that might be construed as defamatory.

### **Finding Help**

Finding someone qualified to help your employees can be trickier than it sounds.

The ideal is a professional with substantial training and experience in anger management. But since anger isn't recognized as a mental disorder, strategies for managing it aren't a big part of the education that most mental health professionals receive. Therefore, it's important to make sure that people advertising anger management services really have the requisite background.

Anderson & Anderson has a network of certified facilitators who use its model of anger management. Also, a small group of facilitators and providers banded together in 2004 to form the American Association of Anger Management Providers. Both organizations offer directories of providers on their web sites.

In addition, since many anger management providers take referrals from the courts, Golden suggests calling probation offices or social services agencies for recommendations. Look for a provider who not only has the necessary education and experience, but who also does an initial assessment and has a well-defined training approach.

Once you've found a qualified provider, don't hesitate to refer employees when they need it. "Sometimes, just the process of identifying anger as a problem is a helpful experience for employees, because they're clueless," says Taranowski. So, do the company hotheads—and the company—a favor, and clue them in to anger management.

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