Leadership And Managing People

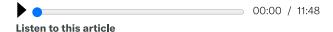# Managing Anger, Frustration, and Resentment on Your Team

by Nihar Chhaya

February 14, 2022

Danil Nevsky/Stocksy

Summary.   Anger and resentment across your team can make an already stressful leadership job feel worse. But how you respond to your employees' frustrations is critical to ensuring negative emotions don't limit your effectiveness. The author offers four... **more**

With so much instability in the workplace these days, you may feel untethered in your daily job responsibilities as well as your long-term career. And when insecurity leads to frustration, it can be hard to keep your temper. But when you are in a leadership role, you face an even more formidable challenge: managing your team's moods without letting their episodes of anger impair your effectiveness.

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Anger and losing one's temper in the workplace is nothing new. 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.

But the past couple of years has brought uniquely acute frustration factors for employees and leaders, including working through the pandemic, concerns over racial justice, and increased turnover in the workplace. One recent study highlighted the clash

between leaders and employees over working from home and predicts the conflict around hybrid work policies across teams will only heighten in the future.
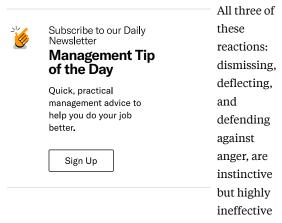
As your team's leader, you aren't in charge of keeping everyone happy all of the time — but you are responsible for building a culture of trust and psychological safety. Here are some recommendations to try when you realize your team is upset.

Balance Your Emotions First Before Reacting to Theirs

It's natural that your team's feelings will affect yours. But before impulsively reacting to their anger, you must stabilize your mood. Depending on your emotional state, you may initially respond in various ways. For instance, if you've been trying to manage your frustrations at work, you may initially be dismissive of team grievances, believing they need to get over it the same way you have.

If you happen to sympathize with their concerns but don't know how to resolve them, you may start deflecting when issues come up, showing interest but then changing the subject and not doing anything about it.

And if you are already emotionally distant from your team, your first reaction may be defensiveness as a way of protecting yourself. Research shows that this response is more frequent when you feel like an outcast in the group because of our human need for belonging. But defensiveness only will create more mutual resentment.

All three of these reactions: dismissing, deflecting, and defending against anger, are instinctive but highly ineffective in leadership. They create unnecessary psychological distance between you and the people you're responsible for inspiring, motivating, and coaching. So, instead of reacting in those ways, focus first on stabilizing your own emotions.

Depersonalize how you receive both the direct and indirect feedback that your team is angry. It's essential to perceive these inputs as data, not danger. In time you'll have a chance to share your view, but for now, don't get caught up in how your team's anger reflects on you.

Remember that whatever your team is feeling, whether you sympathize with it or not, provides valuable insight to have in your leadership role. When you resist the initial urge to add your

judgment and excuses to this data, you will be able to respond with a much more effective strategy toward resolution.

Lean into Their Anger with an Intent to Learn

After accepting the feedback that your team is frustrated without judging them or yourself, you can address it with a clear mind and an open heart.

Don't suppress their anger or ignore it. Instead, ask for more information, demonstrating that you care enough to acknowledge it to your team. And reframe the concept of anger at work, so you and your team can handle it with sensibility, not dread. Just like an angry team doesn't have to trigger your defensiveness, not all anger has to be considered a bad thing.

Indeed, anger that leads to physical or emotional harm to others is unacceptable. But aside from those toxic situations, anger is a part of the human condition and, when managed effectively, can even be a catalyst for improved drive across your team.

Offer your team members a safe space to vent to you without shame or worry of retribution. Then encourage them to partner with you to explore new solutions that benefit everyone.

You can say, "I know you're angry, and as long as you're not hurting anyone else, I want to you to know it's okay to express yourself with me. I believe in supporting each teammate in whatever emotions they are experiencing, not repressing them. My commitment to you is to listen with an intent to learn, without interjecting my opinion. But if you want things to change, I need you to help me help you. That means that you consider which factors behind your anger you need to manage and offer me some concrete ideas around how I can help from my position."

Redesign Team Goals Together

Once you have de-escalated emotions by inviting dialogue and learning about the source of their anger, you can initiate methods to channel their frustration toward more constructive outcomes.

Research has shown that you become more proactive and increase motivation when you redirect your frustration from seeking a fight to inflict harm toward a battle that benefits others. Helping your team regulate and pivot their emotions not only helps everyone feel better, but can spark more creativity around what changes to make and how to get started.

In addition, by designing goals and expectations in a particular way, you can leverage their anger to develop more stamina and grit in their performance. One study showed that when people have set goals that involve striving to attain success in a task instead of ones that seek to avoid failure, anger can lead to greater persistence and engagement.

So, at those times when your team is frazzled, consider the quality of your team's goals. Are they ones that stretch your team in ways that success is attainable or so unreasonable that they will likely

give up in disgrace? And do your expectations come with a healthy acceptance of failure or forbid it to the point that employees work out of fear rather than inspiration?

By co-creating objectives with your team that expand their capacity and set them up for success, you transform frustration from a negative emotion to a positive and productive one.

Build Deeper Trust by Owning Your Part

Consider whether you have any blind spots in your leadership approach that may be contributing to their anger. It's possible that you aren't a direct cause of your team's frustration, given the many issues that are raising the ire of employees these days. But as their leader, how you engage with them collectively and individually can either exacerbate tension or improve trust.

One of my coaching clients, an SVP at a large company, chose the latter approach, humbly using his team's anger and stress as the impetus to develop himself as a better leader, which in turn lowered their resentment.

We conducted an interview-based 360 with his colleagues across various company layers, which revealed some negative perceptions beyond his awareness. He learned that people saw him unwilling to be transparent during crises, which angered them when they needed aboveboard leadership the most. Colleagues also resented that he relied heavily on "favorites," unfairly providing opportunities for advancement and visibility to a small inner circle. Interestingly, lack of transparency and playing favorites happen to be some of the most pervasive inhibitors to trust in organizations.

To start shifting these negative perceptions of him, my client approached his colleagues with humility and gratitude for their input. He publicly owned the areas he wanted to improve and even asked them if he might look to them as "his coaches," requesting their advice and ongoing feedback every month. This straightforward approach was the only way to shift perceptions from negative to positive in a sustained way that minimized future frustration. Simply paying lip service and offering meaningless amends like "I take responsibility, and I'll try harder next time" weren't going to cut it.

Confirmation bias led his teams to continue seeking evidence to support what they already believed. So, in the past, as employees developed negative beliefs about my client's leadership style, they noticed his flaws much more than any positive qualities. To be effective in the future, he needed to flip this bias in his favor. He had to encourage his employees to notice the good he was trying to do and develop a willingness to give him the benefit of the doubt rather than rush to anger at any misstep. And his efforts paid off. By explicitly owning his need to develop and showing a consistent pursuit of their feedback and advice, his colleagues began to believe in him and his desire to improve. As a result, they looked for more examples to support that positive belief and ultimately felt their anger abate.

Anger and resentment across your team can make an already stressful leadership job feel worse. But how you respond to your employees' frustrations is critical to ensuring negative emotions don't limit your effectiveness. By following these suggestions, you can not only contain their anger but potentially leverage it for greater trust and motivation toward future performance.

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