

Study: Compassion, not sanctions, is best response to workplace anger

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Challenging traditional views of workplace anger, a new article by a Temple University Fox School of Business professor suggests that even intense emotional outbursts can prove beneficial if responded to with compassion.

Dr. Deanna Geddes, chair of the Fox School's Human Resource Management Department, argues that more supportive responses by managers and co-workers after displays of deviant anger can promote positive change at work, while sanctioning or doing nothing does not.

"The trouble with sanctions: Organizational responses to deviant anger displays at work," co-authored with University of Baltimore's Dr. Lisa T. Stickney, states that "when companies choose to sanction organizational members expressing deviant anger, these actions may divert attention and resources from correcting the initial, anger-provoking event that triggered the employee's emotional outburst."

In a study of 194 people who acknowledged witnessing an incident of deviant anger at work, the researchers found no connection between firing an irate employee and solving underlying workplace problems. Geddes and Stickney also found that even a single act of support by a manager or co-worker and the angered employee can improve workplace tension.

Managers who recognize their potential role in angering an employee "may be motivated to respond more compassionately to help restore a

favorable working relationship," the researchers wrote in the journal *Human Relations*.

If management shows "an active interest in addressing underlying issues that prompted employee anger, perceptions of improved situations increase significantly," the researchers wrote.

"Business codes of conduct are often about what we shouldn't do as an angry employee in emotional episodes, while few, if any, tend to address our role as observers of emotional episodes," according to the article. "Such guidelines, if available, could expand to include positive suggestions for those who witness, judge and respond to angry employees – formally or informally."

The findings stem from the Dual Threshold Model of workplace anger expression, which distinguishes between suppressed and deviant anger. Researchers label the space between suppressed and deviant anger as the zone most likely to achieve positive change. The model distinguishes between muted anger – complaints to co-workers and friends who lack the authority to resolve the situation – as the least productive way to prompt change. Geddes created the model with Dr. Ronda Roberts Callister of Utah State University.

"Some of the most transformational conversations come about through expressed anger," Geddes said.

Provided by Temple University

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