Defuse anger in the workplace with humor, expert says

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Whether it is pressing deadlines, overwork, or employees feeling they are not being supported, anger in a work environment can be unavoidable. Over time, the anger and frustration can compound,

causing anger to spread through the entire team or organization, creating what George Mason University expert Mandy O'Neill calls a "culture of anger."

In her research, O'Neill, an associate professor of management at Mason's School of Business, found that a culture of anger not only leads to problems for individuals, such as increased alcohol consumption, work-family conflict, and high-risk behaviors, but it also presents problems for teams as a whole.

In a study of a large retail organization, O'Neill found that employee anger stemmed from a culture in which employees did not feel supported by their managers, leading to more employee absences and higher turnover. Additionally, individual high-risk behaviors can lead to a decrease in workplace safety as a whole, including safety violations, accidents, and injuries.

Recognizing a culture of anger

O'Neill explains that when dealing with anger in a team environment, whether it's a workplace, group project, or sports team, it's important to draw a line between a team experiencing occasional anger and a team defined by a culture of anger.

"All emotions have a social functional purpose," said O'Neill. "Anger can serve important purposes around, for example, moral outrage against social injustice, or action tendencies that cause a person to rise up against obstacles thrown in their way."

However, in a culture of anger, "it's not just one incident, one time that made everybody angry. Rather, it's when anger is kind of everybody's default emotion," O'Neill said.

The underlying research has been published in a variety of journals over the past 15 years.

Dos and don'ts

O'Neill highlights two common methods of fighting anger that can actually make matters worse. "Emotion suppression, which is essentially to put the lid on an emotion and not let it be expressed, is very destructive," said O'Neill. "Even if you think you're not expressing [anger], it leaks out in ways that you may not necessarily be aware of or able to control."

Additionally, O'Neill found that allowing members of a team to vent their anger without restraint can serve to intensify the anger. Paradoxically, venting can reactivate and spread anger rather than resolving or calming the feeling.

So, what can be done to help improve an angry team culture?

Through interviewing emergency responders at fire stations in the southeastern United States, O'Neill found that the most effective teams were those who supplemented feelings of anger with joviality.

"Expression of joviality and humor is a way of channeling anger in ways that actually can promote group bonding," said O'Neill.

She also found that companionate love, "the connection felt between people whose lives are closely intertwined," also helps fight anger. Affection and caring, for example, creates a sense of familiarity between members of a team that helps to resolve issues, and can make a jovial culture easier to foster as members of the team know how and when to use humor without going too far.

O'Neill believes that introducing joviality and companionate love to a team can help team members work with anger to turn it into a positive, productive emotion. "Anger paired with positive emotions lends itself to a very different scenario than if you have anger without these emotions," she said.

O'Neill is actively engaged in organizational research, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods to the study of employees and organizational units. She has worked with organizations across a wide range of industries including health care, technology, emergency services, and retail.

More information: Olivia Amanda O'Neill et al, Is Love All You Need? The Effects of Emotional Culture, Suppression, and Work–family Conflict on Firefighter Risk-Taking and Health, *Academy of Management Journal* (2015). DOI: 10.5465/amj.2014.0952

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