ANGER IN THE WORKPLACE
INTRODUCTION

Anger in the workplace is a very common and that's not surprising. Our work environments are often hectic; the fast pace causes pressure and stress; pressure and stress can easily make people feel frustrated, and; frustration is just a short step away from anger.

Few people *enjoy* feeling angry and most of us think of anger in a negative way - upsetting, threatening, and perhaps even a little dangerous. Anger is typically seen as something to avoid. That is a reasonable way to react to because most times, anger is a natural response to something that is wrong.

But anger is inevitable; people will always, rightly or wrongly, become angry about something and there will never be a workplace without anger. How much anger is acceptable, how it should be expressed, and when it shouldn't be - those are the key questions.

We often say to each other or to ourselves, "Getting angry won't solve anything." But that statement implies that anger is wrong - and at times it may be - and it doesn't stress an important point: handling anger <u>incorrectly</u> won't solve anything. Anger is like any other feeling. It can be expressed maturely, handled productively, and used to help us grow, or it can be allowed to be destructive, making the situation worse and creating more anger.

This module will focus on anger in the workplace. Bullying in the workplace and workplace violence are clearly related to workplace anger, but in some important ways they are different; they will be mentioned here but not completely discussed.

IS WORKPLACE ANGER REALLY THAT COMMON?

Is workplace anger really that common? A quick search of the internet would make it seem that it is, and that on the job anger is a very serious problem, as well. There are there are hundreds and hundreds of articles about the topic and there are for-hire seminars and coaches that promise to solve your workplace anger and the anger in your organization. But the real answer to the question is:

1. Yes,

2. No one knows, and;

3. It's really not important.

Number one: Yes, of course workplace anger is common because anger is common. Anger is a normal emotion that happens when people are frustrated, hurt, provoked, or perceive wrongdoing, and there is no workplace anywhere in which frustration, hurt, provocation, and wrongdoing - and all the other good reasons there are for us to feel angry - have never occurred. Also, whenever people of differing personalities and temperaments are in close, daily contact, some amount of anger is inevitable. Anger is part of being human. We spend a large part of our lives at work, so workplace anger is common.

Number two: Anger is a feeling and feelings can't be objectively measured. Workplace bullying and violence can give us some idea of how much anger is the modern workplace. But those are extreme expressions of anger and no one can provide an accurate assessment of the amount and intensity of anger in our workplaces.

<u>Number three</u>: It is not important if anger is or isn't common in the modern workplace because you don't work everywhere and you can't solve the general problem of workplace anger. That statement is admittedly a little flippant but it emphasizes two important points. Number one: You can't solve workplace anger but you can and should learn to cope with the anger *you* feel when you are at work. Number two: You can help build a healthy work environment in which anger is addressed and constructively handled.

ANGER IS WHAT *I* SAY IT IS

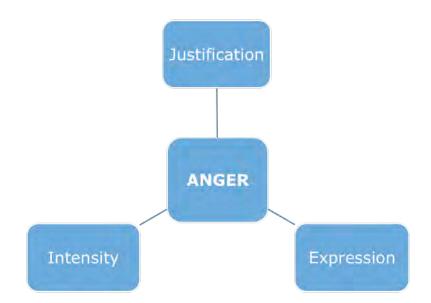The dictionary defines anger as follows:

Anger: A strong feeling of displeasure . . . anger is the name of the reaction, but (the term) does not give information about expression, intensity, or justification of the feeling.

Anger is undoubtedly a feeling of displeasure. Everyone would accept that although for most people, anger is experienced much more intensely. But it is the second part the definition that emphasizes why anger can be difficult to manage.

Anger is an emotion and it is expressed; it is expressed at a level of intensity, and; we feel anger in response to a stimulus that gives us justification for anger, usually fear, injustice, frustration, something we perceive as wrong. So far so good but when you think about those terms *expression, intensity, and justification* it becomes clear that anger, like every emotion, is complicated.

- Expression of anger: Everyone expresses anger in different ways. But the big question is: what is and what isn't an acceptable and reasonable way to let people know you are angry? There are standards to guide us, of course, and it is easy to think of extreme examples. No one would agree that hitting someone because he/she bumped into you in line at the grocery store is an acceptable expression of anger, but everyone would support you if you raised your voice and used strong language in response to a cultural or ethnic insult. But in between the two extremes there are many situations that leave us unsure and asking; how do I express my anger? The words you use to express your anger and the tone and volume of your voice may seem mild and restrained to you, but for the person you are angry with, it may seem harsh and threatening. Perspectives can differ greatly when it comes to anger.

- Intensity: Intensity of anger should ideally match the degree of hurt or provocation in the situation. But intensity, hurt, and provocation are all subjective terms and knowing what is a sensible, acceptable level of anger to feel for a given situation is not universally agreed upon. We have all said things like "Why is she/he yelling so much? That situation was not a big deal," or "I can't believe how calm you are. If that had been me I would have really been furious." Clearly, the level of anger that is appropriate for any given situation won't always be agreed upon.

- Justification: Justification can be defined as the reasons we use to declare something to be right and reasonable, our explanation for how we feel and what we do. Justification as it pertains to

anger is precisely like the expression and intensity of anger; it is subjective. Everyone has some internal standard they use to decide what is and what isn't worth getting angry about but our standards differ, typically not by a lot, but enough to cause disagreements from time to time. We have all thought or said, "You have no right to be angry about that," or "Doesn't that make you angry?" The essence of those statements is that in our opinion, someone was not justified in being angry or that someone should be angry. But clearly, that angry person *did* feel justified or she/he didn't feel a situation was worthy of becoming angry. Who is right?
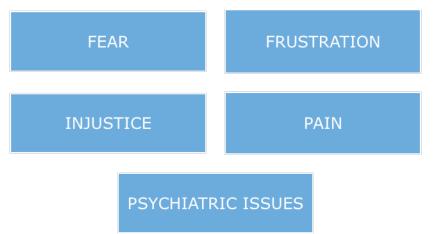

Considering these three factors it is simple to see why anger can be confusing and contentious. Someone can express anger by raising her/his voice slightly *or* by using abusive language, swearing, and threats. People can feel mildly angry for a short time or they can hold

an intense grudge for years. And a situation that you think is a justifiable cause for anger might not even be noticed by someone else.

WHAT CAUSES ANGER?

Fear, frustration, injustice, pain, and psychiatric issues are common sources of anger.

Common Causes of Anger

FEAR	FRUSTRATION
INJUSTICE	PAIN
PSYCHIATRIC ISSUES	

Fear causes anger for many reasons. Fear is often stimulated by a real or perceived threat, immediate or long-range, to our emotional, physical, and/or psychological security. Something or someone is seen as endangering our safety, and fear helps us prepare to meet and overcome the threat. Fear produces psychological and physical responses that are useful for self-defense and collectively these are called the fight or flight response.

> The fight or flight response is a coordinated group of physical reactions that prepare people to overcome a threat - the fight - or to run away - the flight. Some of these reactions are:
> The pupils dilate so we can see better;
> Heart rate increases to deliver more blood and oxygen to the brain and muscles;
> Adrenalin is released, and;
> Blood sugar level is increased, providing a quick source of energy.

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This response is an adaptive survival mechanism but it can also be intensely uncomfortable, and this can lead to a vicious cycle. Everyone knows how disturbing it is to be scared, and the physical discomfort of anger is itself frightening. This is turn increases the level of fear, and more fear can make us even angrier.

As with all causes of anger, the fears and threats that stimulate this emotion are subjective, and fear in the workplace has many causes. Someone might be at risk for losing her/his job or not getting a promotion or raise. A worker might feel, rightly or wrongly, that he/she is not supported at work or that she/he is being unfairly criticized. Perhaps a promotion, a raise, or a change in job conditions was promised but never happened.

Frustration happens when we cannot achieve or obtain what we want, and anger is a common response to frustration. Frustration can come from external sources such as other people or from uncooperative/unresponsive organizations, and it can come from internal sources. Our behavior and emotions can be frustrating when they prevent us from being happy or successful.

Frustration in the workplace is common and it has many causes. We can't get what we need to do our jobs; other departments or co-workers "let us down" and make job performance more difficult; persistent problems in the workplace are known about but not corrected; legitimate complaints are ignored; the job is a dead-end position, or; good performance is not recognized or rewarded.

Injustice makes everyone angry, whether it is personal, societal, or if the injustice happens to a person we know, and anger and injustice are very closely connected for two reasons.

The first involves our group identity. The idea of justice and right and wrong is universal and crucially important to us because to live communally we need laws and rules. Any action that goes contrary to our standards threatens group cohesion, and these transgressions are an uncomfortable reminder that social contracts, which are a primary source of our safety, are fragile. And when we feel unsafe we often become angry.

The second reason that anger and injustice are connected is personal. Whether something that was unfair and wrong happened to you or someone else, a perceived injustice is a reminder that it *could* happen to you and that you may or may not be guaranteed to have things go your way.

Pain can be a source of anger if it's caused by aggression. In that situation pain is a threat and anger is a useful response to threats. People who have chronic pain may also be persistently angry.

Psychiatric issues that cause anger can simple or complex. An angry person may be emotionally immature or socially immature. Anger is a normal part of life but none of us are born knowing how to handle and express anger; we learn those things. And there are serious, psychiatric illnesses that pre-dispose people to anger. People who have bipolar disorder, depression, intermittent explosive disorder, personality disorders, psychosis, or schizophrenia are more likely to have a high baseline level of anger and they will (often but not always) express their anger in aggressive and socially unacceptable ways.
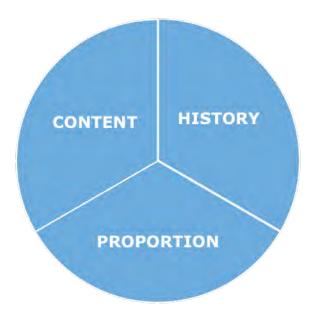
ANGER IN THE WORKPLACE: IS IT NORMAL OR DANGEROUS?

No one is surprised about getting angry during a typical work day, and we expect that our co-workers and managers will at times be angry. After all, there is a lot that can happen on the job that is frustrating and unfair.

But when is anger okay and when is it dangerous? Is the situation in question a normal expression of anger or is it out of proportion and potentially dangerous, possibly ending in violence?

Fortunately, anger at work is common but anger that ends in violence is rare. However, danger does not have to necessarily involve physical harm or threats. Extreme and inappropriate expressions of anger and aberrant behavior are highly disruptive and very, very unsettling. Very few of us can be unaffected if a co-worker is acting aggressively. The keys to determining if you are seeing a normal healthy expression of anger or potentially dangerous behavior are content, history, and proportion.

Anger Assessment

Content: Assessing the content of what is said and done is a primary way of deciding if anger is dangerous and inappropriate. Consider these four examples of normal anger and excessive, potentially dangerous anger. Same situations, different reactions.

Co-worker A says: "I'm so angry. The boss assigned me another part of that job to do but she won't give me the resources I need. She has done this so many times, and it's not fair. Sometimes I feel like quitting"

Co-worker B says: "I'm so angry. The boss asked to stay 5 minutes past quitting time to help get that big order completed. I used to box in high school and I've had my share of street fights. That guy needs his face rearranged and I'm just the person to do it. He better not push me like that again."

Co-worker A says: "Our department needs those documents edited and copied by 12:00 each day, and you have been late 5 of the last 6

days. That makes me angry and frustrated, and it stops me from getting my work done."

Co-worker B says: "Listen to me, you idiot. You're not holding up your end of the bargain and that makes my job really, really tough. Do you think you can get away with this crap? People like you just need to learn the hard way, and I might just decide to screw up your work day or maybe do something a lot worse. You better straighten out before I make you sorry you were born. Do you think you could stop me?"

These situations are exaggerated but they illustrate the difference between normal and excessive expression of anger. They also stress the importance of assessing the content of speech and actions. It is not enough to say that someone upsets you or makes you nervous; the specific behavior or exactly what was said needs to be identified. This means you need to use your judgment and judgment can be subjective. But dangerous and excessive anger is obvious by its content and anything that might have serious consequences will be clear to everyone; it is the situations that are "in between" that are challenging.

History: Are episodes of workplace anger happening frequently and is the same person always the source? Everyone has "bad days" but if there is one individual who is always losing her/his temper and if her/his anger is expressed in inappropriate and intense ways, that is a problem that needs to be immediately addressed. It is also important to notice if the frequency and intensity of outbursts are increasing.

Proportion: Proportion refers to the intensity and the content of the anger in relation to the cause. Assessing this is subjective, but if a co-

worker is noticeably and intensely angry in response to a minor irritation that is a sign of potentially dangerous anger.

The table below provides examples of behaviors that are inappropriate expressions of anger and may be warning signs of workplace violence

Inappropriate Expressions of Anger

Abusive language

Always blaming others or the workplace

Behavior that disrupts the workplace

Constant swearing

Escalation of frequency and/or intensity of outbursts

Excessive reaction to criticism

Expressions of paranoia

Intense mood swings

Intimidation

Obsession with perceived favoritism

Odd or bizarre behavior

Physical force/threat of physical force

Persistent feelings of persecution or being picked on

Preoccupation with past problems

Preoccupation with fairness in the workplace

Profane language

Repeated outbursts

Threats

Withdrawal from social contact

Employees should never intervene in cases of dangerous anger or bullying that may be a prelude to violence. Management should be notified and professional and legal help may be needed.

MANAGING ANGER IN THE WORKPLACE

Anger in the workplace that is not constructively managed can adversely affect employees and the organization in many ways .

- Unresolved anger can cause poor communication. If there is a strong undercurrent of anger at work people will be afraid to interact for fear of confrontation or disturbing the tenuous relationship they have with co-workers and management. And anger can discourage people from speaking up to point out errors or from making constructive suggestions: No one will be willing to take a chance for fear of being singled out. Everyone is "walking on eggshells."

- Anger can be a direct cause of poor work quality. Employees cannot concentrate or function if they are working in an angry environment. The angry employee is not concentrating on her/his job and the other employees just want to get through the day without being upset and then go home.

- Anger can cause employees to miss work or even quit.

- Unresolved anger makes people unhappy. Aside from the practical effects of anger in the workplace such as poor work quality, non-existent communication, absenteeism, it is simply

not very pleasant to be some place where anger is the prevailing mood. We spend a large part of our lives at work - why should it be a miserable experience?
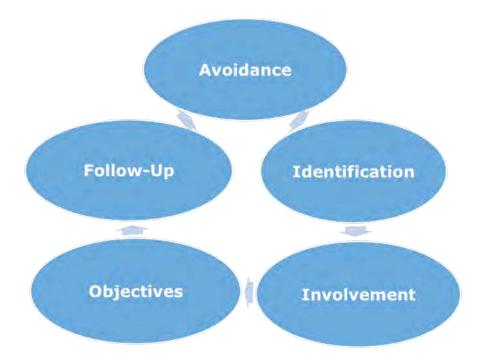
Managing anger in the workplace is an organizational and a personal issue and each one will be discussed.

Workplace Anger: Management Responsibilities

Management has a responsibility to ensure that anger in the workplace does not disrupt the organization's goals and productivity; does not escalate to a dangerous level, and; does not become so unpleasant and pervasive that the employees are unhappy.

These are big challenges that require resources and people skills and can easily leave managers feeling overwhelmed. And it is also natural to feel a bit resentful about these responsibilities. Managers come to work to *work*, like everyone else, and no one wants to referee inter-office tensions, cope with angry employees, or to act as a mediator or problem solver for these types of emotional issues. It's difficult to do and requires talents and training that very few managers have, or can reasonably be expected to have.

Nonetheless, organizations must have plans and processes for dealing with workplace anger, and that can't be stressed enough. Having a "blueprint" for managing emotions may seem counter-intuitive because emotions are something we feel, they are personal, and they often aren't logical. But anger in the workplace has specific, concrete identifiable causes and effects so a plan can work.

The diagram illustrates the basic components of an anger management plan. They can be changed as needed and adapted to the situation.

Avoidance: None of us wants to deal with an angry person and often we don't want to cope with our own personal anger. In either case, the natural tendency when anger occurs is to ignore the situation/feelings and pretend it's not happening, hope it goes away, or simply wait (and again, hope) that it resolves itself. Unless you are dealing with a very minor incident *and* it involves a situation in which the lines of communication are open and clear, ignoring anger is the wrong choice. This approach does not work and it can increase workplace anger. And if employees see that management is ignoring a serious on-the-job anger issue, how will they feel? Angry. Unfortunately, organizations and individuals often respond to anger by avoiding it, and *this is perhaps the most common reaction.*

Identification: Clearly identifying the problem is the *first step* in solving the problem, but this is often overlooked. Example: An employee tells his boss he is angry with a co-worker because "she doesn't do her job." This may be true, she may not be doing her job, but this complaint is also vague and non-specific. Suppose the manager decided to correct the problem by telling this woman "We've had complaints about you. People think you aren't doing your job and you need to improve your work performance and do better."

This is a simplistic example but there are probably many times in which this approach is applied, and this non-specific method won't help. Anger is a response to a stimulus, so the manager must find out exactly what is causing the anger. If it is a work performance issue - and it should be to be considered a legitimate complain - job responsibilities are clear and defined so in a situation like this the manager would: 1) Ask the complaining employee to say exactly what his co-worker is/is not doing; 2) Try and confirm this information and determine what the problem is and its consequences, and; 3) If the complaint has merit, discuss the issue with the employee and everyone else who is involved. Problems with anger can't be solved if no one knows what the problem is: identification is key.

Involvement: Anger in the workplace is like a problem in a personal relationship. There is usually plenty of blame to go around and everyone is contributing in some way. Getting people to acknowledge their responsibility is difficult but it is a necessary part of the process and like identification, this should be done objectively.

<u>Objectives</u>: Once the problem has been identified a plan with objectives should be formulated. Without objectives, there is no way to know if a problem has been solved. Managers should also know when they need help, as solving these types of "crises" is a specialized skill.

<u>Follow-up</u>: Follow-up is a very important step in this process. Managers should schedule follow-ups to determine if the anger problem *is* still a problem and to see if the solutions are working.

A final part of this process is to avoid making judgements. A workplace anger issue is a problem because it disrupts productivity and makes people uncomfortable and unhappy. The goal should be to correct what's happening, not to make the process personal and blame people.

This is difficult to do, of course, as we all think in terms of good and bad, right and wrong. But it is crucial to understand the difference between blame and responsibility. When we assign blame, we are telling someone "you're bad." When we assign responsibility, someone is being held accountable for what they have done. Blaming is natural and instinctual but it only serves to make the accused feel angry.

In summary, an organization should never avoid workplace anger problems; the anger problems must be specifically identified; any employee who is directly involved should be brought into the solution process; there should be clear-cut objectives, and; managers should follow-up to see if the plan has worked.
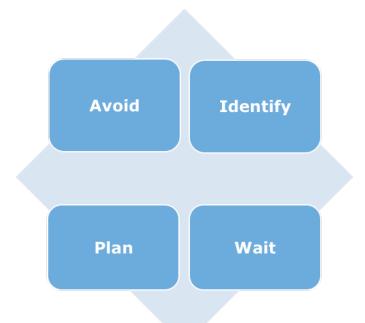
Personal Anger Management at Work: Handling a Specific Situation

This module offers practical advice for dealing with personal anger in the workplace. These suggestions and guidelines are useful tools, but it is this author's opinion that the key to anger management is contained in the phrase itself: anger management. The word manage is defined as "directing with purpose", so to effectively handle your workplace anger you must <u>manage</u> it instead of react to it. If you are angry at work the key question you need to answer is this: Will I control my anger or will my anger control me?

That stance is the starting point but of course it is helpful if you have a plan. This does not have to be highly detailed and organized, and what this module provides could be accurately described as helpful hints or tips. After reading these most people will probably think, "These suggestions are just common sense and are pretty obvious; I knew this already." That's true, but anger is a powerful emotion. When you are angry or someone is angry with you it can be difficult to think straight and be calm so in these situations, simple is better.

These suggestions can be used when you are angry with a situation or a co-worker. Once you are familiar with them they can be applied quickly and will become second nature, but for starters it is helpful to write them down so you can refer to them from time to time.

Avoid: Avoid losing your temper. Except in very, very unusual circumstances, it is never a good idea to lash out, retaliate, or express your anger in ways that are harsh or hurtful. Accusations, name calling, insults, or rude behavior may feel good at the time. But that feeling won't last, it's likely you will do or say something you will regret and those behaviors won't solve the problem.

This advice is easy to give but not so easy to follow. Your anger is probably reasonable and justified; it's only natural that you would want to "get even" or at least have your anger recognized. But as pointed out earlier, losing your temper is counter-productive and won't solve the problem. If you are understandably angry about something or with someone, arrangements can be made for an appropriate expression of your feelings.

Identify: It was mentioned before but you can't effectively deal with your anger, and you can't expect anyone to help you, if you don't know why you are upset. Identify the problem.

<u>Wait</u>: Waiting is related to the first suggestion, avoiding. When you are angry at a co-worker or with some practical aspect of the workplace, it is advisable to wait a bit to let your feelings settle instead of immediately reacting. Waiting can give you time to see if the issue is a one-time thing that isn't worth getting upset about, and it also provides perspective. What might have seemed very serious at first will often be, after some time and reflection, not as threatening as it initially was. The age-old advice of "When you are angry, count to 10, slowly" is worth following.

<u>Plan</u>: Identifying and waiting allows you to carry out the fourth step, planning. Don't react right away, identify what is making you angry, and then make plan of action. In many circumstances this will involve having the management become involved.

Managing Your Personal Anger at Work: A Basic Example

You are an emergency room nurse and you feel that a co-worker is always MIA when there is hard work to be done. You see this as a persistent problem, ongoing for months, but none of the other nurses has mentioned it and you have never discussed your feelings with anyone. Still, it bothers you considerably.

The breaking point for you comes when a confused patient who is very ill but still ambulatory tries to leave the ER. You are struggling to keep the patient in her room - and worrying about the other very sick patients in your assignment - and the patient is threatening to become physically abusive. The situation is escalating and it seems potentially dangerous. The co-worker walks by, glances into the room, but keeps

walking; no offer of help. Later in the day you are alone with this person in the break room. What do say to him? How would you handle this situation?

Avoid: In this situation being angry is perfectly justified, or so it seemed at the time. You are *very* upset and you would really like to scream at this person for what he did. However, there are 10 hours left in the shift and the ER is very busy. A confrontation now would be a bad idea and you recognize that you are angry enough to say something you might regret. Also, this is a person you see four-five days a week; how uncomfortable do you want to feel at work? Do not give in to temptation and lose your temper.

Identify: There are two issues here, the specific action that made you angry and what you feel is a consistent pattern of similar behavior. It is important to remember that they are different. The first is definite and concrete, the second may be true but from an outside perspective and without more information it is more of a feeling. This distinction will be important later.

Wait: Waiting is clearly the best option. You can't make anything better by acting out now.

Plan: You cannot make headway on this by yourself, you need help from your supervisors. It is not your responsibility to direct or discipline other employees and if what someone is doing or not doing affects patient care, you need to speak up so management can step in. Given that, your plan in this situation is simple; let the managers know what happened, ask for a meeting, and think about what you will say.

You should also go into the meeting with objectives *and* be sure to ask for recognition of your feelings. It is important to solve the problem but it is vital to move past it so your anger should be acknowledged so the co-worker should apologize. A meeting will also allow that co-worker a chance to defend himself and tell his side of the story, which is his right.

Conclusion

In this situation, you controlled your anger, it didn't control you. Avoiding the natural tendency to act out prevented an unpleasant and unproductive confrontation. During the meeting, you complained about a specific act; your co-worker admitted he was wrong and he apologized, and; the managers empathized with your anger and they said they would work with the employee to prevent a recurrence. You always felt this other nurse was slacking off, but you couldn't recall specific dates, times, and situations. Because of that you kept these feelings to yourself and learned two important lessons about anger management. Don't avoid your anger and identify what is bothering you at the time it's happening.

Personal Management at Work: General Advice

Everyone must cope with a certain level of anger. Not every anger-provoking situation can or should be addressed, some cannot be corrected, and the workplace is no different. As always, managing your anger should be the guiding principle and you can use the same processes that were previously outlined. Some important differences for personal anger management include these points.

<u>Self-examination</u>: Could you have a better attitude? Are you contributing to the situation? Are you the only one who seems angry?

<u>Is it personal</u>? Are you angry at work because of the job or because of problems that are carrying over from your personal life?

<u>Wrong job</u>: You may be in the wrong career or the atmosphere of your workplace may not be a good fit.

<u>No place to go but down</u>: You like your co-workers and you are in the right career. But there's no room for advancement so you're frustrated and anger is a natural consequence of frustration.

<u>It's only temporary</u>: This is always an important question to ask. Is the situation or the person making you angry something permanent or temporary?

<u>Take a vacation</u>: This doesn't need to be explained.

<u>Get help</u>: If you feel as if your workplace anger is out of control, see if the organization has a program for employees who need help with this issue