

How to understand and harness your workplace rage

January 23 2018, by Peter O'connor



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

As you're sitting there, about to throw an office chair, your temperature and heart rate rising, know that it isn't all in vain.

Getting angry in your office does actually have a positive side. For example, anger can motivate you to [respond to perceived injustice](#). It can

also be useful in negotiations, with [research showing](#) angry negotiators tend to have better outcomes.

But it can also lead you to [make poor decisions](#), say something you'll regret and even make you more [physically violent](#).

Given the mixed consequences of anger at [work](#), you shouldn't feel justified in hitting a fellow employee, but recent research suggests a little anger in moderation is alright.

Common anger triggers at work

The most common cause of workplace anger is being treated unjustly (77%), according to an early but influential [Australian study](#).

Researchers also found we don't tolerate being the target of immoral behaviour like laziness or theft (23%) and being disrespected by our coworkers (20%).

[More recently](#), researchers have suggested three main triggers of anger in the workplace:

1. Feeling unjustly treated by others, particularly a supervisor or witnessing an injustice in your organisation (for example someone else being treated unfairly)
2. When you feel like someone is messing with your goals or obstructing your plans. Lack of time or resources can also be the cause of [deviant behaviour at work](#)
3. Interpersonal conflict, like personality clashes and differences in attitudes. Not only causing one but many people to be angry.

Is your blood boiling yet?

When anger is beneficial

The research evidence for the professional benefits of anger are mostly in relation to negotiation and leadership situations.

In [studies of negotiation](#), people who expressed anger had better outcomes. However this is usually only when the angry party has the greater power, or when the recipient of the rage has [poor alternatives to negotiating](#).

[A 2016 study](#) found anger in leaders can make them appear more powerful, yet less effective. [Intense anger](#) in leaders motivates their subordinates to increase their effort but also means they will be more deviant. [Another study](#) found that anger enhances performance, but only when followers have conscientious and agreeable personalities.

More generally, [research](#) finds anger has positive consequences at work when it's expressed verbally, is of low intensity and when it's a mad man rather than a woman.

Do some people just have a low boiling point?

Although most people will occasionally experience anger at work, some people seem to constantly be on edge.

For example, people who usually blow their top as opposed to getting only a little angry [will be more likely to experience](#) ongoing anger at work. These people are easily provoked.

People who are neurotic at work are also likely to be more angry because they have poor emotional regulation. People who show traits of [psychopathy](#) and [low agreeableness](#) are also more likely to express their

anger at work, than others.

However these people tend to be more successful at work. But anger is probably not the cause of their success. It is more likely that anger is a side-effect of adaptive characteristics. For example competitive people are likely to be both successful and express anger more often.

Anger as a strategy

Since anger is beneficial in some instances, it raises the question: should employees strategically act out anger to bring about positive outcomes? Although [some research](#) supports this, other studies suggest caution.

For example [one study](#) demonstrated that faking anger in negotiations is detrimental to resolving the conflict. A better strategy than faking anger is actually to communicate it when it is real, but do so in a controlled manner (for example not being abusive but telling someone you're mad).

There's only one type of person who seems to be an exception to this advice: those high in the personality trait "machiavellianism". Machiavellian employees are those who operate strategically and manipulatively at work in order to achieve their goals. They [can be highly angry](#) and are likely to use it, and aggression, strategically to enhance their success.

Tips for managing anger

Aside from making you very unpopular in the workplace, anger has been [linked to](#) high blood pressure and heart disease. Fortunately, there are things you can do to manage anger in the office.

You don't have to be a zen master to learn to regulate your emotions

through mindfulness and emotional intelligence training. One simple strategy involves reducing arousal through deep, slow breathing. This type of training can also [protect from stress](#) which is a major source of anger. Although [emotional regulation](#) will not eliminate anger, it will reduce its intensity.

You can also go straight to the source of your rage and see if that can be changed instead. This is not easily done, however it can be best in the long run.

Overall, the research seems to suggest merit to both expressing and controlling anger. It's generally not a good idea to use [anger](#) as a strategy to manipulate, but when something makes you angry, feel free to express it – it might lead to positive outcomes.

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