



Anger

Thoughts on leadership

by Karl Pister



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Several years ago I worked with a surgeon who truly had been trained in the trenches. His age, war-time experience, and training all lent to a command and control, profanity-laced approach to anything that wasn't up to his standards. And, in his defense, most of the time when there was an explosion, I could easily see his point that the patient-safety issues he was concerned about were not being properly addressed.

Long ago I heard the phrase that "anger occurs when reality doesn't meet expectations". That reality can revolve around:

- Something taking longer than it should
- Patients not being brought back to the OR on time
- Someone in clinic truly missing key steps on routine matters, but certainly having time to be on the cellphone in the MA station
- An obvious resolution that is overlooked by someone with a different perspective
- The fifth surgical packet not having the retractor that your preference card clearly states is needed...the first time
- A complicated case starts and the scrub nurse assigned has not done this type of case before and the newness is obvious



And the list goes on and on.

My surgeon client had the latter happen, and he phoned me after the case to let me know the results. As close as I can remember he said:

"It was three in the afternoon, and the case was getting more difficult as it progressed. The nurse was moving extremely slowly and was very tentative. Before, I would have raised my voice and let the nurse know that she needed to up her game.

However, this time, I stepped back from the field, and said the following:

'This is going to be a tough case for me and I know that it is a tough case for you. Let's just keep up the pace and get through this'.

Karl, when I said that, I could see her whole body get less tense. She only mumbled 'thank you' through her mask, but her whole tone changed. Her speed actually picked up and though the case remained difficult, we made it".

He poignantly and rhetorically asked in a different session:



"Why didn't I learn these things earlier"?

Whether age, or training, or background, or whatever, there still is a feeling that anger, however justified, can be used to solve things.

Douglas Wilder, the first African-American governor of Virginia in the early 1990s, who certainly had experience with justified feelings of anger on his path in politics, said eloquently:

"Anger doesn't solve anything. It builds nothing, but it can destroy everything."

Let's take that apart:

Anger doesn't solve anything: this is where anger is deceptive.

Short term anger solves multiple problems: It shifts the position of others. It gets us what we want. It makes things start moving. Such change is seen as a demonstration that anger is necessary and it works.

The deception is that long-term, it erodes the foundation that could make those desired changes permanent and well-founded.



Anger builds nothing: Think about that. IT BUILDS NOTHING. Just experiment with that for a couple of weeks. Track the amount of time that anger occupies your hard drive. Add up the time that you were off your game due to these emotions. Let's say that it is just an hour a week.

"Not bad" you say? Seemingly not. However, the math condemns us here. That adds up, over a 48 week year, to an ENTIRE work week (plus eight hours) of just being angry. Productive use of your brain-power?....

Now, I am not saying that this is easy. I am only focusing on what makes you more productive as a leader.

If you are accustomed to using anger as a control mechanism, this will be a challenge to change, since the brain has a very difficult time letting go of anything that brings results.

Thus, the need to start experimenting, with an intentional plan, on how to provide the brain with alternative paths. A superb book on this is by Matthew McKay: The Anger Control Workbook. You might be thinking than an entire book is overkill on the recommendation. Not the case...just one of the best texts with well-presented and well-tested methods.



Anger can destroy everything: hard to expand on that concrete statement. I go to the great book, that I have referred to before, *The Speed of Trust*, by Stephen M.R. Covey. One of his most salient points is that when trust is established, processes and procedures go better; hence, the title.

I am not talking about some warm, fuzzy, everyone-loves-each-other use of the word 'trust' (nothing inherently wrong with that, but that is not the world you, or I, live in).

What I am referring to is the "I can bring this up to you and I know I won't get my head taken off by your response" trust.

Without that, things slow way down. Destructive, passive behaviors start (out of perceived survival) and then we wonder how to improve our culture?!

In conclusion...nothing presented here should make you think that I don't completely agree with the frustration levels that spark the anger.

The key point, is the resulting response does nothing to solve the situation or help anything to improve.

So again the quote: "Anger doesn't solve anything. It builds nothing, but it can destroy everything."



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