

Anger: A Barrier to Overcome

BY EILEEN L. BERMAN



I was having a consultation

with one of my colleagues when she told me of a personally disturbing incident that I believe we can all relate to. One of her therapy patients decided to terminate without giving any reason. As the patient was leaving, she angrily blurted out, "If you want to know why I'm so angry, you can call me to find out!"

As my colleague relayed the story to me, it was obvious that she was quite hurt and angry. When I asked if she had called the patient to allow for some feedback and a defusing of the situation, she told me that she had no intention of calling her. "There's a tug of war only if you pick up the other end of the rope, and I'll not join in that battle. Let her find someone else."

What she had envisioned as a "tug of war" could also be seen as a way of getting together in order to discover what went wrong and attempt to ameliorate the situation. The objective of her discussion was not to get the patient back, but to learn why the patient left. Why was the patient so angry? Why did she suggest the doctor call her rather than discuss the situation in person? What happened that caused such an angry outburst?

In your professional and personal life, how can you get past the anger being displayed and the hurt inflicted upon you as the recipient? This is, indeed, a daunting and difficult task. If my colleague could only have put her feelings of humiliation aside, she might have found this a great opportunity for growth, albeit not an easy process. In situations like this, it is of benefit to both parties to discover what went wrong. The dialogue between the two is an opportunity

for the future, not the past.

What about my colleague's curiosity as to what prompted such an outburst? What could have happened? The knowledge of discovery plus the process necessary to elicit this information would have lent to her future proficiency as a therapist. It also would serve to quell her anxiety in trying to guess what she had done to elicit such drastic behavior. By being reluctant to obtain feedback about a distressing incident, you not only fail to lower your stress level but also sacrifice a chance to grow in understanding and confrontational skills.

As a supervisor, how do you deal with someone's anger and disparagement? Do you ignore another person's negative emotions or poor performance and simply move on because it is less stressful than confronting the issue? What can you and your staff gain by you having the courage to face a situation directly in order to learn what had happened?

As difficult as it is to overlook anger, by facing the problem and *listening* to the grievance, you will be seen as open and interested in the injured party's feelings and point of view. By not defending your position, but listening to the position of the aggrieved party, you create an atmosphere of trust that will help your future relationship.

You both will discover whether this incident had something to do with your management style or his ability to perform — or both. Does he have a personal problem with which he is preoccupied? You may be able to help him perform better if you know what is preventing him from reaching the objectives you both have agreed upon.

By showing your willingness to join him in understanding his performance and yours, and being able to listen to him without fear of hearing something unpleasant about your own style, you will have gone very far in your relationship with him. You will gain a person on your team who will feel heard, understood, and involved. He will also feel loyal to you as he sees you as reachable and willing to change. And this incident will breed positive consequences for the rest of your team. Morale will definitely be improved.

It is always hard to expose yourself to someone else's anger, to listen and not defend, to find common ground for understanding. We grow and change through dialogue that leads to greater understanding on the part of both people. My colleague did not care to get involved in her patient's anger — a hurdle she didn't wish to deal with. If she could have involved herself in this process, however, much could have been gained for both parties. The ability to talk about things that are disturbing to others is a necessary tool for all of us to employ.

In your professional and personal life, how can you get past the anger being displayed and the hurt inflicted upon you as the recipient of an outburst?

Eileen Berman, Ed.D., is a practicing psychologist and consultant in Rhode Island. She is the author of two books, *Dealing Effectively with Job Loss* and *Building Productivity*. E-mail her at e.berman@cox.net with comments or suggestions.