

How Anger Poisons Decision Making

by Jennifer S. Lerner and Katherine Shonk

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You're late for work, and it's pouring rain. In the parking lot, a car speeds around you and takes the last spot near the building entrance. You end up trudging from the back of the lot and get soaked to the skin. You're mad, and you know your judgment at the moment is probably impaired. Worse, the leftover anger will continue to color your decisions at work, our research suggests, without your awareness—not a good thing for anyone trying to steer the best course through the day's business problems.

Many organizations have anger-management programs for their most egregious bullies, but the reality is that the vast majority of employees will experience anger triggered by anything from a family quarrel to a lost parking space—and their work will suffer for it. For example, angry people tend to rely on cognitive shortcuts—easy rules of thumb—rather than on more systematic reasoning. They're also quick to blame individuals, rather than aspects of a situation, for problems.

Companies can effectively work around this human tendency and mitigate the impact of anger-fueled actions in the workplace by introducing accountability. If you expect that your decisions will be evaluated by someone whose opinions you don't know, you'll unconsciously curb the effects of anger on those decisions. When you can't be sure how your evaluator will judge your behavior, you'll pay more attention to the key facts of a situation, which will then crowd out the (unwanted) influence of your own feelings from past events.

This finding has important implications for organizations and their populations of semirational, emotion-ridden individuals who endeavor to produce good decisions in spite of themselves.

A study conducted by Jennifer S. Lerner with Julie H. Goldberg of the University of Illinois and Philip E. Tetlock of UC Berkeley documented the psychological effects of residual anger. The study found that people who saw an anger-inducing video of a boy being bullied were then more punitive toward defendants in a series of unrelated fictional tort cases involving negligence and injury than were people who had seen a neutral video—unless they were told that they'd be held accountable and would be asked to explain their decisions to an expert whose views they didn't know. After watching the bullying video, the subjects in this accountable group were every bit as angry as the others, yet they judged the defendants' behavior less harshly. Accountability appears not to change what decision makers feel; rather, it changes how they use their feelings—a much more manageable objective for the workplace.

Anger's Lingering Effects

Participants in a study watched an enraging video and then served as jurors on unrelated fictional tort cases. Those who knew they would have to account for their decisions were better at managing the effects of their anger.

Without revealing their own views, managers should inform employees that they will be expected to justify their decisions on certain projects—not just the outcomes—after the fact. By improving accountability, managers can steer employees toward decisions free from the negative effects of anger.

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Unaccountable participants

Judged the behavior of defendants in unrelated cases harshly

Dismissed the mitigating circumstances in the situations

Failed to consider whether their decisions were defensible

Blamed others

Accountable participants

Were evenhanded in subsequent decisions

Based their decisions on the facts of the case

Engaged in self-critical thought about the defensibility of their decisions

Corrected for their tendency to blame others

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