



The ability to stay calm while being criticised is a positive example for subordinates to follow

# Anger management must start at the top

# A

leading Hong Kong company held its annual conference to review performance and map out future strategy. During a breakout session on the second day, groups drawn from different

departments were given time to brainstorm about an assigned topic, after which they were to give a short presentation summarising their ideas and conclusions.

Each group consisted of people of varying levels of seniority in the hope of sparking creativity and stimulating the participants to come up with new perspectives and not just recycle the same old thinking.

In one room, the topic under discussion was how to improve sales productivity.

Logically, the most senior person present chaired the session – in this case, the finance director – and the group also included the company's sales manager and a graduate trainee, who had recently started a job rotation in the sales department.

Encouraged, in the spirit of the session, to suggest "anything and everything", this young graduate was only too ready to speak out. In three short minutes, she explained how the whole department should be restructured, that senior sales staff were clearly resting on their laurels, and that a new incentive scheme should be introduced as soon as possible.

Hearing these views and taking them as a barely veiled personal attack, the sales manager looked like thunder. He also felt

## "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself"

Leo Tolstoy  
Russian novelist (1828-1910)

obliged to launch into a point-by-point rebuttal, explaining in detail to the rest of the group why the trainee's comments were either naive, ill-informed or financially inadvisable. To the casual observer, this performance seemed unnecessarily emotional and bordered on displaying a lack of self-control.

Not surprisingly, the overall mood of the session swung rapidly from positive to negative. No one else wanted to step into the firing line, so they simply resorted to making a number of bland suggestions about "more training" or "focusing on platinum customers".

Things did not end there. A few weeks later, when the trainee completed her spell with the sales department, she received, without knowing it at the time, a less than

glowing appraisal. This went on her personnel file, where it will remain for who knows how long.

The sales manager could possibly claim to have acted decisively and shown leadership skills in setting the record straight. Unfortunately, however, by failing to size up the original situation for what it was and, more importantly, by not managing his emotions well enough, his reaction stifled the breakout session. When word spread, it also had a longer term adverse impact on morale among the sales team and on perceptions of the manager in other parts of the company.

All of this resulted from a lack of skill in controlling emotions and, apparently, the false belief that a leader should be automatically immune to any hint of criticism from a subordinate.

A more emotionally intelligent leader would obviously have handled the situation differently. Noting the topic for discussion and the makeup of the group, he would perhaps have taken the initiative by asking to chair the session. Or, after the trainee had spoken, he could have waited for others to speak, in the likelihood they would put forward alternative approaches or point out certain flaws.

More than anything, he should have avoided taking personal offence for no good reason. This would have made it possible to move forward positively and for everyone to contribute productively.

In general terms, a leader who can manage his or her emotions will achieve more, create a far better working environment for staff and be able to cope more effectively with the day-to-day pressures of the job. To reach that point, it usually helps to have a tried and tested

distraction technique. By adopting a simple method, which you know works for you, of exercising self-restraint in difficult situations, you will approach things more rationally and not allow rash instincts to cloud your judgment.

In 1996, Robert Thayer, a professor of psychology at California State University at Long Beach, and a widely-read author on the science of moods, identified several distraction strategies which helped individuals manage their emotions and change their mood. Some involve taking more direct control, others depend more on practising a degree of passivity. The top strategies are:

● **Engage in cognitive activities which force you to think or learn.** This could be anything from picking up a crossword puzzle to reviewing a vocabulary list from your last Putonghua class. Alternatively, you might consider keeping a personal journal to note down the times you feel negative emotions at work and what causes them. This will help to clarify your thoughts and take a broader perspective.

● **Do something for fun and relaxation** like taking a five-minute "meditation break" at your desk, flicking through the newspaper, or going to the health club for a yoga class. It is well known that nothing clears the mind like a run, a swim or a session at the gym. If that's not your style, identify what it is – building model planes or going shopping – that helps you unwind, and do that instead.

● **Take a step back physically and metaphorically.** If you feel on the point of exploding, leave the room or take 20 minutes away from the office until you feel in control again.

● **A problem shared is a problem halved,** so when something proves a persistent problem, talk it through with a friend, colleague or family member. The key, of course, is to choose someone not immediately connected with the situation.

● **Just switch off by doing something "mindless"** such as surfing the Net or watching TV. It is often surprising how much this can lift the mood.

The important thing is not just knowing about distraction techniques, but finding the one that works best for you. To maintain self-control in potentially difficult circumstances, some leaders also develop specific reminders to prevent them from speaking or acting in haste. This might be a small card with the word "stop" placed on the table in front of them, or wearing a special ring which they touch when feeling wound up.

Stressful situations and difficult people are part of the business world. That will not change, so a resourceful leader must understand how to handle the emotions involved. The best place to start is by managing one's emotions effectively and seeing that a failure to do so has far-reaching consequences.

*Jeffrey Markley is a partner with Simitri Group International, a specialist in coaching businesses and individuals in persuasive face-to-face communication skills.*

### Driven to distraction

- Emotional self-management distraction techniques
- Engaging in cognitive activities
- Engaging in something enjoyable
- Withdrawal or avoidance
- Engaging in dialogue with someone supportive
- Taking time just to switch off

## Tips To Win

### Delivering a message

When communicating with staff, a leader often has to walk a fine line. If not careful, he or she runs the risk of being too general, optimistic and assertive, or of appearing to over-elaborate and talk down to the audience. Striking the wrong note can lead to problems in terms of a loss of support and confidence among the team. Therefore, whether dealing with employees, clients or investors, it helps to have a structured approach. One that is generally applicable is message – impact – relevance. Using this, you start by delivering the main message. It can be a request, policy idea, recommendation or statement. Then comes the impact, which is an explanation of the advantage, benefit or value that the message is expected to bring. Finally, relevance creates a direct link for the audience and shows how the message affects them. Employing this basic structure provides a better chance of capturing attention and motivating people to act.

### Giving feedback

Employees expect feedback, and the golden rule for a boss is to make it specific. General statements about "unsatisfactory work" help no one, and may lead to defensive reactions and arguments. The recommended approach is to highlight actual cases and recent examples, which is a much better basis for action and improvement. Also, if there are problems that are evident, don't be afraid to spell out what impact they have had on colleagues, clients or the company. Seeing that, the person at fault might be more likely to be galvanised into taking corrective steps.

### Managing group conflict

During meetings, people often challenge colleagues in a non-productive way and get into arguments over irrelevant or trivial issues. The person chairing the meeting should be alert to the warning signals and be sure to remain neutral. An emotionally intelligent leader will remember that conflict can often lead to a positive

outcome and will do two things: show that there are differing points of view, and steer people away from anything obviously negative or lacking importance. To ensure there is no room for misunderstanding, it is useful to scribble down the alternative perspectives on a flip chart and then examine each one more closely in turn. This gives people a chance to explain their stance and, if possible, support it with valid reasons. Such a method also gives the leader an opportunity to discern how much of the thinking is rational and how much is governed by emotions.



**On the Web** Classified Post, together with the Simitri Group, has prepared a weekly task for you to complete in your own time to help you develop your emotional intelligence. Visit [www.Classifiedpost.com/executiveinsights/weekly.html](http://www.Classifiedpost.com/executiveinsights/weekly.html). Be sure to also complete the free Emotional Intelligence test, for which you can receive a report in just 24 hours