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# In defence of angry outbursts in the office



By Andrew Hill

The sanitisation of workplace feelings has gone too far, but useful rages take practice

**F**red Goodwin, disgraced former chief executive of Royal Bank of Scotland, was notorious for what were nicknamed “morning beatings”, where he focused rage and ridicule on his lieutenants. According to *Shredded*, Ian Fraser’s new book, the senior team would play Hangman while waiting for the meetings to start, “to see who might be ‘strung up’ next”. Richard Fuld of Lehman Brothers was known for his short temper and intimidating style. The wrath of Robert Maxwell, the late media tycoon, was epic.

Among successful bosses, however, it is fashionable for profiles to applaud those with a reputation for never losing their cool. There are exceptions. Hewlett-Packard’s Meg Whitman and Liu Chuanzhi of Lenovo are reported to have had short tempers, for instance. But the widespread presumption is that anger in the workplace must be bad for business and managers should cultivate only “positive” emotions.

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Clearly, the right to work without intimidation is paramount. Bullying behaviour in the Fuld, Goodwin or Maxwell vein is unacceptable. Uncurbed hostility at work is also costly, if you include the expense of investigating and resolving cases where tempers boil over into aggression.

But still, I am afraid that sanitisation of workplace feelings has gone too far: expunging anger from the office is both unrealistic and potentially counter-productive.

My fear is shared by a group of academics who last week ran a symposium at the Academy of Management’s annual meeting entitled “In Defence of Anger”. The rest of the AOM’s agenda included professors fretting about the consequences of negative emotions at work. But Dirk Lindebaum, from the University of Liverpool’s management school, who co-chaired the symposium, told me that instead of tagging particular feelings – joy or anger, say – as positive or negative, it would be more productive to focus on whether they

are useful.

He has also co-edited a special edition of the journal *Human Relations*, which includes a study suggesting more than two-thirds of emotionally negative events actually lead to a positive outcome. Another study showed that teams of health workers who suppressed feelings such as distress, hostility and upset performed less well than those who allowed “bad” feelings to surface. Co-workers sometimes rush smiling to a solution without having the sort of unpleasant row that can highlight important problems. To avoid this, Honda, the carmaker, has even institutionalised contrariness in so-called *waiqaya* sessions, where workers argue, often for weeks, about process improvements.

In the past, Prof Lindebaum has interviewed project managers in the construction industry, who use angry outbursts to help stay on schedule and resolve snags. Even at the generally collegial FT, editors know an occasional on-deadline rant at a tardy reporter can work wonders.

Allowing an outlet for righteous and justified anger also encourages vital internal challenge. I still wonder if Bob Diamond’s “no-jerk rule” helped perpetuate problems at Barclays. The former chief executive outlawed behaviour that clashed with corporate culture. But it might have been better if a few “jerks” had lost their tempers over the culture of rigging interest rates – a process which, as email exchanges show, involved some exaggeratedly “positive” and courteous exchanges between colluding colleagues.

I hesitate to prescribe a daily tantrum for managers, though, because of the potential side-effects. On one of the few occasions I have truly lost my temper with a colleague, it took me most of the day to recover my poise. As with any management technique, it requires practice for the normally placid, like me, to develop useful rages that can be switched on or off at will, or for the congenitally irritable to confine their anger to an appropriate situation.

Steve Jobs was the best-known angry executive. Prone to mood swings, and sometimes an outright tyrant, he was no model manager. But after acknowledging that the Apple co-founder’s nastiness hindered him more than it helped, biographer Walter Isaacson wrote that “dozens of the colleagues whom Jobs most abused ended their litany of horror stories by saying that he got them to do things they never

dreamed possible". Next time you get hot under the collar, ask yourself: what will this brewing temper tantrum produce – ill-feeling and stress, or the next iPhone?

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