



## Managing with Calm Confidence

*Anger is counterproductive in  
holding people accountable*

Tim Stevenson

**HOLDING PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE** for right performance and behavior is a leader's responsibility. During current conditions, managers are learning whether they can do so remotely, and many are struggling.

Whether in person or virtually, you can manage people appropriately if you first build a platform for accountability. Unfortunately, many managers don't, forcing them to fall back on other means. Some are counterproductive.

### The ineffective angry manager

"I can't stand it anymore," spouts the manager over the phone. "This employee has

frustrated me time and time again, and I can't take it anymore! I want him fired!"

"How did it get to this point?" I ask.

It becomes clear what has happened. The employee has been allowed to persist in substandard performance or inappropriate behavior. The manager has done little or nothing to correct it ... while increasingly steaming. Eventually, the pressure has become so great that she's blown up and now insists that only termination will do.

Emotional eruptions are ineffective and unnecessary. They result from managers believing the **anger-discipline fallacy**.

### Analogy from parenting

The easiest way to illustrate it is by a picture from the world of parenting. You have probably witnessed this.

It's dinnertime. Mom comes out of the front door and musically calls, "Johhhhhhhny." Johnny, busy playing with his friend next door, goes right on with his business. She calls again, with a sweet musical tone, "Johhhhhhhhhny." Johnny ignores her.



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More calls, no response. Johnny's friend even says, "Hey, Johnny, don't you hear your mom calling you?" He replies calmly, "I don't need to go yet."

Finally, Mom is exasperated. She yells in a raspy *non-musical* voice, "JOHNNY!" Johnny immediately drops what he's doing and trots home. He meets a frustrated mother at the door, red and shaking. She lectures him for ten more minutes, "DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING TO ME? DO YOU KNOW YOU ARE MAKING A NERVOUS WRECK OUT OF ME?" Johnny is unconcerned. He's heard this many times before.

What's the problem? It's simple. **Mom has two voices.** Johnny has learned that he doesn't have to listen to her until he hears that second voice. Johnny's mother has demonstrated to him over several years that she doesn't really mean what she says — or at least, that she isn't prepared to *do* anything to back up what she says — until she is fighting mad. He therefore ignores her until she blows.

### Managers continue the pattern

At his first job Johnny learns the same thing about bosses. Like Mom, they often don't mean what they say — in the sense of backing it up with action — until they have been pushed to the point of anger. Johnny learns he can do what he wants until the boss loses his temper. Only then will he respond and comply.

This common experience is why so many people in our society assume that anger and discipline are always linked. They expect that authority figures will not take corrective action until they react emotionally with anger. They also naturally expect that when authority figures are acting "nice" and "friendly" they will not do anything to address performance or behavior that's out of bounds.

Many leaders and managers need to look in the mirror and admit that they have *trained*

their people to think this way. The anger-discipline connection has become cemented in their people's expectations.

### Warning signs

The anger-discipline fallacy leads to ineffective managing. How do you know if you have fallen into it? Some warning signs:

- ***You only correct or discipline when angry***

Like Johnny's mother, *you* have "two voices." You only take action to hold people accountable when you've lost your temper.

A *situation* (e.g., an employee's inappropriate behavior) and *your reaction* to that situation (your emotions and actions) are *two separate things*. It is possible to apply corrective discipline in a calm controlled manner. As a matter of fact, you will do *so more effectively* if you are calm and rational. Strong emotions cloud thinking and lead to errors in judgment.

Mature leaders accept personal responsibility for their spirit, attitudes, and reactions. They don't blame others or circumstances for what they say and do. They manage themselves with maturity and wisdom.

If you must "work up a mad" to apply corrective action, do some personal examination and find out *why*. What's keeping you from acting in the early stages of a problem? As a manager you don't need a "reason" to do the right thing, and emotions have nothing to do with it. Doing the right thing is reason enough.

- ***Managing according to moods***

When you're happy and in a good mood, you are lenient and allow people to push beyond the boundaries. When you're cranky or angry, you clamp down and enforce the rules.

Standards of behavior and performance should be as consistent as the sidelines of a

football field. They stay right where they are, clear and objective, regardless of your moods. This allows people to predict with confidence what the rules and standards will be today, tomorrow, and beyond. People are more likely to accept and abide by them once they have realized they aren't going to change.

Consistent enforcement over time leads to *fewer needs* to enforce them. It makes life easier for everyone, including yourself.

- ***Believing that being “nice” is a sign of weakness***

This error naturally follows the erroneous belief that when you're “happy” you can't hold employees accountable. “I have to be a jerk,” some say, “or people will run all over me.”

That is another fallacy. There are countless nice, friendly, and empathetic leaders and managers who have no problem holding people accountable and have led their teams and organizations to *world-class* performance.

### **Marks of strong leading & managing**

A strong leader or manager:

- Holds sincere convictions and expectations regarding behavior and performance and communicates them clearly and often
- Enforces those standards consistently with calm confidence
- Knows that she or he is working with ordinary human beings and does not get bent out of shape when their weaknesses or faults are exposed; instead they apply relentless, gentle pressure for quality work, constant improvement, appropriate behavior, and better teamwork toward goals

It's in your best interest to pursue qualities like these. They'll do wonders for your leadership, not to mention your blood pressure!

### **What about “justified” anger?**

In any discussion of anger, people inevitably ask, “What about justified anger? How can I not get angry at some things?”

I am not suggesting we should never get angry or become emotionless Vulcans. The capacity for anger is part of our makeup as humans. Sometimes, a failure to get angry would be a sign there is something *wrong* with us. Anger is the natural and proper response to things that are objectively wrong, like injustice, dishonesty, or harm done to innocent people.

The positive purpose of anger is to propel us out of our chairs to confront wrongs and make things right. But beware: In my opinion, that is the *only* positive purpose of anger. Even “justified” anger goes bad quickly. Once anger has moved us to action, we must act intelligently and under control.

Many psychological studies have identified the negative effects of anger: How it turns off clear, rational thinking; how it causes effects on our bodies that are harmful if prolonged; and, particularly relevant for leaders and managers, how **anger leads to errors of judgment**. Laurence Peter said it well:

**Speak when you're angry and you'll make the best speech you'll ever regret.**

Anger may come naturally to human beings, but leaders are called to rise above “what comes naturally.” It is our calling to set an example of maturity, rationality, and self-control. That's when we'll make decisions that are best and provide quality leadership for the people who are looking to us.

Such leadership can build teams with healthy cultures that lead to sustainable excellent performance. **L**