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# Not waving but drowning

In the first of two articles on anger management, **Patrick O'Brien** looks at the causes of stress, how it affects performance and why – to avoid being engulfed – it is important not to leave it unchecked

**We live in an age of increasing variety, and in their recent book, *The 2020 Workplace*, Jeanne Meister and Karie Willyerd noted this trend toward greater workplace diversity.**

Different cultures will link together, multiple generations will remain at work, and a plethora of different technologies will be used to enable effective communications.

Globalisation will extend its broad reach down to demand closer teamwork, and success will depend on deeper levels of engagement. This will encourage us all to communicate with growing diversities of constituents.

Conflicts will surface, and leaders and followers will need to learn to manage the demands arising naturally from differing work styles, personal preferences, needs, cultures and ages. This, in turn, will mean we will need to develop greater competence and skills at both personal and interpersonal levels.

At the macro level, this is all to be expected as business drives ahead. Yet, down at the personal level, it means that better conflict management and resolution skills will become part and parcel of every productive person's management tool set.

Unresolved conflict can often lead to anger. So first, we need to learn how to master our own stresses, frustrations, andangers.

## Stress and productivity

As we strive to interact with others and assert our views in positive ways, managing anger is becoming an important soft-skill.

Stress is often the precursor to anger, and many people found their stress levels on the rise during the recent economic recession. Studies also show that stresses are already on the up, especially in the workplace.

Stress gets in the way, as it adversely impacts people-to-people interaction. When it remains unchecked, it can lead to a breakdown in communications, to anger, even to rage.

There is a business cost, in reduced productivity, lower levels of quality, increased absenteeism, and higher levels of staff turnover.

There is a human cost too, in lower staff morale, reduced self-esteem, impact on career path and personal growth aspirations, and sometimes, a decline in health.

Inability to spot and manage those stresses, raises costs, slows us down, and impacts the quality of outcomes.

## Stress and emotions

Stress is a necessary part of performance improvement; a little stretch is good. We need a little to spur us on, to stretch us as we make progress. Great leaders know this, and constantly strive to drive their teams forward to new ground.

That said, it's the excesses that can be troublesome, though it's not all bad news, as stress comes in two forms: positive and negative.

Positive stress is associated with positive emotions, such as satisfaction, happiness, or delight. It's about the good feelings we have when we exercise or achieve something.

Positive stress provides us with drive, allows us to grow, fuels our ambitions, and feeds our successes. When harnessed effectively, it can be constructive, productive, and intensely enjoyable.

Negative stress on the other hand is associated with negative emotions, such as fear, sadness, or disgust. It's about the bad feelings we experience when forced to do something against our will, or something that we might find dangerous.

Negative stress sucks away our energies, holds us back, debilitates, and harms us. When unchecked, it can be rampantly destructive, doubly depressing, and downright dangerous.

Remembering that a little stretch and conflict is not necessarily a bad thing; the challenge is in knowing how to manage that stress productively.

We need to know what to look out for, how to foster the right kinds and amounts, and, how to keep the wrong kinds in balance.

## Stress and anger

Stress is the emotional tension felt arising from the external pressures we experience every day.

We usually sense it physiologically, as a general feeling of irritation, perhaps a knot in the stomach, tension in the neck, a stronger heart rate, maybe even, a rise in blood pressure.

We also sense it psychologically, as a general state of angst, an emotional uneasiness that when left unchecked, can grow to bring significant, negative, consequences. This can often flow into endless sleepless nights, as we constantly chase thoughts round in our heads.

Anger is one of those unintended consequences, where just one seemingly 'small straw' can indeed 'break the camel's back'.

In the extreme, anger typically arises from excessive negative emotions.

This negativity often happens when we feel that others have caused us harm or displeasure. It creates a deep sense of unfairness inside us, which we hold on to tightly.

Spurred by anger, we typically lash out. Our behaviours cause harm to those that we feel have harmed us. Psychologically, the emotions compromise our intentions. Yet, this pent up sense wants to come out. In



fact, psychologists tell us it is better that it does, though earlier, and in more controlled ways.

### Emotional thunderstorm

Stress and anger are rather like a powerful, tropical thunderstorm. From a clear and calm morning, temperatures rise as the day progresses. Things get hotter, and the storm clouds loom and gather over the horizon.

There is no doubt that we all sense what's brewing as the storm builds up to a point of utter inevitability. With a loud thunderclap, the full power and force of its might is unleashed; the deluge begins.

Anger is like that raging storm, yet, the writing was on the wall, long before the calm was breached.

Once we see red, our ability to think rationally is savagely impacted. Our only constructive option is to just let that anger blow out, just as we head for sanctuary while letting a storm blow over.

Psychology endorses that viewpoint; it tells us that we are at our most productive just before we reach that fully blown anger stage. That is the last time for intervention.

Once that tipping point has been reached, however, performance and productivity become severely impaired; the storm has to be ridden out.

### Managing the thunderstorm

The trick then for improved productivity, is to catch those stresses, strains, and emotions as they build.

It's about working on emotional intelligence, EQ, so you can strengthen your self-awareness. It's about knowing the early warning signals, and listening out for them throughout the day.

For instance, you may begin to feel those storm clouds gathering each time a client complains, a supplier



delivers the wrong goods, or a boss gives you another tight and challenging deadline.

Once you sense the tensions that each new event triggers, listen, pay attention, and act. You know the inevitability of the outcome; it's that bubbling ferment of anger rising.

Yet, it doesn't need to be like that. Paying attention to those inner conversations means that you can start to change the pattern; you can begin to break those old habits. Stopping anger from managing you, means taking charge and making choices, just as you do on those thundery days; you go

earlier, postpone until later, or, choose to do something different.

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**In his next article, Patrick will look in more detail at a three-pronged approach to anger management:**

- \* Increasing your awareness of events that trigger stress and negative emotion
- \* Using a coping strategy when you find anger has boiled over
- \* Reflecting and learning from the anger, once it has passed