

Coping with Frustrated Employees and Co-Workers

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This is the fourth and final in our series of articles on frustration. We have pointed out in previous articles that frustration is unhealthy for people. By helping your co-workers manage their frustration, you can aid them in avoiding strain injuries which are a direct result of increased muscle tension associated with frustration. You can also help them prevent future injury and illness caused by stress or depression. In this final article we discuss how you can calm a frustrated person so everyone feels better and accomplishes goals.

We all must work with other people. Therefore, we need to learn to deal with a variety of personalities and work styles. Managers have a dual challenge because they are responsible for accomplishing corporate goals as well as promoting employee well being at work. Resolving conflicts and responding appropriately to people's frustration will greatly improve work relationships and accomplishments.

Preventing Frustration. Frustrated people often feel that they are in a helpless situation.¹ Typically, one or more people control their time and priorities. Often they are already overloaded or frustrated by other problems in their work (and personal) environment. Confronting new assignments and challenges with the associated pressures, conflicts, and politics, without resolving the existing issues, is a common source of negative attitudes, burnout and injury.

We will be providing guidelines for dealing with frustrated people, but first, we want to discuss a serious aspect of preventing frustration. Whether or not you are managing others, avoid creating a frustrating environment. For example, when scheduling, obtain everyone's honest inputs, take them seriously, and defend the resulting schedule from compression. Acknowledge conflicts of key resources with other projects. People often feel frustrated because they are not allowed adequate input, their superiors may be seen as powerless against schedule and budget demands, and/or the managers may not do what they can to defend their employees against overload. When people are overloaded, it is difficult to accomplish goals without frustration and overwork, which will eventually cause harm if the individual does not take action to prevent injury. Repetitive strain injuries are a reality and the tissue damage resulting from them is permanent.

Daily communication is the only way to manage conflicts, frustrations, and problems so that anger does not develop into aggression. Communication is a shared responsibility of employees and management. It is important for individuals to communicate their concerns and frustrations to management, and for management to be sensitive to, and aware of, employees' stress levels. As we've discussed previously, frustration usually grows into anger, and eventually into an

outburst of aggression. When dealing with frustrated or angry people, tackle the source of the problem, not the attitude itself.¹

Guidelines for Communication.^{2,3,4}

1. If there is potential for violence, make sure you and fellow workers are protected and safe before approaching the frustrated or angry person.

2. Ask the person what they are frustrated about. *Listen for the unmet expectation, need or demand.*

- Be as empathetic as possible and relate to their anger.
- Suspend all judgment
- Genuinely strive to look at the situation through the other's eyes
- Don't defend yourself. If it involves your actions, apologize sincerely and wait for the other person to calm down.
- Listen, question, and paraphrase until the other person indicates that you've understood their viewpoint.

John Gray⁵ suggests that the words and interaction style you should use to empathize with men is very different from those you should use with women in the workplace. Women tend to communicate on a personal level first and become impersonal when things become very heated, whereas men tend to communicate on an impersonal level first and become personal after they are angry. Therefore, to help a woman calm down you might say: "This must be so frustrating to you. You put so much effort into that and they never even read it!" These words would sound whiney to a man and would make him feel like his situation is pathetic and he is pitied. To a woman, it sounds like you understand her situation completely! So, to a man, you could say (in a tone of relief!) something like: "Boy, I'm sure glad I don't have your job." You still convey empathy, but you give the impression that he is capable of handling the situation.

In addition, Gray points out that men tend to state the frustration or problem and want to move directly into a solution. Discussing their emotions about the frustration is generally not only peculiar to them, but also unnecessary in solving the problem. Women may state their emotion about the problem first and expect questioning and discussion about the complexities of the problem before exploring the potential solutions. So, to alleviate a frustrating situation with a woman, make sure she has finished defining the problem before discussing a solution.

3. Disengage your own feelings, do not lose your temper, and take time to listen carefully. Do not interrupt the angry person or tell them to calm down. Never blame the person or use phrases like: "You should have..." or "You can't".

4. Use proper body language.

- Relax your body.
- Sit or stand side-by-side rather than across from the frustrated person, taking a similar stance (e.g., if they are sitting, you should sit; if they are standing, you should stand).
- Lean forward.
- Keep your voice low and your speech slow and evenly paced.

- Make eye contact.
- Nod, smile, and respond verbally to what they are saying so that they know you are listening.

5. With serious anger and/or repeated situations, refuse to deal with the angry person until the air has cleared. Back out gracefully by saying something like: “We need to discuss this. Let’s talk about it later.” Come back when you and the other person are more calm and in the mood for rational discussion about the problem.

6. Guide the discussion or dialogue.

- It is important to determine the scope of the problem. Isaacs⁴ discusses the importance of distinguishing between discussion and dialogue. Discussion decomposes issues in order to make a decision. Dialogue is best used when considering new options, evaluating assumptions, and choosing alternatives. Dialogue is important when problems are large in scope, whereas discussion is generally adequate for resolving smaller individual problems.
- If the discussion is to be a formal meeting, you might even want to give the person a copy of one of the outline forms supplied in the excellent book, *Working Relationships*, by Bob Wall (see below).⁶
- Allow the person to complain if they need to, but don’t let them drag you into it. Pay attention to the actual complaint; reiterate the concern, then verbally move the conversation along to get a resolution.
- Ask what the person wants of you using future-oriented questions such as “What would make this work for you?”
- Negotiate a win-win agreement. Explain your viewpoint tactfully and assertively and negotiate differences. If it appears that one person is winning and another is losing, this must be verbalized. Sometimes it’s helpful or necessary to bring in an impartial third party to help solve the problem and offer potential solutions.

7. Develop a plan to handle problems in the future.

OUTLINE: Raising Issues Discussion Form⁶

Problem: Describe the issue in terms of goals, roles, and/or procedures.

Impact: Describe ways in which the issue is affecting the job you do.

Requests: What do you want from the other person?

Benefits: How will solving this issue benefit everyone involved?

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