

Law Society of NSW

Understanding anger and high conflict personality by Nicola M Hartfield

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Anger affects us all in some way. We may be the one expressing the anger or we may be the person on the receiving end of it. Either way, it is an emotion that most people dislike and try to avoid being around. If we cannot escape its presence, then there are very few of us that feel comfortable and safe in its company.

In my professional and personal life, I encounter people in situations where both the anticipation and perception that anger exists as well as the fear of facing another person's anger face to face, leads to feelings of inner defeat and subsequent inaction. I also see the carnage of where anger has been met head on, and challenged – one force of power attempting to override that of the other.

In September I presented to the Law Society of NSW about how anger changes our thinking and how high conflict personalities (HCP) are burdened with a perpetual heightened awareness of fear and anxiety, manifesting itself in defensive and difficult behaviours¹. It is not just HCP that suffer the cognition impacts of anger, none of us are exempt. The greater the anger we feel, the greater we become hostage to these changes in our brain².

There is an element of anger in most negotiation experiences, and all mediations are a result of at least one failed negotiation. We can feel wronged and deeply aggrieved when we do not get enough of what we want. Our anger can then carry into future

¹ Eddy, Bill. (2008) It's All Your Fault, Janis Publications

² Denzin, N. (1984). On Understanding Emotion, Jossey - Bass

negotiations that may be related to, but also, may be unrelated to the original anger cause.

We can carry this anger past the negotiation or mediation and into our close and important relationships. Sometimes the anger even spills outside of our fields of intimacy, to affect complete strangers that happen to cross our path. While anger may be driving our pursuit of the unmet need, it is also the emotion that can and does impact deeply on others around us. This is scarcely an accident. It is because anger has such a profound effect on others that we learn to use it as a tool from an early age, to make sure that our needs are met.

As dispute resolvers it is not enough to just acknowledge that anger “is in the room”. Our parties and clients require us to steady the ship through the turbulence that awaits them. They have reached the outer limit of their ability to navigate through their particular issue and have put trust in us to lead them. Leadership requires many skills embodied in the ability to connect and engage. To lead wisely we must listen, and to listen we need to be still. But to be still in the company of anger is counterintuitive. By anger’s unpredictable nature, it invites us into responding from our survival brain – the place where we set our anger responses from a young age and unless we consciously adapt and adjust these – they become our default settings.

While engagement and connection is easy when people are nice, our job is to engage and connect when people are at their most stressed – the very worst time to be making decisions that set the path for their futures. We therefore need to be connected with a parties’ anger while they resist change, during their need to blame and be blameless, throughout their inability to see another perspective, through our dislike of parties or the values they represent and on, into your and their moments of

fatigue. This continual engagement requires effort, kindness and thoughtful analysis. We will need to dig deep into our reserves of “Job-like” patience, as we realise when anger is high, we rely more on stereotypical thinking³, our desire to punish increases,⁴ and we have a distorted and unrealistic confidence in the correctness of our decision making.⁵ No amount of considered feedback or reality testing will create the ability to self-reflect, however gently delivered, until anger levels are reduced. These are just a few of the complications and frustrations that we face, when working with anger and HCP.

By investing in understanding anger, both our own anger escalation patterns and our default anger responses, we are well placed to stand steady and centered – the perfect position for any leader. From this vantage point we can remain open to the subtle nuances of change that are occurring for our clients. We can adapt our process to anticipate anger explosion and to resist becoming captured by the magnetic affect of anger.

³ Bodenhauser, Sheppard, & Kramer (1994); De Steno, Dasgupta, Bartlett & Cajdic (2004).

⁴ Goldberg J.H, Lerner J.S & Tetlock P.E (1999). Rage and reason: the psychology of the intuitive prosecutor. *European Journal of Social Psychology* pp 57, 781-795.

⁵ Fischhoff, B, Gonzalez, R.M, Lerner, J.S & Small, D.A (2005). Evolving judgements of terror risks: foresight, hindsight and emotion. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*,11(2), pp 124-139.