

The Nature of Hostile, & Abusive Behavior

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Some Definitions

Anger

Anger refers to an internal state (feeling) experienced by the person in question. An angry person experiences some physiological changes, some invisible and some visible. There are some important things to note about anger, and angry people.

1. People choose their own emotional states. That is, their feelings of anger, or for that matter, any other feelings, belongs to them. As such, it isn't your responsibility. What is your responsibility, however, is to ensure that you don't knowingly or unknowingly do something they choose to take as anger provoking.
2. We need to accept the fact that people will be angry, at times. They have a right to be angry when they choose. What they do not have a right to do is to take out their anger on you, particularly when you have done nothing to contribute to it.

What is important is that you become relatively comfortable with the notion that people will become angry. If you spend all your time trying to make people happy, you are doomed to failure.

Angry Behavior

People express their anger in various ways. Some raise their voices or become more animated. Others turn red. Mild expressions of anger are simply ways a person vents a little steam. As with the feeling of anger, we need to be reasonable in terms of what offends us, and allow the angry person some latitude in behavior before we deem the behavior unacceptable.

There is a clear reason for this. If we allow ourselves to be offended every time we encounter angry behavior, we are going to be pretty damn miserable, and pretty damn ineffective in dealing with other people. As you will see in a moment, our problem is not angry behavior, but hostile/abusive behavior.

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Hostile/Abusive Behavior

What sets apart hostile/abusive behavior from angry behavior is that hostile/abusive behavior is intended, consciously or unconsciously to have some or all of the following effects:

- put you off balance
- manipulate and control you
- demean you in some way
- cause you to feel guilty
- intimidate you

It is this kind of behavior that causes the greatest amount of stress for government employees, because people using hostile/abusive behaviors tend to rant, insult, use intimidating tactics, and simply won't go away. While we may tolerate some degree of angry behavior without being concerned, we need to be concerned about hostile/abusive behaviors. We want to stop these behaviors as professionally as possible. If we can, at the same time, reduce the anger of the client, that's great. If we can't, we need to recognize that the anger belongs to the client.

Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse takes a great many forms, from very subtle, to very obvious. In this book, when we talk about verbal abuse, we refer to behaviors like the following:

- persistent swearing
- yelling
- sexist comments (both explicit and implied)
- racist comments (both explicit and implied)
- irrelevant personal remarks (e.g.. about your appearance)
- threats (e.g.. I'll have you fired, or I'm going to the minister).
- intimidating silence
- accusations of various sorts (e.g.. calling you a racist)
- comments about your competency, knowledge, dedication

These behaviors are intended to demean, control you.

As you go through this workbook, you will learn some ways to countercontrol in the face of these tactics.

NonVerbal Abuse

Nonverbal abuse refers to behavior that has nothing to do with what is said, but has to do with things like body posture, facial expressions, gestures, etc.

Let's make no mistake about it. Nonverbal abuse is intended to send a message or messages to you, such as "I don't like you", or, "I am fed up", or even "In my eyes you are worth nothing". When we talk about nonverbal abuse we refer to behaviors such as:

- standing in your personal space staring at you (long eye contact)
- table pounding (sometimes)
- throwing things
- leaning over you (using height)
- fearsome facial expressions
- loud sighing
- pointing, other offensive gestures

Sometimes, these behaviors may not be intended to intimidate or demean you, and may be a relatively normal way of expressing anger. However, we classify them as abusive, because they do tend to have a manipulating effect on you.

As with verbal abuse, we want to take steps to stop these behaviors. Later on we will discuss some countermeasures you can use to avoid being controlled by these nonverbal techniques.