

The Business Brain

## Using anger to motivate can backfire

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When baboons and chimps bare their canines, lower ranking members of the troop know they mean business, and either do their bidding or run for cover. Expressing anger can be useful to non-human primates. So does it work the same way for primates like us?

It depends on the audience. Displays of anger can sometimes backfire. Last week, for example, a New York Times report examined an online company that deliberately responds to customers' complaints with bullying and threats. The rationale is that irate consumers are likely to vent their fury on the Internet, and because Google search engines can't discriminate between praise and rancour, these rants – all tagged with the company name – will simply push up its Web page ranking. Provoking customer anger was "fantastically profitable," the owner said.

Using anger strategically can work as well for Web bullies as it does for non-human primates, boosting their visibility in a competitive environment. But does it work for bona fide business leaders trying to spur staff to improve their performance?

The answer is a qualified yes, according to a study in this month's Psychological Science. Led by Gerben van Kleef, a psychology professor at the University of Amsterdam, along with Stéphane Côté, a professor at University of Toronto's Rotman School of Business, the study shows that the personalities of the employees are what determine whether angry feedback will be a motive to improve or a turn-off.

The researchers assessed the personalities of 144 participants, then divided them into groups to work together to solve a specific task. They were told they would be observed and coached by an experienced leader who would be watching from another location via live video feed. After getting feedback, they would do the task again to see if they could improve.

In fact, there was no live video connection. Instead, the participants saw a recording of the leader responding in one of two ways: either he was upbeat, smiled and spoke with enthusiasm, or he clenched his fists and knitted his brow. Although the emotional signals changed, the text was identical.

Which style worked best? "The more agreeable people there were in a group, the worse that group performed when the leader showed anger," said Prof. van Kleef. Conversely, people "low in agreeableness" performed better when given angry feedback.

In short, if you can assess your target audience, you can gauge just how much honey and how much vinegar is needed to get the group moving.

The challenge is determining who is highly "agreeable." The researchers used a 12-item agreeableness scale, "but if you just pay attention to the people around you, you can assess whether they care more or less about social harmony," Prof. van Kleef said.

Agreeable people crave harmonious relationships and prefer to avoid conflict; they try not to be angry and hate it when others are angry with them. Then there are people who are less concerned about the feelings of others; angry feedback can help these employees improve their performance.

Prof. van Kleef says it makes sense to pay attention to a business leader's social and emotional skills, alongside their cognitive skills and leadership experience. "It's important to make leaders aware of their emotions, as other people will be influenced by them."

If we've learned anything new about the impact of anger, it's that one size does not fit all.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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