Dealing With Anger

Anger is the first emotion human beings experience and the last we learn to manage effectively. As early as four months of age, the human infant's vague feelings of distress differentiate into recognizable anger.

Anger happens when we perceive an external event (object or person) as threatening or when we experience the frustration of unmet expectations. Because anger is so unpleasant and human beings are so adept at projection, we usually attempt to locate the source of our anger outside ourselves with statements such as "You make me angry," "You have irritating habits," "You bother me." Thus, anger is a result of fear and the need to protect ourselves.

When we perceive an external event as threatening to our physical or psychological well-being, a cycle of internal movements is initiated. As the perception is formed, assumptions are made internally about the possible danger. The assumption is then checked against our perceived power of dealing with the threat. There are three possible responses to a perceived threat, fight, flight or freeze. If we conclude that the threat is not very great, or that we are powerful enough to confront it successfully, a calm, unflustered response can occur. But if we conclude that the threat is dangerous or that we are powerless to handle it, anger may be one of the responses that emerge. Flight and freeze are whole other issues.

Anger is a self generated, non-interpersonal event. We make ourselves angry. We literally OWN our anger. Anger does not disappear if we refuse to deal with it. Dealing directly with anger is self-strengthening. Dealing indirectly with anger is self-defeating, passive, blaming, game-playing, name calling and we tend to view ourselves and adversaries as weak and fragile. It can literally cause physical illness.

Conflict is more easily resolved when both parties act honestly toward one another and are willing to face the problem openly, rather than avoiding or hiding from it (hidden agendas). Avoid personal attacks and stick to the issues. Accept responsibility for your own feelings. Take the YOU out of the conversation. Say "I feel hurt, disappointed, frustrated" instead of "You make me...". Seek solutions rather than deciding who's to blame. Negotiate toward a mutually agreeable compromise.

When conflict involves strong angry feelings, many people fear bringing those feelings into the open, perhaps because we've been told since childhood anger is bad. Recognizing the value of anger, allowing that natural feeling to be expressed nondestructively and working toward resolution of the problem will create conditions necessary for constructive conflict resolution, healthy growing relationships, and inter/intra-team cohesiveness.