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Alone at the Top

By Dr. Frank Carter

Q: A dentist asks: “When I’m angry at a staff member, and I have no office manager to defer to, sometimes, I want to strangle them! Fire them! Hit them! Or send them home! All the time, I want to yell at someone! Anyone! Usually my frustration comes out on my wife and children at the end of the day. What should I do?”

A: From Dr. Frank Carter: I went to graduate school too, and they didn’t teach me about business either. They didn’t teach me about marketing, they didn’t teach me about accounting, and they didn’t teach me how to manage people; however, I personally have owned two companies and effectively managed people. I’ve learned a thing or two.

For some people in the business of business, becoming a manager is their career goal. For professionals in healthcare, managing employees **is the least desirable aspect of the business.** But it is a necessary part of making money, and feeling like the boss. This seems to come as news to many of my clients, when I say that they can learn to manage people. It is clearly a stretch of their self-image and imagination.

The psychological explanation for the presence of anger that I teach is the following: the brain feels angry when something has been taken away from it that it can get back. It is the idea that you can get it back that makes anger “anger”. If something has been taken, you get angry and suddenly there is a shot of adrenaline coursing through your system. Your desire to take it back and the desire to get back control turns you into this strong and powerful individual who wants to take back what was taken. This applies to any material object, like a handpiece, or an intellectual object like one’s dignity, such as when people don’t listen to you. ***When someone takes your dignity, you get angry and you want to take back control of your business.*** This makes sense.

In response to anger, the brain generates a desire for action and the power to carry out the necessary task. ***When this happens in the dental office, the product of one’s spurt of adrenaline, the rapid action and muscular strength seem like overkill. And that is the problem.*** You want to take back your dignity when the staff doesn’t do their job correctly, but the biological overreaction is pretty obvious to everyone. As a result, you shut down the impulse immediately in order to not be embarrassed. What do you do with all this energy? You go home and take it out on your family or the dog.

When a staffer does not do their job correctly or listen to what you are telling them to do, your overly intense reaction does not seem to be justified to the employee or the observer. The reason why is because the meaning, the psychological deeper meaning, that you give to the insubordination is not apparent to others. It resides as a feeling in your body. Each person's brain will process the same insubordination differently. This is because the history of one's sense of control varies from family to family. It is your experience in life that determines the meaning of each insubordinate act. ***If you learn to handle problems as a child, you will handle the problem of the insubordinate employee.*** Most of my clients did not have the benefit of good parental problem solving modeling. Thus, when an event occurs and the anger rises, the solution often becomes confusing.

To begin with, why is the reaction to some discrete insubordination so strong when it concerns your business? The answer is because your business is an extension of your sense of self. Just like a piece of your body is regarded as critical to your functional health, the same can be said for the importance of your business and your view of the world: your view of your world is guided by your emotional history.

Anyone who takes something from your worldview is essentially taking your definition of your integrity: your physical or your psychological integrity. **We call this your dignity, and it is the most valuable intangible sense of purpose for living that you possess.** It's your most highly valued, highly regarded and seriously protected entity. That's why you get so angry when the staff doesn't do their job. They are threatening your self-image: the illusion of control beyond your body and your actions.

As the business owner, as the person who writes the checks, you are entitled to a fair exchange: money for services. Many of my clients missed that relationship. This idea of give and take was not part of their childhood upbringing. Looking back, mother and father did not satisfy some of the needs of the growing child. The give-and-take of love and protection is a social contract that all children understand, but not all parents respect. In business, the give and take comes in the form of a business contract where everyone understands their implicit role. The business owner is to provide payment and the employee is to provide services.

So to begin with, as the business owner (the person who writes the checks), you are entitled to something in return for the money you pay and the risk you take by opening up a business.

Once you accept that the employee owes you something in return for the money, now you have the obligation as the business owner to make it clear to the employee exactly what they are suppose to be doing. Equally as important is what will happen if they don't fulfill their obligation.

In order to address your anger, you need to create structure. From that structure, comes order and any breach of that order requires discipline. The end result of a lack of discipline is termination. Once you outline this procedure, you will derive a personal sense of order which will allow you to feel some sense of control. Once in control, the anger will disappear and the ordinary routine of managing the business will become mundane and automatic.

What I am proposing is a simple but effective employee manual. There are services that will help you to create an employee manual. Appropriate employee manuals consist of the job description chapter, an office policy and procedures chapter, and a discipline and termination procedures chapter. ***What's very interesting and convenient about an effective employee manual is that inappropriate team players, when held accountable, will quit rather than wait to be fired.***

When you have a properly organized employee manual, you don't have to yell and you don't have to defend your dignity, because your dignity is automatically protected by the procedures outlined in the employee manual. In the event that you secure a well organized employee manual, but still find yourself returning home kicking the dog, you may want to look a little deeper at the real reason for your anger. It may not be found in the office; but it can be resolved.