

Managing anger

can create a healthier work environment

Managing sickness in the workplace and maintaining a healthy working environment benefits both employees and employers. It is estimated that stress related sick leave alone costs the UK industry £370 million every year or approximately 91 million working days. Additionally, according to government figures, 222,000 people in the South West and 307,000 people in the South East suffer an illness they believe has been caused or made worse by their work.

This year's Mental Health Action Week (23-29 March 2008) focused on anger. In a YouGov survey, 12 per cent of people considered they had trouble controlling their anger, 25 per cent of people are worried about how angry they sometimes feel while 64 per cent consider we are getting angrier in general. Anger is more likely to have a negative effect on relationships than any other emotion and that includes relationships in the workplace.

Issues for employers

Anger in the workplace can give rise to a number of potential claims against the employer from employees who suffer at the hands of another's anger including:

- vicarious liability for harassment under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 (PHA)
- failure to provide a safe working environment
- stress, and
- constructive dismissal.

The recent Court of Appeal case of *Conn v The City Council of Sunderland* goes some way to demonstrate why anger can cause issues in the workplace. Mr Conn was a paver and was asked by the foreman, Mr Dryden, to name people who had left the site early. Mr Conn and two others asked at the same time refused and Mr Dryden threatened to punch out the windows of the cabin. On a second occasion, Mr Dryden asked Mr Conn why he was giving him the 'silent treatment'. Mr Conn said he would only talk to him about work matters to which Mr Dryden responded by losing his temper saying he would give Mr Conn a good hiding and he knew where he lived. Mr Dryden was also witnessed as being so angry he was shaking. Mr Conn brought a claim for harassment under the PHA against his employer claiming he felt threatened and scared by Mr Dryden's behaviour



and they were vicariously liable.

The Court of Appeal concluded that the first incident was insufficient to amount to criminal harassment under the PHA. Under the PHA there must be a course of conduct of harassment and therefore more than one incident. Consequently Mr Conn's claim failed. Nevertheless, this case highlights one of the potential consequences that anger in the workplace can have for the employer.

However, it is not just those who are the victims of anger who may be at risk but also the alleged perpetrators themselves. Anger can be linked to a range of social, physical and mental health problems and chronic and intense anger has been linked to heart disease, cancer, stroke, colds and flu. While these problems may only occur in a small number of cases, according to the Mental Health Foundation, anger is a physical and mental response to a threat or something that has already happened. Consequently, if an employee is repeatedly angry there may be an issue at work which needs to be resolved such as relationships with work colleagues or stress.

Stress

Stress is a perennial difficulty for employers and research estimates that each new case of stress leads to an average of 29 days off work. It is defined by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them' therefore anger can indicate stress and vice versa. While positive pressure can create a 'buzz',



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pressure beyond a person's ability to cope can lead to stress. In Conn following the second incident Mr Conn went off work sick from 17 November 2000 until his employment was terminated in June 2005. Managing anger in the workplace therefore has a number of potential benefits.

How to manage anger

One of the difficulties in managing anger and one of the reasons for the Mental Health Foundation's campaign, is that there is little professional help on offer. Some help is available, however, and on the back of Mental Health Week, Acas has launched its guide to 'Health, work and wellbeing' (see p19). This addresses the three main causes of long-term sickness absence of which two are mental health and stress. It also highlights the positive effect that work can have on your health and the possible causes of the negative impact of work recorded by over half a million people in the south.

Acas considers there to be six indicators of a healthy workplace:

- line managers are confident and trained in people skills
- employees feel valued and involved in the organisation
- managers use appropriate health services, eg occupational health to tackle absence and get people back to work
- managers conduct back to work discussions
- jobs are flexible and well designed
- managers know how to manage common

health problems.

Acas stresses that these are only guidelines and what works for one organisation may not work for another.

There is also guidance from the HSE about managing stress in the workplace which deals with issues such as control, support and relationships. This includes how to have a difficult conversation with employees and points out that tackling absence is often about prompt management intervention.

A study produced by the University of East Anglia at the end of last year has also suggested that allowing employees to swear in the workplace can boost solidarity and help them to cope with stress. Banning it completely from the workplace could therefore backfire. The suggestion was, however, accompanied with words of caution that it should not be used in front of senior staff or customers and that managers should find out how their staff felt about swearing. Clearly swearing can also create an intimidating and hostile environment which could amount to harassment under the discrimination legislation so care should be taken before using it as a stress management tool!

Conclusion

The Mental Health Foundation recognises that anger itself is not a mental illness but considers that many of the everyday tools used in mental health, such as talking therapies, can be applied to help people cope with anger. Not all anger is negative and it would be wrong to seek to eradicate it completely. However anger which amounts to bullying or harassment or which is indicative of other problems needs to be recognised and addressed. Anger can also manifest itself in many ways and so there is no one method of addressing it.

The ability to manage conflict in the workplace is an important skill for any manager and will go a long way towards enabling employers to meet their responsibilities such as providing a safe working environment and care for the health and safety of their employees. While the statutory dispute resolution procedures are to be replaced, voluntary ways of resolving disputes, such as mediation, are gaining more prominence.

As Acas points out in its guide to health at work: 'Healthy and motivated people will go that extra mile, give good customer service, take fewer "sickies" and provide commitment and creativity.'

Managing these issues effectively and promptly therefore benefits employers and employees alike. ■

Authors: **Charlotte Hamer** (Professional Support Lawyer) and **Charlotte Poole** (Solicitor), Bond Pearce LLP. A leading commercial law firm, Bond Pearce LLP distributes a range of legal updates and briefings. To find out more visit www.bondpearce.com. Reproduced with kind permission.