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## How To Deal With An Angry Colleague: 3 Steps To Decoding Anger

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 27 February 2026

Anger in the workplace makes people feel uncomfortable. It can manifest as raised voices, tense body language, or passive-aggressive behavior. While our instinct may be to react defensively, avoid the person, or vent to co-workers, this rarely leads to a positive outcome. In workplace mediation, anger is almost always in the room. Sometimes, individuals feel anger themselves or worry that others are angry with them. Part of a mediator's role is to help people understand this emotion and, where appropriate, communicate it in a way the other person can hear. Here are three steps to decode what's behind an angry colleague's behavior, and manage it without escalating the situation.

### 3 steps to deal with an angry colleague

#### **Step 1: Create an environment where emotions can be discussed**

It's natural for emotions like anger to arise in working relationships. The first step to managing it is to create the conditions for a constructive conversation. While you can't control other people's behavior, you can manage your own response. When you encounter an angry colleague, your nervous system reacts, triggering your body's fight, flight, or freeze response.

Be aware of your own reaction so you can self-regulate and make a conscious choice about how you want to respond. In the heat of the moment, you may not be able to have a constructive conversation because you're less able to listen. This is why it is so important to pause between trigger and response. This can be as simple as taking a deep breath and consciously relaxing tense muscles, or suggesting that the conversation be picked up again another day.

#### **Step 2: Find out what's beneath the anger**

Anger is often a secondary emotion, so it is useful to explore what other emotions – such as hurt, fear, or sadness – it is covering up. Asking one simple question, such as “What's the impact of this on you?” can encourage someone to voice these feelings and help both parties better understand the underlying issue. It's also worth remembering that anger is sometimes misplaced. A colleague may be reacting to other pressures, for example, something that happened earlier in the day, or in their personal life. It's helpful to see anger as a signal that there's something deeper to explore.

#### **Step 3: Look for the unmet needs behind anger**

And finally, when faced with an angry colleague, try to discover which of their underlying needs aren't being fulfilled. According to Deci & Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, we all have psychological needs for autonomy (to have a say or influence over how our work is done), competence (to feel effective in our jobs), and relatedness (to feel respected and part of a team). When one or more of these needs aren't met, frustration, anger, or defensiveness can follow. An employee who complains of being micro-managed is likely experiencing a loss of autonomy. A colleague who becomes defensive during feedback may feel their competence is being questioned.

Someone who seems withdrawn at work may be struggling with a sense of belonging. When we understand our own and other people's unmet needs, the path forward becomes clearer.

### **Understanding anger can resolve workplace conflict**

Managing an angry colleague isn't easy, and everyone is responsible for how they express emotions in the workplace. But anger itself is not always the problem. Often, it signals that something important isn't being addressed. The goal is not to suppress anger at work, but to decode it. When we recognize that anger often reflects care, we shift from defensiveness to dialogue. And that shift changes everything.