



Desk Rage And what To Do!

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(adapted from MSNBC.com)

The high-stress world of corporate event planning was getting to Mary Tribble and her business partner. At times when deadlines were near and clients were making seemingly impossible demands, the two of them would turn on each other. Shouts flew, doors slammed, teardrops fell.

"In conflict, I tend to retreat and cry, and she tends to confront," says Tribble, founder of the Tribble Creative Group in Charlotte, N.C. "It wasn't very healthy."

The women were suffering from what psychologists call "desk rage," on-the-job anger that industry observers say is increasingly rearing its nasty head in stress-filled offices and other workplaces across America.

Some desk-ragers "go postal," screaming, cursing, trashing office equipment, even assaulting others. But desk rage also manifests as a slow boil that leads to gossiping at the water cooler, backstabbing, poor productivity, abusing sick days, stealing supplies or becoming irritable or depressed. Some people simply get fed up, stop communicating, put on a headset and emotionally "check out."

Desk rage isn't something companies like to publicize, so there are few statistics on it. But a 2001 survey of 1,305 workers, commissioned by Integra Realty Resources in New York City, found that 42 percent of respondents said there was yelling and other verbal abuse in their office, 23 percent said they have been driven to tears because of workplace stress and 10 percent said employees have actually resorted to physical violence.

Corporate consultants say they're busy dealing with employees who behave badly. "I hear comments, more and more, like, 'Oh my gosh, by Friday we don't talk to Tom because he'll bite your head off,'" says Susan Enyeart, manager for curriculum development at the National Seminars Group, a division of Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Mo., that conducts continuing business education programs and conferences nationwide.

In August, her group introduced — by popular demand — a new workshop titled "How to Manage Emotions and Excel Under Pressure" that's aimed at helping companies combat desk rage. Human resources personnel asked for the course to help deal with office temper tantrums and other destructive work behavior.

"A lot of people are in workplaces where they are being emotionally abused and bullied and that can take a toll," says Paul Spector, a professor of industrial and organizational psychology at the University of South Florida in Tampa. "It's becoming much more socially acceptable to be mean and nasty to others."

Anna Maravelas, a psychologist and self-described "corporate peacemaker" in St. Paul, Minn., says she regularly sees anger, hostility, rudeness and general inhumanity in the workplaces where she consults. For instance, a corporate vice-president told her, "I pay my people well, I don't have to appreciate them too," and a bank employee said, "Being nice here is seen as a weakness."

Never catching a break

A generational shift may be partly to blame for the rise in desk rage, according to Enyeart, who's been in the business for 20 years.

"People are more likely to wear their emotions out on their sleeves than in the past," she says. The older baby boomers are retiring and being replaced with a younger generation who've been brought up to air their discontent.

And it's not hard to find something to be unhappy with in the modern workplace: heavy workloads, long hours and technology that keeps workers constantly on call. "They never get a break from their work responsibilities," says Enyeart.

With laptops, PDAs, cell phones, e-mail and pagers, there is an ever-widening gap between the amount of information people are expected to keep up with and the amount they can reasonably process, says Dr. Kerry Sulkowicz, a psychiatrist and founder of the Boswell Group, a corporate consulting company in New York City. **(continued on page 2)**

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"The technology is outstripping our capacity to use it," he says. Management turnover, downsizing and outsourcing are other sources of stress, making workers feel their jobs aren't secure.

"We're being squeezed," says Maravelas, author of "How to Reduce Workplace Conflict and Stress." "We're just burning out." Stuff stressed workers in a crowded, noisy cubicle — in what's been termed the "Dilbertization" of America — and you have the recipe for desk rage. The people more likely to experience desk rage are those with the least power, says Enyeart, those "who feel like they're at the mercy of everyone else." But all of us, regardless of our standing at work, face frustrations, an average of 30 of them a day, says Maravelas. It's how we handle them that matters.

When we become angry, our bodies "flood" with a rush of adrenaline and other stress hormones that stay high in the bloodstream for two hours and interfere with our ability to think straight. "We lose I.Q. when we flood and other people get contaminated by it," she says. So if something else happens to anger us within that two hour window, we're less equipped to deal with it.

During times of flooding, people react in one of three ways. They either a) blame others, leading to screaming and yelling, b) blame themselves, leading to depression and self-loathing, or c) react rationally (correct answer), realizing that stressful events are part of life and finding ways to problem-solve and handle them.

Of course, those solutions don't always come easy, and some of the toughest situations to resolve are those with a superior, particularly an overbearing one, says John Weaver, a psychologist and corporate consultant in Waukesha, Wis. "If it's a co-worker, there's a sense of equal power," he explains. "But when it's with a supervisor the power differential makes it harder to deal with." The underling, whether right or wrong, can feel like a victim and react with rage.

Tough as it may be, the best approach generally is to try to have a reasonable conversation with your boss about your concerns and to come prepared with some solutions, he says. However, some bosses simply may not be reasoned with, says Weaver, who cautions that sometimes it can be "career suicide" to go up against certain bosses.

Tyrants and micromanagers are the worst offenders, he says. In those situations, carefully choose your words ("I'd love to do a bang-up job on this project, like we did with Client A, but we're so squeezed for time right now. So I'd really love your guidance on how to proceed ...") and be prepared to consult with another manager or human resources if your talks deteriorate. Sometimes the solution is to find a new boss.

Lighten up

Sulkowicz offers some additional advice for handling workplace rage: Don't always take your job so seriously. "Step back and realize that the stakes are not nearly so high as you might believe they are," he says. Then pick your battles carefully.

Bottom line, whether your trouble is with a boss, co-worker or client, it's important to deal with desk rage rather than endure it. "It's ultimately self-destructive," says Sulkowicz. "While others do and can get hurt, one of the things that is guaranteed is that the person experiencing the rage ends up losing." The potential damage: embarrassment, misery, guilt, even losing your job.

Tribble and her partner, Linda Libby, learned their lesson. Not only were the two of them frazzled by the fighting, other employees in the company were feeling the effects. "It's the same feeling a kid has when his parents are arguing," says Tribble. "There's a sense of vulnerability. Will they stay together?"

So a couple of years ago, they sought help from Maravelas, who, through her workshop titled "Self-Defeating Habits of Otherwise Brilliant People," taught them a few workplace ground rules. No. 1: the Golden Rule. They also learned how to have constructive disagreements and manage their anger. And they make time to talk on a regular basis so the lines of communication stay open. Still, there are occasional setbacks.

"We sometimes fall back into our old ways," says Libby. "But if we slip we at least know what to do to get ourselves on track."

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