

# Anger Lurks in the Workplace

**BOILING POINT:** Raging and fuming is in urgent need of being addressed as high employer expectations and the stress of daily living take their toll on executives

## Seeing Red

One in five persons in corporate India is likely to have anger management issues, according to Thomas Assessments



### WARNING SIGNS

- 1 Sudden irritability
- 2 Not making eye contact in meetings
- 3 Not having a healthy relationship with subordinates or team members
- 4 A sense of resentment
- 5 Frequently staying away from work
- 6 Showing signs of passive aggressive behaviour at the workplace
- 7 Ready with the resignation over the smallest thing a boss or colleague says



### THE SOLUTION

None in India yet. In the West, instances of angry behaviour can invite a harassment or intimidation lawsuit

Emotional and psychological readiness is important for a leader. We focus too much on technical skills. A once-a-year town hall is not enough

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The CEO of a large company called the senior VP of sales to his office to discuss the sales performance, which apparently wasn't going too well. There were differences in opinion on why the numbers weren't looking good. Tempers began to flare and voices rose. In a fit of rage, the CEO picked up a glass of water, first threw the contents and then the glass at him. Luckily the sales head caught the glass in time and wasn't hurt. But he felt very humiliated as he walked out.

If this appears like an overly dramatised version of what goes on inside Indian corporate offices, think again. "It's not in isolation," says Ronesh Puri, MD of search firm Executive Access, who recounted this incident. "Corporate rage is taking a toll on people's professional and personal lives. Seemingly docile people get violent. But it's always kept under wraps by the company and the person."

Losing one's cool isn't necessarily a bad thing, and a healthy degree of conflict even helps. But if someone is regularly snapping, that's cause for worry. Anger at the workplace could well become the latest scourge to hit India Inc. Blame it on long hours at work, high employer expectations or simply the stress of daily living and you have a heady concoction of pent-up anger that threatens to explode any minute. Job pressure tops the list, though. "Most of us are in a race — high performance expectations, stiff targets, competition. You are virtually taking a class 12 board exam everyday," says Samir Parikh, chief psychiatrist at Max Healthcare.

According to Ganesh Shermion, country head, people and change practice at KPMG India, this could be taking place a lot more inside the newer telecom companies, private equity firms, financial services players that cater to high net worth individuals and broking firms. The cost of failure or under-performance is high, and with very high salaries there's significant amount of greed and fear at play. "People negotiate hard to come in and the contractual terms are sharper and in-your-face. For this they have to pay back through demonstrated performance or bear the wrath of the company," says Shermion.

It can of course happen anywhere — a BPO, a factory shopfloor, on an offshore oil rig or the creative department of an advertising agency. "With less time for everything, everyone is on a short fuse these days," agrees Ambi MG Parmeswaran, executive director at DraftFCB Ulka Advertising. "Earlier if clients were sent a piece of work it took some time to be delivered and there was some time before their feedback came in. Now they send an email and expect you to respond instantly," he says.

One in five persons in corporate India is likely to have anger management issues, according to G Prahalad Rao, head of India operations at Thomas Assessments, a psychometric testing company. This fig-

ure is based on results of testing carried out among Indian executives across sectors on five attributes that anger could manifest in — emotional regulation, impulse control, stress management, emotion expression and assertiveness.

Are there warning signs? Sudden irritability or not making eye contact in meetings could point to simmering anger within a person but it's not easy to always catch it early. "This is a serious issue simply because there are no early warning systems," says Elango R, chief human resources officer at Mphasis, adding that the problem stems from a high academic slant in education with social skills training receiving scant attention.

The profusion of technology in our lives is often blamed for behavioural issues people exhibit in their jobs. But Amitabh Tiwari, head of sales at LG Electronics India says it has helped make life easier. Sales has always been a high-pressure job, and tempers flying high is not new. Things, however, have begun to look better. "The pressure is not as much on sell-in (pushing stocks down to the trade) but on sell-out (getting consumers to buy)," he says.

In the West, stringent laws governing employee rights mean the offender could face a harassment or intimidation lawsuit. There's no rallying call yet for Indian businesses to take notice of anger as a big problem. But this attitude could backfire

And it may be this way for some time. But this attitude could backfire sooner, warns Parikh. A limited supply of talent is already forcing companies to promote less mature executives to positions of higher responsibility. The result — many can't cope with the people-centric demands of their enhanced roles. Elango suggests companies should put in place counselling lines and take the help of external experts to address specific cases. "Make sure your managers show empathy to people with anger-related problems."

Ellen Mrinalini Shinde, clinical head at 1to1help, a corporate counselling firm in Bangalore, suggests a few steps. "Recognise you have a problem. A lot of times people don't notice until they see a serious impact like say a person yelling at colleagues. A counsellor would help you do that." Secondly, look for the triggers. "Anger is a secondary emotion. Where is it coming from? Is it a sense of frustration or being overwhelmed? Is it from getting less sleep, or about your role not being adequately defined?" she says. Finally, she recommends a larger view. "Sometimes we can change the external situation, or be empowered to cope better. I tell people to take brief vacations through the day. A lot of times we feel we are at the mercy of so many things outside of us."

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