How to handle an angry employee: 6 tips

Sooner or later, a manager must be the bearer of bad news. If it’s a termination or disciplinary notice, employees may react with anger. If the anger is directed at you, it’s perfectly normal to become frustrated and defensive. Learn how to resist this impulse, and maintain control of yourself and the situation.

Timothy S. Koirtyohann, Benefits/HR Consulting Broker at EbenConcepts, Dallas, states: “My most important advice: Learn to set aside the personal attacks and the guilt that employees aim at them and the company. In most cases, the person being disciplined earned the consequence. They may not want to take responsibility and will blame you, the company, the system, their life, etc. Don’t get caught up in that game.

“It is like my high school teacher once told me when I asked why he had flunked me in a class: ‘I didn’t fail you; you worked hard to earn that F just like others worked hard to earn their As.’”

If you find an employee is playing the blame game and is diverting the discussion away from him or herself, “focus on the legitimate business issues, and don’t make judgments,” Koirtyohann says.

To help keep an angry employee under control, you must keep yourself under control. Here are six tips:

1. **Stay calm.** “Watch your tone of voice and volume,” says Koirtyohann.

2. **Watch your non-verbal signals.** Make sure your body language is not confrontational (e.g., finger pointing, hands on hips), dismissive (e.g., eye rolling), or defensive (e.g., arms crossed). Stay out of the employee’s personal space, and certainly avoid any physical contact, even if it’s meant to be reassuring.

3. **Be respectful.** “Always avoid embarrassing the person or making them feel ashamed,” Koirtyohann advises. Saying, “You’re acting like a child!” will only escalate the employee’s anger.

4. **Allow the employee to talk.** It is important to give the employee a chance to tell his or her side, says Koirtyohann. Oftentimes, an angry employee’s main frustration stems from feeling that his concerns are not being heard. Avoid cutting him off, unless he is being disrespectful or are out of control.

5. **Use active listening.** Repeat back what the employee has said, but in your own words. Example: “Mary, if I understand you correctly, you are angry because you feel you are being discriminated against because you are the only woman in your department, and you feel frustrated because you expect me to do more than I’ve done about your complaints up until this point. Is that correct?”

6. **Retain control of the conversation.** End the meeting if the employee is growing more and more agitated...
as the conversation progresses. Inform the employee you want to reschedule the meeting after a brief cooling-off period, when the conversation can be more productive.

Assess the outcome

Take time later to reflect on the confrontation. Was the person calmer when you finished, or more upset? What did you say or do that helped the situation or made matters worse? Reflecting on your words, actions and outcomes will help you be more effective next time.

Got an angry customer? How to handle it

It’s not just angry employees that managers must deal with. Often, a supervisor is summoned to deal with the complaints and ire of customers.

Three tips for addressing it, from Harvard Business Review:

1. Make sure you fully understand the situation.
2. Propose a resolution. Ask: “What would make things better for you?”
3. Show respect. Keep your feedback constructive, so the other party can improve.