



DE-FUSING ANGER: HOW TO CALM DOWN IRRATIONAL PEOPLE AND GET THEM TO LISTEN TO REASON

By Mark Goulston

When I have done surveys with thousands of my social media contacts regarding the causes of stress in the workplace and asked them to choose between: a. too much work and b. difficult people, the results have collectively been 25%, “too much work,” and 75%, “difficult people.”

Interestingly, the CEO’s have answered with almost the reverse ratio, with too much work far outweighing difficult people. When I have asked them why that answer, a number of them have chuckled, “I don’t go near people problems. That’s what I have HR and my COO to handle.”

Assuming that the majority of you that are reading this are not so fortunate and that *you* are the ones tasked with dealing with the messy problem of problem people, I hope the following will help.

To begin with, one of the singular insights I have realized in more than thirty years dealing with “people stuff” is that the saying, “Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” is actually backwards. In reality, “Where there’s a way (that is doable by a regular, non psychological expert type), people find the will” to confront situations they are now avoiding.

Here is one way that I hope might give you that *will* that is adapted from, *Talking to Crazy: How to Deal with the Irrational and Impossible People in Your Life* (Amacom Books, \$24.95).

Research done from the UCLA laboratory of Professor Mathew Lieberman has shown that “affective labeling” (i.e. giving people the most accurate expressive vs. reactive word for what they are feeling), lowers amygdala activation by 33%. Your amygdala is an area in your emotional brain that upon being over stimulated “hijacks” you away from your rational brain and being able to think clearly. And in the process you become “jacked up” and agitated.

As for the angry people we are referring to, they have already had their rational brain hijacked and are coming at you with a full head of steam.

When that occurs, you might want to try the FUDN approach.

The FUDN Approach

F = Frustrated

U = Upset

D = Disappointed

N = Now What

If you tell someone they're angry or ask them what they're angry at, many people will become defensive and escalate, because they will feel that you're shaming them or talking down to them.

However nearly everyone will admit to feeling frustrated.

So when you are encountering such an agitated person, reassure yourself that you actually have a process (FUDN) to calm them down – and yourself -- and listen to reason.

First let them vent at least a little bit, because you are essentially dealing with a bull that has seen red.

When they pause, say to them: "If I were you, I'd feel frustrated. Are you feeling anything like that?" This helps because you're not talking down to them. Instead you're helping them "effectively label" what they're feeling accurately.

Hopefully they will reply, "Yes." When they do that, they have started to lean towards cooperation with you.

Build on that by using what I refer to as a conversation deepener (something that causes people to express even more of what they feel) such as: "Say more about what you're frustrated about." And if they use emotionally laden words such as "awful" or "horrendous" or if their inflection goes up, ask them to say more about those.

Another conversation deepener is to wait until they pause and then say, "Really?" in an inviting-them-to-say-more manner vs. a confrontational tone.

While doing this, you should begin to notice their calming down and even more noticeable, you're remaining calm because you have an approach you are following that is helping you feel more in control.

After they get much of their frustration off their chest, say: "And you know, if I were you, I'd also feel upset. If that's true, say what that's about."

Follow through with conversation deepeners on that.

Next comes the game changer.

Say to them, "And you know, if I were you, I'd also feel disappointed. Either disappointed at someone else, in me, in the company or even at yourself. If that's true, say more about that." There is something powerful and calming when someone shares what they're disappointed about that is less inflammatory and is calming, especially if someone is hearing them out.

Again use conversation deepeners to help them get even more off their chest.

Finally say, "What you've said is very important so I want to make sure I got it right. You said you were frustrated about _____, then you said you were upset about _____ and then you said you were disappointed about _____. Did I get it right and if not, tell me what you actually said or meant."

Using the word, “important,” is very calming to another person who is often agitated because they feel the world has treated them as if they’re unimportant. In addition, causing them to listen to what you say, further settles them down because listening is much slower than venting.

After they confirm what you have said, say: “Given that all or at least some of what you have said is true and it’s already happened, now what?”

That might temporarily startle them and they may say, “Huh?” or “What?” after which you calmly repeat, “Yes, given that all or at least some of what you have said is true and it’s already happened, now what?”

At this point there is a good chance that you and they will be able to brain storm solutions. As you’re doing that you want to point out to them that what they’re asking for may be reasonable (in that it’s understandable given how they feel), but it’s not going to work unless it’s realistic (i.e. doable given what’s actually possible and what isn’t). Then work with them on what a realistic solution might be.

I’m guessing that to many of you, what we just covered may seem overly detailed and even tedious and please do adjust the verbiage in any way that is a better fit for you.

However, if you’re like many of the HR heads and executives we have worked with, it will rapidly become more natural and you’ll be highly motivated.

And that’s because if this “way” works for you, you will definitely find the “will” to try it.

Dr. Mark Goulston is an international thought leader in empathic communication and former FBI hostage negotiation trainer and crisis psychiatrist. He is the author of: *"Just Listen" Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone* (Amacom, \$17.95) and *Talking to Crazy: How to Deal with the Irrational and Impossible People in Your Life* (Amacom, \$24.95). For more info visit: www.markgoulston.com or contact him: info@markgoulston.com.

