

Paper 107-30

## **Working Effectively with the Angry, Critical Client: Real World Solutions to Help You Get the Job Done**

Steven Flannes, Ph.D., Flannes Associates, Oakland, CA 94611

### **ABSTRACT**

The angry-critical client causes more personal anguish and work disruption for the knowledge professional than do complex technical problems.

Interactions with angry-critical clients often leave us experiencing fear, anxiety, anger, self-doubt, and helplessness. These interactions also hinder our ability to concentrate and make solid technical and business decisions. Frequently, when faced with angry-critical clients, we withdraw or "give in," allowing project scope to expand inappropriately.

In order to get the work done and to manage our careers (as well as our own emotional well being), we need to find ways to deal with the angry-critical client, regardless of whether we are dealing with an internal client or an external client.

This paper will help you identify different types of angry-critical clients that you may encounter in your work, and will offer you specific, tangible tools that you can use to "manage the relationship" with this type of client. These tools help you focus not on "changing" the other person, but instead, will help you focus on approaches you can use to alter the cycle of anger and criticism, while simultaneously keeping you directed towards achieving a quality work product.

### **AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE**

The management of the angry client requires a set of skills and approaches that are grounded in the general category of the "soft skills" of professional competencies. When dealing with a discussion of "soft " skills, it is important to have an understanding of the perspective and background of the author. This understanding is important so that the reader has a context into which the content and suggestions can be placed.

I am a practitioner and writer on the subject of applied psychology in the workplace. I was originally trained as a clinical psychologist, and spent a number of years in clinical settings where I practiced and observed the basic "helping skills" that I later took to settings such as the world of work. Since 1982, I have worked with individuals, teams, and organizations (public, private, and university) in the areas of performance improvement, team development and effectiveness, and conflict resolution.

I have taught at the graduate level at the University of Notre Dame and for the University of California, Berkeley, Extension Program. I have written on the subject of applying "people" skills to the world of technology (Flannes and Levin, 2001) and have presented two-day "people skills" workshops to technical and knowledge professionals in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

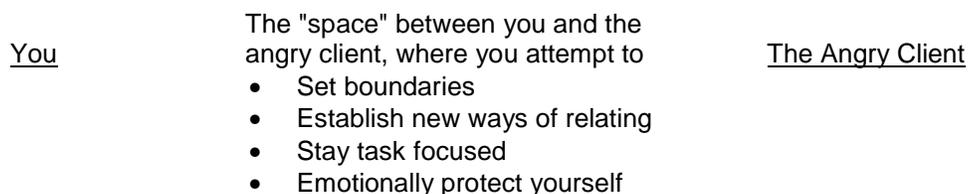
In essence, therefore, the content of this paper is the summary of my varied experiences in observing what works in the real world to address challenges such as the angry client. Clearly, there are no "right ways" to handle a situation with an angry client. Consequently, as you read these ideas, consider what you think will work for you. Try different approaches, and learn from your peers.

## YOUR GOAL IS TO "MANAGE THE RELATIONSHIP"

Regardless of whether the angry client is an internal client or an external client, it is often difficult to know how to begin to conceptualize an effective approach or response. In essence, one often does not have a "platform " or basic belief system from which to spring in order to define and articulate tangible approaches and tactics.

To provide such a platform or unifying thread to use in taking you through the process of addressing the angry client, I offer this goal: your task is to focus on changing what happens between you and the angry client. Although obvious, your goal is also one of not trying to change the other person; pursuing that goal will result in business failure and personal pain.

Towards the goal of changing what happens between you and the angry client, it may be helpful to conceptual a visual model. This model describes you, the angry client, and the "space between the two of you." It is the space between the two of you where you want to devote your efforts and energies.



By operating within this space, you are attempting to influence/change/manage what happens "between" the two of you. It is my experience that when focusing on this space between the two of you, you will feel more empowered, less anxious, and more efficient in defining new steps you can take to make the situation better.

Much of the content of this paper is devoted to presenting approaches, skills, and techniques that you can use in attempting to create new ways of relating within this "space" between you and the angry client.

## ANGER ASSESSMENT

When considering basic approaches to dealing with the angry client, it is important for you to first conduct an informal anger assessment, the results of which give you an indication of possible sources of the client's anger.

In completing this informal anger assessment, it is wise to look at three possible sources of the clients' anger. These possible sources include anger that is:

- Personally based (the client just does not like you or your "type")
- "Displaced" upon you (the client is angry at someone else, but you are receiving it)
- Content/task based (the client is angry about the work product itself, and there are no other contaminating sources of anger at play)

Each of these three general sources of anger will be described below, with suggestions about what you can do in each situation.

### Dealing with Personality-Personal Attribute Based Anger

This is in many ways the toughest type of anger to deal with, because the client, in essence, is angry with you because they do not like you (which could be because they have issues with your

sex, age, race, personality, appearance, etc.). You may be dealing with this type of anger when you notice:

- A free floating sense of disapproval or verbal aggression from the client
- Nothing you do seems to improve their treatment of you
- Everything else considered, you come away saying, "this person just doesn't like me"

When facing this type of generalized anger, the most productive efforts you can make to improve the situation (i.e., experiencing a reduction of the client's anger) include actions such as:

- Selectively disclosing some personal aspects of yourself that might help the client see you as "a real person," gently challenging the biases they currently hold of you
- Ask a peer who might have similar qualities as you (i.e., a female under 35) to see if the client treats this peer the same way. The peer may be able to validate your experiences (which can help reduce your personal discomfort), or, this peer may be able to offer you suggestions about approaches that they have found work in dealing with the client's anger.

#### **Dealing with Displaced Anger**

Displaced anger is misdirected anger that is directed at you by the client, when in reality the client should be directing the anger at the person who "caused" the anger.

In essence, the client has become angry over some other event in their life (an argument with their partner, frustration with a failing project they are leading, or a reprimand from their manager) and they are passing the angry on to you, often with little awareness of what they are doing.

You may be the recipient of this type of anger when you notice that:

- The client is angry over small or inconsequential aspects of your work, and is displaying an intensity of anger that you think is way out of proportion to the issue being discussed
- At the first encounter with your client that workday (in person, on the phone, etc.) you observe nonverbal indicators (facial expressions, an edge to their voice, a cognitive distraction, etc.) that suggest that something is already bothering the client and it is not related to anything you have done

The most productive approaches to dealing with displaced client anger involve your:

- Giving the client a chance at the start of your meeting to externalize some of the displayed anger. An example of a statement that relates to this point is: "Mark, so how is the day going so far...? It looks like you've had a really demanding morning already." This type of question allows Mark an opportunity to pause, realize that he is already upset about some issue that does NOT involve you, and provides him a space to vent some of his feelings about the other subject before starting to dialogue with you.
- Taking cues from the client about how much he wants to "vent" about the subject. Be a listener, but don't probe too much, and follow his lead about when he wants to move onto other subjects.
- Actively redirecting the client to his work with you, while subtly helping him realize that he is really not angry with you. An example of a statement that achieves this goal is: "Mark, that sounds like a very frustrating situation...would you like to take a few minutes to catch your breath and grab a cup of coffee before you and I start our meeting?"

### Dealing with Content/Task Based Anger

Client anger that is based solely on issues with the content of your work, or with a certain task is the easiest type of anger to deal with, in part because it is “clean” anger related to something that you did incorrectly or not on time.

This is a situation where the client is angry because a deliverable was not met, and the anger is delivered to you in a clear and straightforward manner, with no attempt being made to make you feel inadequate. In so many words, the client is saying “Bruce, you said this would be done by the end of the first quarter, it’s not completed, and I’m very angry because I’m now in trouble with my boss.” Obviously, this is a legitimate anger.

When encountering a client with this type of legitimate, content-based anger, positive steps that you can take to diffuse the situation and keep the focus on getting the job done would be to:

- Non-defensively own up to your mistake or failure in a tone suggestive of “looking them in the eye”
- Do not make excuses for your behavior
- Ask them what they believe is the most important thing to do right now to correct the situation

As a side comment, I offer this observation: the people over the years that I have observed who are most likely to set themselves up for content based anger from clients are those professionals who:

- Want to be seen as “nice guys,” and reflexively say yes to a client’s request
- Over commit without taking the time to calculate what are reasonable deadlines for various goals

Consider this typology of three types of anger when working to develop an understanding on why the client is angry, but keep in mind the perspective that one should not view these three categories of sources of anger too mechanistically.

In reality, anger from a client may include various combinations of all three sources described above. Use this typology not to find the “true” source of the anger, but rather as a grounding for you to consider when beginning to craft some initiatives that might reduce the amount of anger coming your way.

This section has considered possible sources of the client’s anger. This next section will look at the client’s anger from a different vantage point, that being a description of certain behavior patterns that constitute “angry styles.”

## ANGER "BEHAVIOR STYLES"

### VIEW AS GUIDELINES, NOT FIXED ATTRIBUTES

We all are capable of exhibiting patterns of “angry behavior.” When considering patterns of behavior, it is easy to slip into the risk of objectifying people, saying something like “Susan, that angry, internal client of mine, must be an example of ‘the aggressive-critical client.’” Granted, this person may all too frequently display many of the behaviors of the aggressive-critical client (which is described below), but we should keep in mind that that these are not fixed qualities within Susan.

People do not always approach us in the same way, and they do change, so our goal in dealing with the Susan’s in our life is to focus very strongly on the immediate, present behavior. This focus on the present allows us to respond to what is in front of us, and not respond to Susan in an overly stereotyped or prejudiced manner.

In other words, use these descriptions of angry behavior styles as guidelines, and monitor the natural tendency to act as if these are fixed qualities in people. (As a side comment on the subject of interpersonal interactions in the workplace, it is my experience that one of the most destructive tendencies-both in terms of the treatment of others and the completion of work tasks-is to treat stakeholders as objects with fixed personal attributes. These processes of objectifying others, although very natural and often a convenient "shorthand" that we create to expedite our dealings with others, create role rigidity and reduces workplace creativity.)

Having offered these cautions about objectification, let us now consider four constellations of angry behavior patterns, plus what you can do to manage the anger that comes from interacting with someone displaying any of these behavior patterns.

#### **THE AGGRESSIVE-CRITICAL CLIENT**

When you encounter a client displaying aggressive-critical behavior, you will notice the following:

- The client approaches you in a win-lose manner, communicating in various ways that they are "right" and you are "wrong"
- The aggressive component of their behavior comes across as your sense that they are trying to drive right over you, as a car might run over a branch
- This individual is minimally open to new information that supports the idea that you can be "right"
- Even when the client is satisfied with your work product, you still come away from dealing with this person with a free floating sense that they feel you are "not good enough"

When encountering this type of client, consider this list of things NOT to do:

- Do not expect that this person will be able to show empathy for you
- Do not appeal to their sense of fair play
- As much as possible, do not take their behavior personally. Assume that others also receive this form of treatment

Instead, try these approaches:

- Try to contain the flow of their aggression by clarifying a very specific goal or agenda for each discussion with this person. For example, if on the receiving end of their free flowing aggression and criticism, actively insert a statement like this early in the conversation: "Mike, I hear your dissatisfaction with the work product. However, what tangible steps can we focus on RIGHT NOW that will help address your concerns?"
- Make a conscious decision, in the moment, about whether you want to respond in an "active" posture (as illustrated above) or in a "passive" posture. A passive posture, which can also be very effective in certain situations, is to just allow the aggressive-critical person to blow off steam, assuming that once they get their anger out, they will become more rational and will be able to focus on specific actions steps.
- Develop competence, and therefore a reputation, for being good at using active or passive approaches with the aggressive-critical client. Your having competence in both approaches allows you to feel more empowered, while also serving the goal of keeping this type of person off guard, which helps alter the dynamics between the two of you when you employ different responses.
- In dealing with a client who chronically exhibits aggressive-critical behavior, focus on two very important goals: informing them about how you work best ("Mike, I really appreciated how you sent me the email about your concerns about the project; that gave me some time to prepare for our meeting") and your ability to set limits on their aggressive behavior

("Mike, I think it would be best to stop the meeting for a few minutes, get some coffee, and pick it up in ten minutes. I'm losing track of what are goals are for today.")

#### **THE PASSIVE-WITHHOLDING CLIENT**

Anger can also be expressed in subtle, passive, and indirect ways. You may be dealing with this type of angry client behavior when you notice that:

- The client is routinely late in returning calls or emails, "forgets" what they need to provide you for the work product, comes late to project review meetings, or frequently cancels or reschedules meetings at the last minute
- You have the experience that something is going on with them, but you cannot put your finger on the issue

When encountering this type of behavior, do NOT do the following:

- Do not confront the person directly about their behavior, implying that you know they must be angry because you see them doing x, y, and z. Confrontation usually increases this type of passive behavior.
- Do not assume that this behavior will just go away; it's often reflective of an ongoing personal style.

Instead, try these approaches when dealing with this situation:

- Help the client review what is realistic for them in terms of their behavior or commitments ("Kevin, you mentioned you could get the information to me by Friday. Would it be more reasonable for us to assume that next week might be a more realistic time frame for you.")
- Arbitrarily assume a "fudge factor" when dealing with this person's commitment to deadlines ("I will automatically add three days to Kevin's stated timeline so I won't naively be waiting for things to be delivered as promised").
- Work to develop "backdoor" sources of information and assistance that you can access when you are working with someone with this form of passive anger.

#### **THE WOUNDED-INSECURE CLIENT**

The wounded-insecure client is a person who, for whatever reason, has a current or ongoing poor self-concept. This person has little confidence in his or her abilities and operates from a position of defensiveness, trying to keep others from seeing their self-perceived inadequacies. Often, the anger that you receive from this type of client is a manifestation of their fears about being discovered as inadequate.

You may be encountering the wounded-insecure client when you perceive a client who:

- Has an angry "edge" about them
- Spends a good amount of time showing you how they "right"
- Responds poorly to humor or gentle barbs sent in their direction

To reduce your chances of receiving anger from this client:

- Find ways to let them know you are on their side
- Comment on their successes when you become aware of them
- Avoid sharing many of your successes unless asked
- When possible, let them feel they created the solution, even when you know you have been the key contributor

#### **THE TRIANGULATING CLIENT**

An angry client can also express his or her anger through "triangulation." This is a process in which anger is expressed indirectly. Rather than the client being direct with you about the anger,

he or she shares it with a third party (their manager, or your manager, or another stakeholder) with the hope of putting indirect pressure on you to take a certain action or possibly as a means of damaging your credibility and reputation.

You may be dealing with triangulated anger when you:

- Experience your client as cool, aloof, and unresponsive to you
- You begin hearing rumblings of dissatisfaction from other stakeholders
- Your manager announces to you that you have a problem with your client, and you are caught unaware

As a rule of thumb, the triangulating client tends to be someone who is indirect and has trouble with situations involving conflict. Hence, they distance themselves from the target of their anger (in this case, you!) by passing the anger through a third party, whom they hope will get the message to you. In extreme, this triangulation behavior can be very manipulative.

The most successful strategy for working with a triangulating client who is not direct with his or her anger involves:

- Your frequently checking in with them to sample their satisfaction/dissatisfaction on your work product
- Use open-ended questions (such as “Karen, can you describe what you’re liking about the work to date, as well as what areas need attention?”)
- Avoid closed ended questions (“Karen, are things going well on the project?”) because it is too easy for the triangulator (who by definition tends to be indirect) to answer with evasive answers in order to avoid possible conflict

Presented below is an overview of these four angry styles, plus suggestions for what you can do to address the angry behavior and increase your productivity.

Overview: Anger “Behavior Styles” *		
Type of Anger Style	Their Behavior	Your Best Response
The Aggressive-Critical client	Runs over you, Implies you are “wrong”	Clarify current goal; Use “active” or “passive” interventions
The Passive-Withholding client	Indirect; “forgets”	Help them be “realistic,” Create a “fudge factor”
The Wounded-Insecure client	Has an “edge”; Is defensive	Don’t “threaten;” Let them take credit
The Triangulating client	Deals with others and not you. Manipulative?	Check in with them regularly; Use open-ended questions

(\* These are behaviors we all engage in from time to time. They are not fixed attributes)

## TRAPS TO AVOID

Managing the relationship with the angry client is fraught with possible traps and pitfalls. Here are three traps that you may encounter. As you consider each of the three traps (debating the angry client, your striving to be "right," and your striving to be understood or appreciated), see if any or the three are risks for you, given your knowledge of yourself.

### DEBATING THE ANGRY CLIENT

The process of debating the angry client is akin to the analogy of pouring gasoline on a fire. A bad situation gets worse when one debates an angry client. Here are some thoughts about why I think this is true.

A true, effective debate only works when both parties are emotionally calm and are presenting arguments steeped in intelligent positions, which are grounded in facts, or a rational compilation of trends or themes. As an example of a successful, effective debate (defined as two people asserting their views with clarity and some emotional detachment), consider the basic high school debate class where both parties press their arguments in forthright but emotionally contained approaches.

By observation, one can see that the angry client fails the test of being "emotionally detached" or "emotionally contained." In many cases, the angry client is not looking for a rational debate of the issues. Rather, the angry client is often looking for a setting to "get some things off his chest." If you as the communication partner assume, possibly incorrectly, that the client wants an intellectual dialogue/debate, you may in fact just be adding more fuel to the fire.

For example, have you ever had the experience of "debating" someone (an angry client or a friend, for that matter) and noticed that whatever you said, no matter how reasoned your statement, the other person only became more angry? These are situations where you are falling into the trap of assuming the other person wants to debate the issue in good faith, when in fact they are still stuck in the stage of emotionally unloading their affect.

Should you find yourself debating an angry client, and you find that it is only making things worse (such as the client getting even more angry), the best things to do would be:

- Stop offering any counterpoint, and shift into a listening mode, hoping that the listening mode allows them to blow off some steam
- If the listening mode does not reduce the client's anger, then you may need to set limits on the time put aside at that moment for the discussion, take a break, or reschedule the discussion for a later time

### YOUR STRIVING TO BE "RIGHT"

Bright, intellectually and professionally accomplished individuals can easily fall into the trap, when dealing with the angry client, of wanting to be seen as "right." This process goes something like this:

The angry client approaches you and makes an aggressive complaint about the capabilities of the software package that your team just created and installed for the client. You know that the specifications for the software never included the capabilities being described by the client (and you have the documentation to prove it). You produce documentation, showing the client that he or she is "wrong" and you are "right." Internally feeling smug, you are pleased that you will now be seen as "right," but to your surprise, this presentation of the documentation only makes the client angrier. What happened?

Again, as with the situation described above regarding "debating," you may have encountered a situation where you erroneously assumed that the client was emotionally and intellectually ready

to see who was right and who was wrong. Certainly, providing documentation to support your argument (or to prove you are "right") is a valid tool at times when dealing with the angry client, but it must be employed judiciously or it really does become a trap. The approach of proving that your position is "right" work best when:

- You have probed a bit with the angry client first to see if they are ready for new information (remember, they may still be in the emotionally venting stage)
- You believe you have a strong, quality relationship with this angry client that would allow you to pull out something that will show them that you are "right"

#### **YOUR STRIVING TO BE UNDERSTOOD OR APPRECIATED**

One of the most personally frustrating (at least for me) aspects of providing service to an angry client is the all too frequent experience of not feeling understood or appreciated by the client. For example, consider this situation: you have worked nights and weekends and have navigated the murky waters of a matrix model of team functioning towards the goal of meeting the client's demand of installing the software by a certain date, only to be angrily chewed out by the client because some sections of the code did not function as designed.

In many situations, it is a trap for you to seek the client's emotional understanding and/or appreciation for all the extras you did to deliver this product on time. And if you bring a strong focus on wanting to explain yourself and get their "understanding," you can run the risk of prompting more anger on their part, in part because they may care little about your predicament and may see your explanations as excuse making.

Rather than seek their understanding or appreciation for all you did, a more effective response to their anger might be to:

- Firmly state the resources you had and the limitations you faced
- Quickly move the discussion to the topic of reviewing/discussing what needs to be done NOW to correct the situation
- Be realistic and forthright, and avoid the risk of over promising as a strategy to reduce their current anger

#### **FIVE LEVELS OF SKILL SOPHISTICATION FOR MANAGING THE ANGRY CLIENT**

In my experience, I have observed what I call five different levels of skills or approaches to addressing the angry client. As you move up through the levels, you are required to put more time and effort into developing your skill sets. Some people like to develop all five levels of skill sets; others are not willing to put in this additional personal development time and energy.

Each higher level of skill becomes increasingly sophisticated. These five levels of anger management skill sets are:

- Level One: Skills in Basic Conflict Resolution Approaches
- Level Two: Interpersonal Communication Skills
- Level Three: Willingness to Try the Unusual
- Level Four: Significant Self Knowledge
- Level Five: Application of Self-Disclosure and "Teaching"

#### **LEVEL ONE: SKILLS IN BASIC CONFLICT RESOLUTION APPROACHES**

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (2005) have described a model for resolving conflict that stresses the importance of developing competency in each of five conflict resolution approaches. Of these five approaches, there are four in particular that you can use in managing your relationship with the angry client. These four approaches are:

- Avoiding
- Compromising
- Accommodating

- Collaborating

The “Avoiding” approach should be used with an angry client when:

- The issue being discussed is not that important
- You make a conscious decision that says that you would rather “pick your battles” with the client, and this is one battle where you will let their anger go over your head without directly responding to it

A good application of Avoiding is a situation where your client is communicating displaced anger (I previously defined displaced anger as anger the client has for someone else but is passing it on to you). In this situation, it can be helpful to “avoid” the client’s anger, letting them blow off some steam, and waiting for them to cool down before engaging them on the work task. By avoiding a direct engagement with the client’s anger, you help keep the communication between the two of you from becoming unnecessarily entangled around affect that has nothing to do with you and the client.

However, if Avoiding is over used in situations where it is not appropriate (such as content based anger where the client is legitimately angry about something that you actually did or did not do), you run the risk of being seen as passive and unresponsive, possibly failing in your role of client management and client retention.

The “Compromising” approach should be used with an angry client when:

- You agree with the client that you need to do something to meet them half way (such as possibly shortening the delivery time of your product)
- You also feel strongly that there is something you need to receive in return from the client (such as an increase of revenue or some other scope concession) in order to maintain the fiscal integrity of your work or to maintain your standing within your work group or organization

To employ Compromising as a technique with an angry client, you must be able to:

- Be proactive (interpersonally assertive) in speaking up for what you need
- Be able to articulate how this compromise can be a win-win situation for both you and the client.

If you over use Compromising as a vehicle to resolve client anger, the client may perceive you as not confident and too flexible.

The “Accommodating” approach should be used with the angry client when:

- The issue being discussed is not important
- You want to appear very cooperative and service oriented to the client

An application of Accommodating is a situation where the client wants something done a certain way, and feels very strongly about their desire. On the other hand, you do not have a particular need to have the solution go in a certain direction because the issue is not that important to you (for example, the client has a strong desire that the off-site planning meeting be held at a certain location). You “accommodate” the client by giving he or she what is desired, with the hope that you are perceived positively. Also, by using this approach, you engender favor with them that can be used to your negotiating advantage later on an issue around which you do have strong feelings.

To employ Accommodating with the angry client, you must be able to:

- Comfortably let the client “have a win”
- Give up control of all the details

Obviously, the over use of Accommodating results in your giving up too much during any conflict negotiation, and reduces your power in the eyes of the client.

“Collaboration” is the most interactive and win-win oriented method to use in resolving a conflict. This approach involves you and the client thinking out loud about a myriad of possibilities, with the goal of creating a solution that is better than the solution promulgated initially by either of you.

Use Collaboration when:

- The situation is appropriate for an approach of “two heads are better than one”
- You believe the issue at hand is significant, and the resolution to the client’s anger requires that the two of you interact as equals in coming up with a sophisticated solution

A situation, for example, where Collaboration is appropriate is one where the client is angry that the technical solution that you are offering does not meet the client’s needs, and you believe in retrospect that the client was not clear with you originally regarding the technical requirements for the job. Now, you must devote time with the client, working in a collaborative manner identifying additional technical needs and requirements.

To employ Collaboration, you must have the skill to:

- Work as a “partner,” displaying an intellectual openness to the ideas of the client
- Be able you communicate effectively on interpersonal levels, specifically displaying the ability to ask open-ended questions

Collaboration is over utilized if it is applied to solving angry situations where:

- The issue is insignificant, and it is a waste of your time and the client’s time to work in an interactive process when the issue could be resolved in a quicker, more arbitrary manner

#### **LEVEL TWO: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

There are a number of distinct verbal skills that are important tools to employ when facing the angry client, particularly the aggressive-critical style of behavior. A detailed discussion of verbal skills, which can nicely be applied to addressing the angry client, can be found in Flannes, 2004.

However, one particular verbal skill that deserves detailed attention in this section involves using the phrase, “yes, and...” This phrase allows you to encounter the client’s anger directly, and then deflect it towards more productive targets, minimizing the your personal pain and maximizing opportunities for productive work.

Here is an example. A client comes after you with aggressive and critical comments, possibly attacking your competency, timeliness, or the quality of your work product. To counter the anger, you first want to acknowledge the client’s anger dissatisfaction, because such acknowledgment paradoxically often results in:

- The client feeling as that they have been “heard”
- The client reducing the amount of their angry output (as a result of being heard)

This acknowledgment is achieved via the “yes” part of the phrase, where you say something like:

- “Yes, Phil I see that you are very disappointed in the quality of the project to date.”

Quickly, before Phil has an opportunity to express additional negativity, you add the “and” component of the phrase by shifting the focus to actions steps that the two of you can take to remedy the problem (thus shielding yourself from his anger and creating a more productive climate between the two of you). To make the shift to the “and” portion of your intervention, you might say something like:

- “...and let’s spend five minutes defining three things we need to address over the next two weeks.” (By including tangible numbers such as five minutes, etc. you help Phil

ground himself in dealing with the issue in a tangible, present tense manner, which gives you something you can work with).

Thus, the completed "yes, and" statement ("Yes, Phil, I see you are disappointed, and let's spend five minutes..") creates a medium or partnership in which you can address concerns in a task driven manner, while simultaneously shielding you from his free floating anger.

A second skill warranting attention in this section is the application of silence. Paradoxically, silence, when used artfully, is a powerful tool for managing the angry client. Silence in the response to the angry client helps dissipate the anger because:

- The "silent" space between you and the client allows the anger to fall to the floor
- As the anger falls, you are not engaging it with a retort, rebuttal, or debate, thus preventing fuel from being added to the fire
- Silence, when accompanied by strong eye contact, tells the angry client " I see you are angry, I am not going to engage you on this anger, and I am going to pursue a more productive path when you are ready."

Use silence selectively, because its over use may create the impression that you:

- Agree with what the client is saying
- You are a passive individual

#### **LEVEL THREE: WILLINGNESS TO TRY THE UNUSUAL**

With any angry client, and especially so with the aggressive-critical client, your being unpredictable in your response can help break up the cycle.

For example, some aggressive individuals become accustomed to this pattern: they come at you with verbal aggression, you sit through what they are saying and try to make sense of it or you debate their assertion, or do something else that they have come to expect from you when you are responding to their anger.

However, if you respond in an unpredictable manner in the face of their anger, you may be able to catch them off guard, which may results in their slowing down, reducing their angry output. Here is an example of responding in an unpredictable manner:

Rather than sit in your chair and let the client communicate towards you in an angry and aggressive manner (which has been your pattern to date), stand up during the discussion, move to the whiteboard, and start listing the client's concerns. This process of physically altering the pattern between the two of you often catches the angry client by surprise, interrupting their angry presentation, and makes them more open to approaching the discussion in a different manner.

#### **LEVEL FOUR: SIGNIFICANT SELF KNOWLEDGE**

The more you know about yourself and your personality, the more equipped you are to manage your relationship with the angry client. You must be able to conduct a self-assessment about how you as an individual respond to situations of anger.

You are "at risk" to contribute to situations which create client anger when you:

- Are passive in responding to client issues or anger, hoping the situation will resolve on its own
- Over-promise to the client
- Feeling insecure or inadequate in your competency, and handle these feelings by adopting a defensive posture in your dealing with your client
- Your actions do not match your statements. You are not congruent in statements and behavior

**LEVEL FIVE: APPLICATION OF SELF-DISCLOSURE AND "TEACHING"**

This level involves the most sophisticated approach to managing your relationship with the angry client. On this level, you are subtly and casually "teaching" the client about what works best for you when conflict or anger arises between the two of you. In essence, you are telling the client what works best for you in resolving angry situations.

Clearly, this is done in low-key ways, such as using statements such as "John, I appreciated your heads-up email about your disappointed about the programming. That gave me some time to prepare for our meeting." Through this and similar statements over the life of your relationship with this client, you are subtly making this statement: I can handle your anger best when you give me some time to prepare for our resolving of the anger. Written notice works best for me, because I like to step into conflict situations with some time to prepare possible solutions."

Granted, this self disclosure and teaching the client about what works best for you in dealing with anger is not always possible or appropriate, but it can have significant benefit when applied deftly. Keep it as an option, particularly in your relationships with long-term clients with whom you have a significant business and personal investment in effectively addressing the client's anger.

These five different levels of your skill sophistication for managing a relationship with the angry client are presented in a visual summary below:

Level	Skill	Your Behavior
Level One	Basic conflict resolution skills	Using Avoiding, Compromising, Accommodating, and Collaborating in the correct situations
Level Two	Communication skills	Using "yes, and.." statements
Level Three	Try the unusual	Alter your physical posture, stance, during angry encounters with client
Level Four	Sharpen self knowledge	Reflect on how you react to anger and your contributions to creating anger
Level Five	"Teaching" the client	Let the client know how you like to handle situations involving anger

**SELF CARE**

Personal "self-care" is a crucial component of any strategy used to address working with an angry client. Think about it this way: most of the time, your manager or employer focuses on your getting the job done for the angry client and puts much less attention on assisting you in taking care of your personal issues and feelings that are associated with managing an angry client.

Expressed from a different perspective, if you do not take care of yourself emotionally in the face of an angry client, no one else will.

This section presents some personal approaches and strategies that you can use to emotionally take care of your self when you have an angry client.

#### **DEBRIEF YOURSELF; IDENTIFY LESSONS LEARNED**

Over time in working with angry clients, note what you do that works and what does not work.

A good starting point for this effort is immediately after an encounter with an angry client, sit down and review what you did that you thought was effective and also note what you would do differently next time. In addition to the obvious benefits inherent in capturing "lessons learned," this process of personal debriefing also is very effective in:

- Assisting you in processing toxic emotions that you may be carrying from this recent encounter with the angry client
- Helping you emotionally feel more empowered and potent in your dealings with these clients

#### **APPLY ACTIVE STRESS MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES**

A solid stress management program, tailored to your individual personality and your interests, is a foundation for self care when dealing with an angry client.

I have found that there are a number of distinct and research supported approaches for managing personal stress. These approaches include positive psychology (the ability to find something meaningful or positive in even the angriest interaction), resilience (creating stress reducing resources before you need them), cognitive approaches (the ability to re-frame a negative situation into a more neutral or positive experience), and engaging in personally meaningful and fun activities. For more detail on these specific approaches to managing stress see Flannes, 2004.

However, one stress management approach will be highlighted here in detail, as it can be very useful in handling your feelings ("self care") after an encounter with an angry client. This resource (also discussed in Flannes, 2004) involves a free form writing of your feelings on paper.

In this informal writing, you would:

- Write down how you are currently feeling ("I'm hurt, anxious, and am doubting myself after this conversation with Paul") after an interaction with the angry client
- Write down what you would like to say to Paul if you were really to speak your mind. This second aspect serves as a "poison-pen letter" (certainly not sent!), which helps discharge feelings so that you are emotionally "lighter" the next time you deal with Paul (or anyone else, for that matter)

This type of personal journal writing can be short, involving or a few lines or paragraphs, and can be applied as needed. My suggestion is to destroy the writing after completion; there is no inherent benefit in keeping it. While deceptively simple in its concept, this form of writing is really a very powerful resource.

An additional "self care" strategy that I believe is valuable is aligning yourself with a formal or informal mentor. I have found in my work that:

- The most effective mentors are people who work outside of your organization or immediate department but are still knowledgeable of your industry and work product

If considering a mentor for yourself, you might be interested in my own experience with mentors in my career. Some of my most valuable mentors were people who never knew they were

"mentoring" me. These were people with whom I'd get together casually, on a periodic basis (lunch, etc.), and would think out loud about various issues facing both of us. The message here is this: don't allow the concept of "mentoring" to feel as though it needs to be a formal relationship conducted with structured goals. It can be that, but it doesn't have to be that.

## CONCLUSION

The angry client is one of the most frustrating and personally unpleasant aspects of managing client relationships, regardless of whether the client is an internal or external stakeholder. Your goal should be one of "managing the relationship," not one of changing the other person.

Anger from a client comes from three different sources (personality based, displaced anger, or content-task based anger). Behavior styles of clients also contribute to anger experiences; these behavior styles include the aggressive-critical client, the passive-withholding client, the wounded-insecure client, and the triangulating client.

In working to resolve client anger, avoid the three traps of debating, striving to be seen as "right," and striving to be appreciated or understood.

Five levels of skills can be applied to developing your skills in managing client anger. These levels include your developing basic skills in conflict resolution, your honing effective interpersonal communication skills, your willingness to try different behaviors, your knowledge of your own personality, and your ability to subtly inform your client about your preferred approaches to resolving anger.

In addition to complicating your job of getting the work done, client anger is also a corrosive agent on your self-esteem and a contributor to personal stress. Developing your own personal stress management program is a key ingredient to personal self-care, especially when the angry client is a long-term client.

## REFERENCES

Flannes, Steven W. (2004), "Effective People Skills for the Project Manager: A Requirement for Project Success and Career Advancement," Proceedings of the Twenty-ninth Annual SAS® Users Group International Conference, Montreal, Canada.

Flannes, Steven W., and Levin, Ginger (2001), *People Skills for Project Managers*, Vienna, VA: Management Concepts, Inc.

Thomas, Kenneth, and Kilmann, Ralph (2005), *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*, Consulting Psychologists Press (CPP), Palo Alto, CA

## CONTACT INFORMATION

Steven Flannes, Ph.D.  
Principal, Flannes Associates  
2080 Mountain Blvd., Suite 205  
Oakland, CA USA 94611  
Phone: (510) 339-7095  
Fax: (510) 654-9319  
flannes4@aol.com