

Angry? Who, ME?



I didn't see myself as angry early in my career ... and I was.

I accessed higher than ideal levels of anger, but didn't recognize that within myself. Looking back, I can now understand both why I didn't see the anger within me, and how my unrecognized anger hurt my working relationships.

This blog post is written with the hopes of opening the eyes of others who have high access to anger, but can't see it.

Patterns Playing Out

In my early working life, I was acting out a pattern of behavior that had been modeled in my home throughout my childhood. To be clear, I, and only I, am responsible for my behavior. Now and then. And what is true is that I was shaped by my earliest relationships. And anger played a role in the shaping.

I didn't see my anger because it was my default experience. It's what was modeled for me and how I was wired to conduct day to day interactions. I didn't experience myself as angry or not angry. I just was.

We are all shaped by our primary relationships. And not simply metaphorically, but also, neurobiologically. Meaning, the neural wiring of our brains, our mental models, our implicit understanding of what is and isn't acceptable are all shaped by our earliest relationships. And it can blind us to certain aspects of ourselves.

The Tell-Tale Signs of Anger



While I didn't experience myself as angry, the signs were there if I had looked. My co-workers tended to give me a wide berth. Silence often followed after I spoke. I didn't have the kinds of close personal connections at work that others had. Eventually, I was told that I was seen as having an agenda (which I thought was ludicrous).

I just wanted to get s%\$t done. I wanted to be successful. I didn't think much about how I did that. I just did it. And because I was unaware of my inner experience and how that experience was playing out, I didn't make the kinds of connections with my co-workers that would have enabled me to be more successful.

Angry Shadow in the Workplace

I'm not the only person who accesses anger without feeling it, knowing it, or seeing it. I believe there are armies of people, just like the younger me, in workplaces across America.

While there are a number of studies on Anger in the Workplace, they are mainly about physically aggressive or verbally abusive behavior. The more common, more

subtle, more pernicious presence of anger is in the non-conscious internal experience of anger that people access and don't see. Meaning, many people access anger and don't recognize it in themselves.

Angry? Who, Me?

When anger is a dominant part of our internal experience and is not overtly manifest in our behavior, it's easy for us to dismiss the notion that we might be accessing anger. In fact, I've worked with a number of clients who reported (in their EQ Profile) experiencing anger more than any other distressing emotion, and still didn't recognize the anger in themselves.

Access to anger is one of the many dimensions of internal experience that the EQ Profile measures. And when an EQ Profile reveals greater access to anger than is ideal, people often push back, saying "This isn't right. I'm not angry. I hardly ever get angry." One might say that they are accessing anger (or resistance) at the idea that they access anger. :)

The Fingerprint of Anger

Anger has a recognizable fingerprint (if you know what to look for ...and want to see it). Anger, like other emotions, has a direction. Anger points outward. "I'm angry at you." The focus of anger is on the Other. (The Other person, the Other thing, Other Situation). People who have high access to anger tend to focus outside of themselves when challenged. That might look like blaming or judging or competing with or dominating the Other. Or like feeling victimized by the Other.

The essence of anger is rejection, resistance or non-acceptance of something or someone. There is no curiosity in anger, no openness, no uncertainty. Anger is right! Maybe even righteous! Some people enjoy the feeling of anger because it provides them with clarity, with a feeling of being right. If we are feeling right, there is a good chance we are also accessing anger!

The language of anger points outward, as well, and implies resistance. Many people who don't see themselves as angry, tend to see anger as binary (versus as a spectrum) and as extreme (versus nuanced). However, anger, like all emotions, is experienced on a spectrum from "peevish to seething." Anger has many nuanced shades that include annoyed, frustrated, irritated, perturbed, ticked, rankled, riled, livid, vexed, impatient, appalled. As people describe their challenging experiences, they'll use these words that fall on the anger spectrum, often without noticing it

The Underlying Meaning of Anger



The underlying meaning of anger is essentially, “I’ve been wronged.” That’s why anger makes us feel so right!

Exactly what that wrong is, is unique to the person experiencing the anger and the meaning they’ve made of the situation. People who are angry can be convinced of the absolute correctness of their response. However, for any given situation that provokes anger in one person, the exact same situation can occur for someone else and they will not access anger. Our anger is all about the meaning we’ve made of the situation, and is unique to us.

The internal language that someone accessing higher levels of anger might use to explain to someone why they are angry would sound like, “You are wrong!” “You wronged me.” “You are at fault.” “You are to blame.” Most people would not externalize this language, particularly in the workplace, however it would be the voice of their internal experience. Again, the focus is on the Other.

When the person accessing anger turns the spotlight back on themselves (if they do), and owns their experience, the internal language might sound more like, “My needs are not being met.” “My values are being violated.” “This is not what I wanted / expected.” “My voice is not being heard.”

Guide for Coaches with Clients who have High Access to Anger

It's common for clients who have easy access to anger not to see it. And though it may show up in their 360 feedback, that often merely reinforces their focus on the Other. The key is to connect them with their inner experience using what you both witness together in your coaching sessions.

If you have clients who don't see their anger, consider the following approaches to help them see and process their anger:

- Listen and mirror the emotion words your client uses. As your client describes challenging situations, listen for words like "frustrating," "annoying," "irritating" (all anger words) and mirror that and be curious.
- Listen and mirror the focus of your client's words. As your client describes challenging situations, listen for where their focus is. If it's on the Other or outside themselves or if they are giving their power away, mirror that and be curious.
- Attend to your client's tone of voice, facial expressions and body language. Some clients don't use emotive words, however, their voice, facial expressions and / or body language may appear rigid, tight, defensive or resistant. Mirror that and be curious.
- Divine what is underneath the anger. Considering asking questions like, "What of your needs are not being met?" "Which of your values are being violated?" "How is this different than you expected / wanted / hoped?" "How are you feeling unheard?"
- Access the missing perspective. When you are sensing the anger in your client, mirror and explore it using some of the techniques mentioned. Then, at the right time, consider asking your client how they might have contributed to the situation that provoked their anger. What of it do they own? If they continue to focus outside themselves, respond defensively or like a victim, or respond rigidly, mirror that and be curious. (We all can tend to lose our agency when we are angry, because our focus is outward. These kinds of inquiries can help our clients regain their sense of agency.)

These approaches can help your client connect more fully with their internal experience, giving them more access to themselves. Anger can be disconnecting because the focus shifts so strongly to the Other. And turning your client's attention back on themselves can connect them more with themselves and ultimately with others.

Do you have clients who don't see their anger? What have you tried to help them see it? How have you helped your clients see their anger and connect more fully to themselves?