

When the red mist falls

The short fuse to newsroom rage is just a megalomaniac editor away, argues Andrew Don

The editorial and training development manager at Reed Business Information, John Charlton, once threw a typewriter at his editor. "Good on 'im," you cry. Let's face it, we've all felt like doing something similar from time to time.

But whereas most of us wimp out, Charlton had the bottle to carry it through. What drove him to his act of violence? Did his editor sexually abuse women staffers? Did he stink out the office eating spaghetti bolognese with Parmesan cheese at his desk?

No.

He was "inconsiderate and inconsistent — the sort of person who gave you a difficult task, you would do it to the best of your ability, then he refused to run the story," says Charlton.

To the credit of his editor, whom Charlton spared the indignity of naming, he apparently realised he was the cause of the young man's rage. He managed to duck and Charlton kept his job, although the typewriter was all the worse for its experience.

Charlton's been on the receiving end, too. He borrowed the French-speaking secretary of another publication's senior editor to help with a telephone call to Brussels when he was a junior.

"Two days later the editor came storming into the office. How dare I ask his secretary to do my work! I said she spoke French. He said next time he'd have words with my editor, and that I was obviously a troublemaker."

Clare O'Brien, a freelance from Scotland, says a



PHOTO: BECKY JASON

certain amount of anger can be a positive force. "Avoiding the issue leads to a lack of self-esteem, not to mention feelings of cowardice. Sometimes you have to stand up for yourself and what you believe to be right."

She did just that, ending a four-year relationship with one well-known weekly trade magazine. "They tried to make me do a picture editor's job as well as my own, for no extra money. When I complained, the person who commissioned me told me to like it or lump it. Apparently I had an 'unrealistic attitude to work'. I was happy to lump it and told him so, decorating my response with a few choice Anglo-Saxon expletives. That's the only time though, and it was in direct response to his outrageous rudeness and arrogance."

But sometimes anger can get out of hand and a person whose emotions run riot will be forced to seek help.

Arena associate editor Steve Beale's bosses referred him to anger management guru Mike Fisher at the British Association of Anger Management. Beale wrote in the August issue of the magazine that it was the little things that really pissed him off. A full-time *Arena* staffer, male, 6ft-plus described him as "absolutely terrifying". But Beale wrote: "I, on the other hand, think I'm a soft touch who is forever being fucked about by those who have concluded the same, and my anger is putting them straight."

He underwent Aggression Prevention Treatment (APT) which focuses on making the individual understand and acknowledge feelings of being overwhelmed, or suffering sensory overload.

Fisher says: "A person in a state of 'overwhelm', usually enhanced by stress, has little or no internal resources available in order to prevent them behaving abusively."

He says it is in this state that they are being subject to their deep primal instincts — the fight, flight or freeze response, a survival mechanism that kicks in when someone feels threatened. "Their behaviour becomes irrational, explosive and sometimes violent... in these cases the anger projected is disproportionate to the event," he adds.

Beale explains to me that APT worked for him and he now finds it easier to stay calm, although he casually drops in angry words such as "fucking", "pissed off" and "tosser" during our conversation.

Harry Mount, deputy comment editor at *The Daily Telegraph*, believes journalists are less prone to anger

ANGER MANAGEMENT TIPS

- Go to the toilet or take a break
- Eat
- Slow your breathing and focus on relaxing bodily tension — then if you need to confront someone you can do so rationally
- Do not walk away from confrontation if an issue needs resolving
- Take regular exercise and find relaxation techniques that suit you
- Put a phone caller on hold while you calm down or tell them you'll call back
- Refuse to be drawn into a discussion when you are angry — ask for a later meeting
- Contextualise what is happening — is this really important in the scheme of things?
- Channel your anger into something positive; for example, to get an assignment done
- Be aware of your body language so your anger does not inflame a situation

than other professionals because they tend to enjoy their job more. But Maria Scott, personal finance editor of *The Observer*, thinks they probably get angrier because of deadline pressures.

Scott admits to losing her rag at work, but mostly with "unco-operative ill-informed press officers, and agencies that make nuisance calls about non-stories; also pestering to confirm if we've received their email, fax or whatever, and are we interested?"

I emailed dozens of journalists to find out what made them angry — and PRs won hands down.

The good PRs recognise the faults of some of their colleagues. Laura Clarke, head of consumer and event PR at The Crocodile, north London, said: "I think journalists have the right to get angry when a clueless PR calls up having not read their publication, and suggests some ludicrous story angle which has no relevance whatsoever!"

"From a PR perspective though, journalists can be just as bad. They can be lazy and rude and downright insulting when you're trying to help. But I do think that it's PRs who are worse. All we need do is adhere to some common sense rules of etiquette and good manners and

LEADING CAUSES OF ANGER

- PRs
- Management red tape, poor management communication and incompetent management
- Bullies, and colleagues who don't pull their weight
- Sub-editors who compromise an article's integrity
- Interruptions on deadline
- Static budgets and penny-pinching on staffing and resources
- No payment until after publication (freelancers)
- Editors who try to get more than they are paying for (freelancers)
- Publications that omit a byline or put someone else's name on it (freelancers)
- Technology problems, such as computers crashing, voice mail, call centres and automated switchboards
- Unfair treatment, feeling hard done by or frustrated in career

I'm sure the anger would be diffused."

Paul Hölleran, the National Union of Journalists' Scottish Organiser, who has been involved in developing Dignity At Work policies in the media, says his experience is that anger and aggression are commonplace in newsrooms, exacerbated by short-staffed offices, "megalomania of certain editors" and the lack of management skills in particular.

"Our lawyers are always amazed at the cases we bring to them. It is as though newspaper managements believe they are above the law," he said.

Dr Sandi Mann, author of *Anger Management In A Week*, says she hopes anger management training will soon become mainstream.

She said: "Currently, it is seen as something you have to do if you have committed a criminal act... but it is not just for criminals and the mentally ill."

Some behaviour can raise questions about mental stability and anger can make journalists behave in the most foolish way.

The Observer's Maria Scott once witnessed one such an act when working for another newspaper. Two male colleagues, evidently upset with the other ended up "grabbing each other".

It was not because they were feeling amorous.

"The grabbing I witnessed was definitely the angry variety and it was on a broadsheet, too," she says. □

Andrew Don is a freelance journalist