

# Wolverine vs. Superman: The Anger Debate

Anger can be a powerful emotion that provides a burst of energy for action, but it can cut us off from the common sense, creativity, and wisdom that can truly help us find an effective solution in a difficult situation.

**M**y five-year-old grandson, Ansel, showed me a very special calendar he had received. Every month falls under the aegis of an illustrated superhero. Since my youthful fantasies were populated by only Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, I asked Ansel to describe the special power of each member of this new pantheon. He was happy to oblige.

“This is Wolverine. He’s really angry, and he’s going to kill the bad guys with his sharp claws....This is the Human Torch. He’s really angry, and he’s going to burn the bad guys....This is the Incredible Hulk. He’s really angry, and he’s going to crush the bad guys....” Month by month we went, every character posed to showcase his special trait, but all, according to Ansel, spurred by anger. The exercise left me disturbed.

I can’t remember Superman ever getting angry; indeed, the Man of Steel of 1950s TV always seemed to have a warm twinkle in

his eye. Batman was unflappable despite the machinations of outrageous villains in the ’60s. And Wonder Woman never had a hair out of place in the ’70s.

But my leadership models didn’t come just from comic books. I also learned about Moses, who led the Hebrews out of bondage in Egypt and through the desert for 40 years, only to be denied entry into the Promised Land. Why? Because when the thirsty people panicked, God told Moses to command a rock to spew out water. Instead, Moses took his rod and hit the rock. He acted in



anger, and God punished him.

Here’s a guy recruited to leave a comfortable position as shepherd to lead a huge change initiative. Moses speaks truth to power (Pharaoh), overcomes an army trying to enforce the status quo,

brings order (Ten Commandments) to an unruly team that’s been taken well beyond its comfort zone, and gets within sight of the ultimate objective. Then one angry outburst, and the Boss fires him. That’s what I absorbed at five years old.

Ansel’s linkage of heroics with anger reflects the argument that anger can be a good thing, a way to unleash the energy needed to fight a foe. As one client said to me: “After 9/11, we needed to get angry so we could go after bin Laden.” At the time I thought, “Are bombs really more effective when they’re dropped by a pilot who’s angry instead of simply determined?”

I do concede that anger may have its uses. Consider Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The brooding prince not only debates whether “to be or not to be,” he dithers over when and how to kill the uncle who murdered his father, took the throne, and married Hamlet’s beloved mother. Only at the end of Act 5, when Mom dies after drinking a poisoned cup the King had meant for Hamlet, does the now enraged hero act on the resolution he made way back in Act 1. The strong emotion of

anger overrides the thoughts that had paralyzed this tragic hero.

Yet I'm not ready to join the chorus glorifying anger. Its dark side is simply too seductive. In the throes of anger, it's too easy to become obsessed with one course of action—to cut off the ability in oneself and others to think nimbly, to be open to possibilities, to sustain the broadest possible access to the deep resources of wisdom, common sense, insight. That's why trash talk is so common in sports contests; the whole idea is to make the opponent lose his cool and, therefore, the game.

Bill G., owner and CEO of a small publishing company who hired me early in my career, frequently used anger as a management tool. One day, for example, we were discussing the acquisition of a magazine. Bill asked Harry, the new publisher: "When can we start putting out the magazine under our own banner?" Harry rushed off to check the requisite factors. Rather than twiddle our thumbs, Bill and I began to plot a critical path. It took X number of days to bind a magazine in those days, Y to print, Z to set type, etc. Given those externally set realities, we determined that the earliest issue date would be 10 weeks hence. We began to methodically discuss the staffing needs that flowed out of the timeline. A few minutes later, Harry burst back into the room: "We can get out our first issue in 10 weeks," he announced. Bill whipped around in his chair, glared at Harry, and snapped: "Why not sooner?"

Obviously, he already knew the answer to his question—indeed, we'd moved past it. But Bill, like

many others then and now, believed that Boss anger would keep people like Harry on their toes, would make them try harder. Yet for all the scurrying people did when Bill blew hot, the pervading atmosphere was one in which initiative withered. During the 18 months I worked for Bill, he fired 19 of his 65 employees and another 12 left. Ultimately, Harry left, too; he and Bill's best salesman started their own magazine. Within a few years, they put Bill's company out of business.

Daniel N. wants to be a different kind of leader. His young

### In the throes of anger, it's too easy to become obsessed with one course of action...

communications consultancy eked out survival in 2009. Last quarter, Daniel turned his attention to an expanded offering. When he checked back in with core business at the end of January, he found that the firm was on the brink of losing its anchor account. Daniel erupted. "The person I put in charge should have known better than to do the things the client is upset about. What am I paying him for? And why didn't I know about this sooner?" For a full 10 minutes, Daniel ranted to a friend.

Then something happened. Daniel noticed that he was angry. Just that much interruption in the loop of resentment and recrimination, and Daniel realized that anger was diverting his attention from what really mattered: how to solve the client's problems. He set

his emotion to one side and began to reflect. What popped into his mind was a reminder of his fundamental value—a dedication to client service. That put Daniel into a positive framework for a client dialogue focused on actions to get back on track—in terms of both what the client needed to achieve and to repairing the client/agency relationship.

So when you feel hot under the collar, revel in the surge of energy that anger can unleash. But before you let 'er rip, hit the pause button. Take a deep breath and check the quality of your thinking. Can you see the broad landscape instead of just a single possible course of action? Are you able to make clear distinctions instead of meshing thoughts and feelings in a tangled mass? Can you assess new inputs as events unfold instead of remaining fixated on one conclusion?

Then reflect on the issue in front of you. With your powerful emotion banked, you'll have access to all your resources—common sense, creativity, insight, wisdom, enough perspective so that you're responding and not reacting, making good choices instead of striking out on autopilot.

Then, and only then, can you avoid unintended consequences and collateral damage as you, like Hamlet, "take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them." **SF**

*Betsy Raskin Gullickson is an executive coach and coauthor, with Bob Gunn, of On the High Wire: How to Survive Being Promoted. You can reach her at [bgullickson@sbcglobal.net](mailto:bgullickson@sbcglobal.net).*