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When the Boss Is a Screamer

Shouting Is Less Tolerated in the Workplace, but Nasty Emails and Other Ways of Venting Take a Toll

By SUE SHELLNBARGER

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No one forgets a screamer—a boss who yells at workers, leaving them feeling powerless and constantly on edge, and sometimes reduced to tears when the explosion comes.

It is a figure Andrew Cornell vows not to become. He sometimes feels like yelling when employees at his manufacturing company don't meet his expectations. But he bites his tongue. "Yelling is a vestige of a past time, and I always regret it," says Mr. Cornell, chief executive of Cornell Iron Works in Mountaintop, Pa. Instead, he holds short, frequent meetings with employees having problems, rather than "waiting until the end, throwing a nuclear bomb and leaving blood all over the wall."

Indeed, the yelling boss appears to be quietly disappearing from the workplace. The new consensus among managers is that yelling alarms people, drives them away rather than inspiring them, and hurts the quality of their work. Some bosses also fear triggering a harassment lawsuit or winding up as the star of a co-worker's cellphone videotape gone viral.

While underlings may work hard for difficult bosses, hoping for a shred of praise, few employees do their best work amid yelling. Verbal aggression tends to impair victims' working memory, reducing their ability to understand instructions and perform such basic tasks as operating a computer, according to several studies of cellphone-company employees and engineering students published earlier this year in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Workers who fielded complaints from hostile, aggressive customers were less likely even to remember what the complaint was about, compared with workers who dealt with calm customers.

The workplace has become more civil, by many measures. When Lucinda Maine, chief executive of an Alexandria, Va., professional association, was dealing with family problems recently, "I did yell at some of my vice presidents. It's better than yelling at the receptionist, but yelling is never appropriate," she says. She quickly apologized to each one, then held an executive-team meeting to share what she had learned: Keeping emotions in check at work when you're under stress at home takes "emotional intelligence," she says.

But how we fight at work now isn't always healthy. There is still plenty of anger and frustration. Managers spend about 25% of their time resolving conflicts, research shows. The "not-so-good part" of the no-yelling trend "is that people are pushing things under the carpet," causing frustrations to



seep out in other ways, says Jack Lampl, president of the A.K. Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems in Rainier, Wash. One favorite way of venting, angry email, "serves as a relief valve, but tends to inflame conflict. It takes a very corrosive role in the workplace, for gossiping and undermining others," he says.

Melanie Brooks, the editor of Bangor Metro magazine, was annoyed last year when a writer failed to finish an assignment on time, forcing her to complete the job herself and miss a work event she'd been expected to attend. She fired off an angry email: "I got the missing information, but it nearly KILLED me. This is your job, not mine," she wrote, adding that she didn't want it to happen again.

Ms. Brooks, of Orono, Maine, thought the email was succinct, straightforward and better than dressing down the writer by phone. But the next day, the writer called Ms. Brooks's boss and ranted about the email for nearly a half-hour, and the boss reproached her for putting her reprimand in writing.

Others use "silent yelling" to vent, says Sylvia LaFair, president of Creative Energy Options, a Sonoma, Calif., leadership coaching company. "They give a stone-faced look, shrug their shoulders, clench their hands," she says. Others express anger through sarcasm or just silence.

All this guerrilla warfare is causing workplace conflicts to drag longer than they did 10 to 15 years ago, says Steven P. Dinkin, president of the nonprofit National Conflict Resolution Center in San Diego, which helps resolve thousands of disputes each year. Research shows that suppressing anger can also keep underlying problems from being exposed and solved.

There are ways to express anger at work and get away with it. It can even be beneficial, helping people understand each other, strengthen relationships and improve attitudes and work performance, says a 2007 study in the *Academy of Management Review* by researchers at Temple and Utah State universities. Just don't get angry too often, and when you do get angry, point out how the problem hurts other employees or the company rather than yourself, the study suggests.

Dr. LaFair advises telling the truth about problems and frustrations, but in a measured, calm way. Using short, seven- to 12-word sentences that start with "I," describe your emotions and state the problem. For example, "I hear what you're saying but I can't agree with it."

Rather than yelling when he gets upset, Mr. Cornell believes "the better solution is to retreat and think about what I want the other party to get out of the experience."

Ms. Brooks, who regrets her angry email, suggests waiting 24 hours before responding to a colleague or customer, and then taking a softer approach, saying, "Look, you made my life really hard. How can we avoid this situation again?"

When John Shufeldt, a physician and chief executive of Doctors Express, an urgent-care franchising company, needs to get people focused on a problem, he lowers his voice and speaks very slowly. "It forces people to dial down their own volume just to hear you. They lean in and hang on your every word," says Dr. Shufeldt, Phoenix, who also consults to health-care employers on physician behavior.

In dealing with an office screamer, it's best not to react at first, Mr. Dinkin says. This "throws the other person off balance, because they're expecting you to push back," he says. Listen to what the screamer is trying to say, then summarize it calmly, "so they feel they've been heard," he says. That may calm the screamer enough to let you state your position or start talking about solutions.

In the worst cases, a colleague or mediator can help. Mr. Dinkin says an employee of a small business sought help recently from the National Conflict Resolution Center because his boss was yelling at him so much that he couldn't focus on his work. As the worker's output declined, the boss got angrier and screamed more. The boss "felt the employee wasn't dedicated to his work, and the employee couldn't focus on his work because he felt really disrespected by the supervisor," Mr. Dinkin says.

The boss agreed to engage in talks, and the mediator had the two meet and listen respectfully to each other's emotions and viewpoint, then work out a solution. They started talking more often, tracking projects at earlier stages. The employee stopped fouling up, and the boss stopping blowing up.

Write to Sue Shellenbarger at sue.shellenbarger@wsj.com.

Scott Broetzmann

President & CEO

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