

Why Channeling Anger Can Be A Leadership Strength

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Everywhere you turn, people are angry – and [showing it](#). Black Lives Matter has turned outrage into a nationwide [movement](#). President Trump has [lashed out](#), calling for governors to crack down. Rapper [Killer Mike](#), Atlanta [Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms](#) and Reverend [Al Sharpton](#) channeled anger to mobilize, chastise and eulogize.

And that was just in the past two weeks.

We're still in a global pandemic in which Governor [Andrew Cuomo](#), politicians and [doctors](#) have angrily attacked or defended our national response. Let's also not forget about the charged questioning by Reps. [Devin Nunes](#), [Jim Jordan](#), and [Elise Stefanik](#) during President Trump's impeachment process, the [heated exchanges](#) during Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearings, and the [fiery attacks](#) that punctuated the final 2020 Democratic primary debates. Senator [Elizabeth Warren](#), Senator Lindsey Graham and of course Trump, the divider-in-chief himself, have no qualms about leaning-in with ire. Diplomats from as far away as China have become aggressive "[wolf warriors](#)," and even basketball coach Steve Kerr gets irate about his team's [performance](#) and vocally [criticizes](#) the president.

In decisive moments and crises, we look to leaders – be they from the public or private sector, be they everyday people or celebrities – to connect with us and show us the way.

So, is all this anger helping?

Because anger can make our blood boil, we see it as a negative emotion to suppress or avoid. Channeled effectively, however, expressing anger can help us reach our goals, whether those goals involve seeking justice, building or holding on to power, leading change, getting promoted, or creating strong coalitions with allies and, yes, even adversaries.

As an executive leadership coach, I contend that anger is underappreciated and expressing it is underutilized. Instead of dismissing anger, we should better understand it. We should study leaders who wield it strategically to achieve their aims — regardless of whether we *like* these leaders or not.

And we should recognize that bias and structural inequality exists. As a person of mixed race who has lived and worked around the world, I have

been an insider and outsider, often simultaneously. The global leaders I coach constantly navigate how they need to be perceived in cultures and organizations to get things done.

Why we don't like anger

When we are children, our parents warn us not to get angry. The Bible ([Proverbs 29:22](#)) and most religions say that anger is harmful and that we should turn the other cheek. Because anger is associated with conflict, which most of us are [averse to](#), we try to avoid it. Uncontrolled anger shuts down [all thinking](#), can make us more [impulsive and can lead to poor decisions](#).

When women and Black people show anger in many arenas of U.S. society, they are often negatively viewed as “out of control” or “aggressive”— while a White male acting the same way is deemed to be “in command,” “assertive,” and having “strong executive presence.” Indeed, the title of a [study](#) by Victoria Brescoll says it all: “Can an angry woman get ahead?”

The case for channeling anger

First, research by Larissa Tiedens showed that anger can [boost our status](#), and that we perceive angry people as strong. Strength can signal confidence, which is perceived as competence. Strength is what most of us want to see in a leader, and what organizations [tend to reward and promote](#) — even if that means promoting a type of behavior and leader that can often lead to worse [performance outcomes](#).

Second, there is evidence that expressing anger may [be more powerful](#) than showing sadness and remorse. We may *like* people more who show sadness, but we confer lower status on them. Indeed, there seems to be an inverse correlation between [competence and warmth](#), with warm people being perceived as [less competent](#).

When Bill Clinton testified during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, research showed that people viewed his initial apology and remorse as humble and warm, but conferred lower status to him. When he went on the offensive and got angry, he was found less likeable, but his status improved. Barack Obama has been famously [lambasted](#) for his composed, rather than fiery, approach.

Third, anger can indicate you mean business, which may get your adversaries to think twice before [confronting you](#), or get others to want to rally behind you. You may dislike Trump, Devin Nunes, Kamala Harris, Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, but their displays of toughness and ire make them formidable figures.

To be clear, the perceptions of what makes a competent leader, and prescriptions of how we might best channel anger, are based on the dominant values and how society currently operates, not on how we would ideally wish it to be. Workplaces and organizations may be, as one paper put it, a “[masculinity contest](#).” But [research shows](#) that people, across cultures and time, organize in hierarchies. We want to see “[strong](#)” [traits](#) in our leaders. Furthermore, Peter Belmi and Jeffrey Pfeffer [found](#), at least when their economic livelihood is on the line, that most people would work for someone abrasive yet competent over someone likeable but ineffective. As Pfeffer often [says](#), likeability is overrated.

The challenge: Ensuring anger doesn't backfire

Anger may be underrated, but it can backfire in certain circumstances.

A recent [review of seven studies](#) on anger and status revealed that *extreme* anger may actually hurt our status, but *moderate or mild* displays of anger do boost status. Implication for all: try not to fly off

the handle. Appearing more measured when expressing anger has a greater chance of helping you achieve your goals.

Second, we can't ignore the fact that women face a double-bind. We say we want to see strength and command in our women leaders, but when women get angry or forceful, they get penalized for it, and do **not get** the same status boost as men. So women are often forced to navigate a tightrope with how they show anger: it can be **damned if you do, doomed if you don't**.

The research is not conclusive on how women can best manage this double-bind, but **Joan Williams** has done leading work in this area, and provides **practical strategies**: direct anger at a common cause, use powerful body language or hand gestures, or adjust voice or tone. Inbal Demri proposes a "**gender agency**" framework that I find can be used by any group: identify strategies that tap into how power is created but also address **implicit biases**.

Black men face a different double-bind, as research by **Robert Livingston** shows. Black male leaders may be perceived as threatening. One of his studies, on the **Teddy Bear effect**, suggested that having a baby face benefited Black CEOs but not White CEOs, and that babyfacedness may be a disarming mechanism that facilitates the success of Black leaders, by attenuating stereotypical perceptions that Black people are threatening.

So what are women and Black people supposed to do? I do not want to be misunderstood: I and all the experts I've cited, including Sheryl Sandberg who famously urges us to "**lean in**," agree that we cannot ignore — and that we must address — implicit bias and **structural inequality**. It's also incumbent on those in power to act on these problems. But those in marginalized groups may be able to strategically leverage the researched-based evidence. The question is how they can use anger to their advantage

to achieve their goals, in different contexts and in front of different audiences.

This tension was on full display in the anger-filled speeches of [rapper Killer Mike](#) and Atlanta [Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms](#). Both received [positive attention](#) in the national media, and Mayor Bottoms was [lauded](#) for delivering a “master class in constructive scolding,” and for using “all the right words.” But Bottoms and Killer Mike were also [roundly criticized](#) by some in the black community who saw their speeches as “talking down to” black protesters, and even “treachery” by pandering to the white-dominated status quo.

Regardless of how we seek to address change or increase our power, there are important points to keep in mind. If you want to achieve your goals by working outside the system, or overthrowing it, you still need to build power and create coalitions – and channeling anger can rally people behind you. If you want those in power to change the system and rules that benefit them, I say good luck – but showing anger can help, because it can get those in power to pay more attention. And if you wish to rise to power *within a system*, understand the evidence on status conferral and perception, which may mean adjusting how you express anger, depending on the context and audience. Our current system is not fair, but it behooves us to recognize how it operates.

There is a lot to learn as well from cross-cultural research. Many executives I work with are foreigners working abroad or lead diverse teams. They must constantly navigate or play roles in ways that best serve them, and we benefit from the culture insights of [Michele Gelfand](#), [Geert Hofstede](#), [Erin Meyer](#) and [Daniel Coyle](#).

Executives I coach, 60% of whom are women or non-white and work in the U.S., cannot wait for the system to change and don't want to start their own

companies or organizations. They find ways to express anger that enables them to achieve their goals without selling their souls. When they learn to channel anger or strong emotions, their ratings on “executive presence” and “strength” rise – and so do they, putting them in positions where they can write the rules or affect wider change, if they so wish to do.

Channeling anger to lead

Although many of us have been raised to fear and dislike anger, recent events have reminded us that it has its place in achieving goals and making change. Channeling it strategically can help you achieve your goals. Like fire, anger used indiscriminately can burn everything down. But channeled by leaders effectively, it can be a powerful force that provides energy, illuminates the way and takes us out of our darkest ages.

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