

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 SHELLENBARGER

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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."

Yelling isn't tolerated in most workplaces any more, even though offices are as tense and fraught with conflict as ever. Sue Shellenbarger explains why on Lunch Break. Photo: Getty Images.

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.

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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

The workplace has become more civil, by many measures. When Lucinda Maine, chief executive of an Alexandria, Va., professional association, was dealing with



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them, and hurts the quality of their work.

Where the Squelched Screams Go

Yelling may have become less acceptable at work, but it's common in other venues.

AT KIDS' GAMES

One-third of children wish adults wouldn't watch their games because they yell too much, according to a January 2012 survey of 300 children ages 8 to 14 for i95sports, Tampa, Fla., a national youth-sports franchise.

BEHIND THE WHEEL

58% of commuters have experienced road rage while driving to work, and 9% have gotten into a fight with another driver, according to a 2012 survey of 3,892 workers by CareerBuilder and Harris Interactive.

TO CUSTOMER-SERVICE WORKERS

24% of consumers who experienced a product or service problem in the last 12 months yelled or raised their voices at a customer-service worker, based on a 2011 survey of 1,000 people by Customer Care Measurement & Consulting and Arizona State University's W.P. Carey School of Business.

AT SPORTS EVENTS

96% of fans at college and pro football games experience crowd noise loud enough to put those who attend regularly at risk of hearing loss, according to a 2010 Colorado State University study in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene.

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Sue Shellenbarger talks about her column on The Wall Street Journal This Morning.

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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.


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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


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