Positive, Proactive, and Committed: The Surprising Connection Between Good Citizens and Expressed (vs. Suppressed) Anger at Work

Lisa T. Stickney[1] and Deanna Geddes[2]

1   Department of Management and International Business, University of Baltimore, Baltimore, MD, U.S.A.
2   Department of Human Resource Management, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, U.S.A.

Correspondence

Lisa T. Stickney, Ph.D., Department of Management and International Business, University of Baltimore, 1420 N. Charles St. Baltimore, MD 21201, U.S.A.; e-mail: lstickney@ubalt.edu.

Abstract

In two studies, we examine the relationship of positive and negative trait affectivity (PA/NA), organizational commitment, and emotional exhaustion with organizational member anger. Utilizing the dual threshold model (DTM) constructs of expressed and suppressed anger (Geddes & Callister, 2007), we find employees with high organizational commitment express anger to *relevant others*, that is, to management or to those responsible for the anger-provoking situation. In contrast, emotionally exhausted employees and those with high NA tend to suppress their anger, venting only to uninvolved parties or remaining silent. Findings also indicate a positive relationship with PA and anger expression—a connection rarely considered or examined in anger research. Further, expressed anger was predictive of perceived improvement with problematic situations, while suppressed anger forms led to perceptions that the situation at work deteriorated.

Increased attention toward emotional aspects of employees and their organizations suggests a realization that these are unique and prevalent phenomena impacting daily work interactions and operations. Ongoing emotion scholarship enhances our understanding of employee emotions and emotional responses within the complex social contexts in which they occur (Ashkanasy, 2003; Barsade, Brief, & Spataro, 2003; Côté, 2005; Elfenbein, 2007; Fineman, 1993, 2000; Lindebaum & Jordan, 2014; Van Kleef, 2009). Environments and unique situations that generate strong, negative emotion, namely anger, are particularly relevant to conflict at work. Emerging research and models of workplace anger help explain how and when employee anger is destructive and when it may actually enhance working relationships and organizational functioning (Geddes & Stickney, 2011; Gibson & Callister, 2010; Van Kleef & Côté, 2007).

Relevant to these studies, the dual threshold model (DTM) of workplace anger (Geddes & Callister, 2007) offers a social constructionist framework for examining employee anger expression and related social and organizational consequences. Unlike traditional views of workplace anger that often equate its expression with aggression, the DTM argues that anger displays do not inherently reflect employee hostility or retaliatory intent, nor are they always perceived as deviant. Instead, expressed anger may demonstrate intolerance for unfair or unethical organizational practices as well as angst due to another's incompetence, insensitivity, or intentional misdeeds. Consequently, expressing anger at work may be not only socially acceptable, but potentially prosocial action that can lead to necessary changes and promote positive consequences for individuals and their organizations (Geddes & Stickney, 2011; Lindebaum & Geddes, 2014). Further, the model proposes that employees who express anger at work may prove more

committed, positive, and emotionally healthy organizational members than those who choose to or are compelled to suppress their felt anger.

In the studies reported here, we pursue these propositions and examine how positive and negative trait affectivity, organizational commitment, and emotional exhaustion relate to the expression or suppression of anger at work. Further, we explore how expressed anger following an anger-provoking event may promote positive changes within the work environment.

Workplace Anger: Traditional and Reconfigured Views

In a recent review of workplace anger, and consistent with views found in the DTM, anger is defined as "an emotion that involves an appraisal of responsibility for wrongdoing by another person or entity and often includes the goal of correcting the perceived wrong" (Gibson & Callister, 2010, p. 68). This explanation of anger suggests that it is neither inherently bad nor good but essentially an adaptive state of readiness (Frijda, 1986) that "may or may not have destructive consequences" (Fitness, 2000, p. 61). Like all emotions, anger reflects both automatic and controlled processes and begins internally with individuals attending to some stimulus, appraising its relevance and impact, and experiencing physiological and psychological changes (Elfenbein, 2007). In organizational settings, many individuals regulate the degree to which this felt anger is expressed outwardly (Lawrence, Troth, Jordan, & Collins, 2011). In some cases, employees consciously suppress their feelings or displays of anger and, at other times, they do not.

Traditional Anger-In Versus Anger-Out

Traditional views of workplace anger have differentiated this process as *anger-in* and *anger-out* (Domagalski & Steelman, 2005; Spielberger et al., 1985; VanderVoort, Ragland, & Syme, 1996). Anger-in behavior characterizes someone who experiences but does not express anger, while anger-out behavior reflects an individual who "engages in aggressive behavior when motivated by angry feelings" (Spielberger, Krasner, & Solomon, 1988, p. 95). A related construct, *anger control*, overlays the mid-region of the anger-in/anger-out continuum and is defined as intentional strategies to dissipate or reduce one's anger using calming techniques or exhibiting patience and tolerance (Spielberger, Reheiser, & Sydeman, 1995; Spielberger et al., 1985). These designations reflect a range of strong to weak inhibitions for expressing intense anger.

This traditional view of workplace anger is increasingly critiqued, however, as anger-in and anger-out scores tend not to align clearly with verbal or behavioral measures of anger expression (Suchday & Larkin, 2001). Further, anger-control scale items, such as "control my temper," "calm down faster," and "keep my cool," reflect tendencies that can characterize either expressed or suppressed (i.e., anger-out or anger-in) anger, making it difficult to interpret anger control as a separate category. Emotional episodes incorporating these conceptualizations can also prove difficult to interpret, especially when examining anger expression's potential for either positive or negative outcomes. For example, expressing anger to those responsible for or able to resolve a problematic situation, venting angrily to one's social support network, or engaging in physical acts of violence would all be designated as anger-out with its presumption of underlying hostility. Nevertheless, in the first example, it appears a problem-solving initiative is attempted, while in the second, emotional support seems the primary motive for anger expression. Only the third example reflects intent to harm—a condition not present in the previous two examples. Nevertheless, all traditionally would be given an anger-out designation.

To better understand expressed workplace anger and related consequences, an alternative to the anger-in/anger-out distinction may prove beneficial. Specifically, conceptualizations of suppressed and expressed anger proposed by the DTM may add insights into workplace anger research and improve our ability to determine anger's potentially beneficial and detrimental consequences in complex work environments.

Organizational Anger Reconfigured

Geddes and Callister (2007) conceptualized workplace anger as three types: Suppressed, expressed, and deviant. These are separated by two thresholds—first, an *expression threshold*, and second, an *impropriety threshold*. If one's anger does not cross the expression threshold, it is considered *suppressed anger*. If anger crosses both the expression threshold and the impropriety threshold, it is labeled *deviant anger*. If anger displays remain in the space between the two thresholds, it is termed simply *expressed anger*.

Suppressed anger consists of two forms: silent and muted. *Silent anger* is felt anger unexpressed, thus resembling the traditional anger-in construct. Silent anger is seen as an intrapersonal phenomenon, where for reasons ranging from fear of retaliation to organizational indifference or cynicism, one attempts to hide felt anger from others.

Particular to the DTM definition of suppressed anger, however, is the concept of *muted anger*. This second type of suppressed anger is identified as a unique, interpersonal phenomenon (Geddes & Callister, 2007). It differs from either anger-in or anger-out traditional classifications because it is neither silent nor is its expression hostile to recipients. Taking the term from a mute apparatus used on brass instruments to soften the sound, muted anger is muffled and considered organizationally silent because it is intentionally hidden from those responsible for or able to fix the anger-inducing situation (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Perlow & Williams, 2003; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Here, employees verbalize and vent their anger to uninvolved, but supportive or convenient colleagues—a practice, unfortunately, that can contribute to negative emotional contagion in the work environment (Anderson & Guerrero, 1998; Barsade, 2002; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Kelly & Barsade, 2001). They may also complain at home or to friends and confidantes outside of work, potentially perpetuating unfavorable views of the organization (Gundlach, Douglas, & Martinko, 2003). Because these receptive individuals often serve as the angry individual's support system, they typically sympathize with the employee's rendition of events and subsequently develop negative emotions of their own, even *heightened* feelings of anger and offense (Rimé, 1995a, 1995b). Research indicates venting one's anger publicly to friends and associates occurs frequently (Fitness, 2000; Rimé, 1995b; Simon & Nath, 2004) and is most common with individuals believed by the angry employee to be sympathetic (Tice & Baumeister, 1993).

In contrast to suppressed (silent or muted) workplace anger, the DTM argues that expressed anger crosses an expression threshold in that it is neither objectively nor organizationally silent. Here, the angry individual expresses anger openly to parties relevant in some capacity to the anger-provoking event— someone responsible for or able to make changes to the situation. This construct reflects the increasingly accepted view that anger expression is neither inherently good nor bad (Elfenbein, 2007) but must be considered in terms of its functionality within a particular social context (Lindebaum & Jordan, 2012). Thus, anger expression is more akin to notions of *employee voice* (Hirschman, 1970), direct but non-hostile *integrative assertion* (Guerrero, 1994), and *organizational dissent* (Kassing, 1998, 2011) where employees are "moved considerably" (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002, p. 41) to express organizational or interpersonal concerns within the workplace. This conceptualization of expressing anger overcomes a persistent problem in academe and industry where anger and aggression are used synonymously, thus, conflating the construct of expressed anger with negative intentions or outcomes (Geddes & Stickney, 2011; Suddaby, 2010). Specifically, expressed anger according to the DTM does not necessarily reflect an aggressive, harmful intent. More accurately, it reflects perceived social norm violations or harm perpetrated *against* the angry employee or another party (Tavris, 1982). Along with the potential for self-interest, expressed anger may reflect a prosocial and alter-centric approach to workplace inefficiencies, injustices, and improprieties.

Finally, Geddes and Callister (2007) argued that the probability of positive outcomes from expressed anger increase if that expression does not cross the impropriety threshold, a symbolic representation of organizational emotion display rules or salient social norms. Once anger expression crosses both

thresholds, it is classified as deviant anger and may or may not have characteristics—such as high intensity and hostility—that resemble traditional views of anger-out. For instance, they argued that deviant anger, as defined by organizational observers, may include uttering an expletive, sending an ALL CAPS email or slamming the door on the way out (Geddes & Callister, 2007). It may or may not include intentionally harmful acts but is nevertheless seen as socially unacceptable in that environment. Physically aggressive acts of anger (violence) are still considered rare in organizations as most workplace aggression is covert and indirect so as to avoid detection and public censure (Geddes & Baron, 1997). Surprisingly, recent studies testing various propositions of the DTM show that even when expressed anger crossed the line according to organizational emotion display norms, more favorable organizational outcomes resulted than when employees kept their anger silent (Geddes & Stickney, 2011; Stickney & Geddes, 2005).

In summary, the DTM conceptualizations of workplace anger are demarcated by the expression and impropriety thresholds and offer useful alternate constructs to the traditional distinction of anger-in and anger out. When anger fails to cross an organizational expression threshold, it is suppressed anger, meaning it is either silent (hidden from all) or muted (hidden from some). When anger crosses the expression threshold, it is simply expressed anger. This form of anger is viewed by organizational members as appropriate for the work environment or circumstances. If one's anger crosses the impropriety threshold, the anger is considered deviant in that it deviates from social norms of appropriate behavior. For our studies, we focus specifically on the two forms of suppressed anger and expressed anger and examine their relationship to trait affectivity, organizational commitment, and emotional burnout.

Positive and Negative Trait Affectivity

Positive and negative trait affectivity (PA and NA) reflect an individual's susceptibility to experience various emotions. Both are seen as important and stable dispositions. PA reflects an individual's "level of pleasurable engagement with the environment" (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988; p. 128), while NA measures the extent one feels upset or unpleasantly aroused (Watson & Tellegen, 1985). Both PA and NA impact one's tendency to view and react to various environments with more good or pleasant versus bad or unpleasant feelings and emotions (Russell & Carroll, 1999; Watson & Tellegen, 1985; Watson et al., 1988). Negative affectivity is seen as producing negative emotions, including guilt, fear, stress, and anger, while positive affectivity is associated more with love and happiness (Cropanzano, Weiss, Hale, & Reb, 2003). Consequently, negative affectivity is more often associated with antisocial and unfavorable organizational outcomes, while positive affectivity is linked with prosocial and favorable consequences (Thoresen, Kaplan, Barsky, Warren, & de Chermont, 2003).

Traditional conceptualizations of expressed anger as anger-out, hostility, or aggression prompted scholars to examine its relationship primarily with negative (versus positive) affectivity (Geddes & Stickney, 2011; Glomb, 2002). In general, positive affectivity is assessed only half as often as negative affectivity, prompting calls for its inclusion in more organizational research (Thoresen et al., 2003). Available research shows positive affectivity as a significant factor for improving organizational functioning and generating cooperation (Brief & Weiss, 2002; Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001; Staw & Barsade, 1993; Van Kleef, 2008). The DTM asserts that anger expression may reflect a desire to solve problems at work and may serve a prosocial function, signaling issues that can damage organizations or its members and prompting important changes in the workplace (Geddes & Callister, 2007). Consequently, positive affectivity may play a role in the decision to voice rather than suppress anger. For this reason, we do not limit our examination of trait assessments to only NA, but also consider PA when identifying individual factors that may influence employee emotion displays.

Research examining the connection between affectivity and emotional display tendencies is limited and findings are mixed (Aquino, Douglas, & Martinko, 2004). Hepworth and Towler (2004)

indicated that anger expression is tied to aggression and negative affectivity. However, Tschan, Rochat, and Zapf (2005) found that negative affectivity was not significantly correlated with either dissonance (not expressing negative emotion) or deviance (expressed negative emotion). Significantly less is known regarding positive affectivity and anger expression or suppression due to the fact that it is rarely measured with regard to negative emotions and behaviors (Thoresen et al., 2003). Existing research offers some tangential evidence that may prove relevant, however. For instance, studies show positive mood produces tendencies among employees to act in ways that protect the organization and facilitate effective functioning (George & Brief, 1992; Patterson, Warr, & West, 2004). Research examining approach-avoidance behavior indicates approach tendencies are associated more with positive affect and avoidance tendencies with negative affect (Carver & White, 1994; Gray, 1982). Consequently, PA should make one more prone to express anger (approach), while NA would likely promote anger suppression (avoidance). Relatedly, scholars suggest that when individuals feel differently from their typical affective state, they pay attention and see it as more diagnostic of the situation, resulting in greater attempts to engage in problem-focused coping (Kramer & Yoon, 2007). Given that felt anger is more characteristic of NA than PA, PA individuals would consider their anger more novel, prompting a more conscious and, perhaps, vocal response.

Examining the impact of both positive and negative trait affectivity on workplace anger expression is novel and should prove helpful in forwarding research in this area. It is expected that individuals with high positive affectivity generally are more active, confident, and optimistic about changing a problematic situation; thus, their anger would prompt them to confront someone in a responsible position to affect that change. An opposite reaction is likely by individuals regularly in a negative emotional state, who view problematic work events with less optimism, confidence, or interest. These organizational members would be more cynical and less inclined to approach management or challenge the perpetrator and perhaps more likely to complain to support groups or remain silent and brooding. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals with trait positive affectivity will be more likely to express their anger and less likely to silence or mute their anger.

Hypothesis 2: Individuals with trait negative affectivity will be less likely to express their anger and more likely to silence or mute their anger.

Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment is an individual's identification with and involvement in an organization (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979). Nearly all previous research examining anger and organizational commitment examines felt rather than expressed anger, reporting its association with decreased organizational commitment (Kiewitz, 2002; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000; Skjørshammer, 2003). To our knowledge, no published research links anger expression with organizational commitment. However, studies examining organizational cynicism, a state inconsistent with commitment, may shed some light on this relationship. Organizational cynicism is characterized by a sense of frustration, hopelessness, and disillusionment at work (Andersson, 1996). Limited research on this phenomenon indicates a significant, negative correlation between cynicism and organizational commitment (Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 2000). The DTM proposes that organizational cynicism increases one's tendency to suppress, especially mute, anger at work (Geddes & Callister, 2007). Thus, we anticipate organizational commitment, in contrast to cynicism, increases one's willingness to express frustration openly to responsible parties regarding problematic work situations.

Relatedly, organizational dissent is the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions about workplace policies or practices (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002). Research indicates that while

organizational dissent reflects felt anger (Garner, 2009), highly committed employees are more likely to express dissent to management (Kassing, 1998). Specifically, research on *prosocial voice* (Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003) and *articulated dissent* (Kassing, 2001) reports employees so inclined tend to be and are perceived to be highly engaged organizational citizens. For instance, research on whistle-blowing as a form of organizational dissent shows that righteous anger often influences the decision to go public with organizational transgressions (Gundlach, Martinko, & Douglas, 2008; Martin & Rifkin, 2004). In many cases, the decision to blow the whistle is associated with high levels of commitment to an organization (Mowday et al., 1979). In contrast to whistle-blowers, *latent dissenters* (Kassing, 2001), whose expressions resemble grumbling, venting, or muted anger displays, as proposed in the DTM, typically are viewed as less identified with their organizations and as having poor relationships with supervisors.

Although no studies directly examine anger expression or suppression and organizational commitment, research on organizational cynicism and dissent, when considered together, suggest a positive relationship with anger expression and a negative relationship with anger suppression. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 3**: Individuals committed to their organizations will be more likely to express rather than suppress their anger.

Emotional Exhaustion

Employee well-being is a valuable condition for both the individual and the organization. Previous research incorporating traditional notions of anger-in and anger-out focused primarily on physiological impact or psychological well-being, with the vast majority of consequences from anger seen as detrimental to the individual (Begley, 1994; Gross & Levenson, 1993; Julius, Schneider, & Egan, 1985; Richards & Gross, 1999; Van der Voort et al., 1996). A facet of emotional well-being, emotional exhaustion has been called "the core of the burnout process" (Thoresen et al., 2003, p. 917). It is characterized by feeling emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Most studies examining anger and well-being view psychological conditions as an outcome rather than an antecedent of anger display tendencies. For instance, emotional labor scholars show that service workers required to *surface act*– to and suppress felt anger when interacting with customers–report high incidents of emotional exhaustion and burnout (Bono, Foldes, Vinson, & Muros, 2007; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Zapf, 2002; Zerbe, 2000). In our study, we consider whether emotional exhaustion itself influences workplace anger expression. While it is possible for employees experiencing emotional burnout to display even intense negative emotion, the conservation of resources model (Hobfoll, 1989) suggests that emotionally exhausted individuals are less likely to express their anger. For example, a study of police service workers in the Netherlands found that emotional exhaustion was positively related to the suppression of anger and that anger was the most common emotion suppressed at work (Van Gelderen, Bakker, Konijn, & Demerouti, 2011).

Given the tendency to conserve dwindling emotional resources (see Ito & Brotheridge, 2003), emotionally exhausted employees, with their reduced energy, are subsequently less able or motivated to speak up and engage others when frustrating problems arise. Psychologically drained individuals would likely seek emotional support when angry rather than take on the challenge to confront another for apparent misdeeds. Consequently, we expect these employees to suppress their anger, either by keeping silent or by venting frustration to friends and family to obtain social support. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 4:** Emotionally exhausted individuals will be less likely to express anger and more likely to silence or mute their anger.

Study 1

Data Collection

Samples and Procedure

Survey data were collected in two waves as part of a larger project on anger in the workplace. The first data collection provided usable data from 87 full-time employees working in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, and the second data collection included usable data from 185 full-time U.S. employees from Western and Eastern states. All participants completing the survey were assured confidentiality and anonymity and received a token gift of appreciation.

Of these 272 participants, 60% were female. Approximately, 45% were under the age of 30, with 21% between 31 and 40 years old, 19% between the ages of 41 and 50, 14% between 51 and 60 years old, and 1% over the age of 60. Most participants were Caucasian (86%). When asked about the highest level of education completed, 30% reported having a college degree, 27% were in graduate school, 19% indicated some college, 15% had a high school diploma only, and 9% had a graduate degree. Twenty-six percent of the participants had been employed by their current employer for more than one but less than three years, 23% between five and 10 years, 20% between three and five years, 17% for one year or less, and 14% for more than ten years. The majority of the sample (56.4%) indicated that they were not in a supervisory position. Of those who did super-vise others, 75.3% had between one and ten employees reporting directly to them, and 24.7% had more than ten direct reports.

Measures

Anger Expression

In our *Emotions in the Workplace* questionnaire, respondents were asked to recall the *most recent* situation at work that made them angry. With the anger-provoking situation in mind, each partici-pant was instructed to "Indicate if/how you expressed that anger," including "I communicated with the person involved" and "I communicated with management" (expressed anger); "I communicated with a coworker unrelated to the situation" and "I communicated with someone outside of work" (muted anger); "I didn't communicate my anger to anyone, I kept it to myself" (silent anger) and "Other (please specify)." Respondents were instructed to select all options that applied. To preserve independence, we used these five options to form three mutually exclusive categories consistent with DTM categories: expressed anger, muted anger, and silent anger.[1] Muted and silent anger are the two forms of suppressed anger (Geddes & Callister, 2007). For purposes of data analysis, the three mutually exclusive responses were coded in one categorical anger response variable ($0 = silent$; $1 = muted$; $2 = expressed$).

Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment was assessed by averaging responses to the 14-item Organizational Commitment Scale (Mowday et al., 1979). Sample items include "I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond what is normally expected to help this organization be suc-cessful" and "I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization." Responses reflect a 5-point scale ($1 = strongly\ disagree$, $5 = strongly\ agree$). Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this measure was .91.

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[1]A small subset of respondents who spoke with multiple groups ($n = 19$) were coded as *talkers*. These individuals were elimi-nated from the analyses to isolate the effects of the mutually exclusive responses.

Emotional Exhaustion

We averaged responses to the nine-item Emotional Exhaustion subscale from Maslach and Jackson's (1981) Burnout Inventory. Sample items include "I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job" and "I feel used up at the end of the workday." Using a 7-point scale (1 = *never*, 7 = *everyday*), participants indicated the frequency that they had these feelings about their job. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .94.

Positive and Negative Trait Affectivity

Trait affectivity was measured with the 20-item PANAS scale (Watson et al., 1988). PANAS is comprised of two subscales (positive affectivity and negative affectivity) with 10 adjectives each that describe a feeling or emotion. Respondents indicated to what extent they typically feel that emotion (1 = *very slightly or not at all*, 5 = *extremely*). Scores were averaged for each measure. Sample items for positive trait affectivity include "interested," "enthusiastic," and "alert." The alpha coefficient for this scale was .93. Sample items for negative trait affectivity include "distressed," "upset," and "nervous," and the Cronbach's alpha was .86. Table 1 contains descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables used in the analyses except anger response—a categorical variable. In its place, we list the anger responses (expressed, muted, silent) as three mutually exclusive variables.

Results

We ran ANOVAs to test our hypotheses. The results of these analyses are found in Table 2. Hypothesis 1 predicted that individuals with positive affectivity would be more likely to express rather than suppress their anger after a provocative incident. The overall ANOVA for this model indicated significant differences between anger expression groups. A Tukey post hoc indicated that, as predicted, PA increased expressed anger, which was significantly more likely than muted anger. However, contrary to our prediction, there was not a significant difference between expressed and silent anger. Thus, these results provide partial support for Hypothesis 1.

The second hypothesis predicted individuals with negative affectivity would be less likely to express anger to a manager or individual involved and more likely to be silent or express their anger to an uninvolved individual (muted anger). Analysis results fully support this hypothesis. The significant ANOVA indicated differences among the anger expression categories and showed a significantly lower mean for expressed anger than for either muted anger or silent anger, while neither muted nor silent anger were significantly different from each other.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that individuals committed to their organizations would be more likely to express anger and less likely to mute or silence it. The ANOVA for this model also showed significant

Table 1

Study 1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

		Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Positive affectivity	3.73	0.75						
2	Negative affectivity	1.80	0.60	−.31***					
3	Organizational commitment	3.47	0.75	.54***	−.44***				
4	Emotional exhaustion	2.88	1.40	−.35***	.59***	−.53***			
	Response to anger incident								
5	Expressed anger	0.45	0.50	.19**	−.23***	.26***	−.24***		
6	Muted anger	0.33	0.47	−.20**	.16**	−.25***	.15**	−.63***	
7	Silent anger	0.16	0.37	−.07	.09	−.05	.13*	−.39***	−.30***

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 2

Study 1 Results of ANOVAs Predicting Anger Expression and Suppression (Muted & Silent)

	Expressed anger		Muted anger		Silent anger		ANOVA
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	$F_{(df)}$
Positive affectivity	3.88_a	0.68	3.52_b	0.82	3.61_{ab}	0.71	$6.99_{(2,262)}$**
Negative affectivity	1.64_a	0.56	1.93_b	0.63	1.92_b	0.55	$7.86_{(2,262)}$***
Organizational commitment	3.69_a	0.68	3.21_b	0.77	3.38_b	0.77	$12.41_{(2,268)}$***
Emotional exhaustion	2.52_a	1.26	3.19_b	1.45	3.30_b	1.57	$8.81_{(2,264)}$***

Note. Across rows, means sharing subscripts are not significantly different from each other.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

differences between anger expression groups. The Tukey are revealed that employees committed to their organizations are more likely to express their anger to an individual in a position to affect change and are less likely to be silent or mute their anger. These results fully support Hypothesis 3.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that emotionally exhausted individuals would be more likely to suppress their anger than to express it. The significant ANOVA again showed differences between the expression groups, and the post hoc test indicated these differences are as predicted. The means for silent anger and muted anger did not differ significantly from each other, and both were higher than the mean for expressed anger. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship of trait affectivity, organizational commitment, and emotional exhaustion with the expression or suppression of felt anger at work. The results offer support for rethinking and expanding traditional anger-in and anger-out designations utilized in workplace anger research. Positive individual dispositions and traits can promote expressions of anger at work—actions likely to promote needed change. Further, individual emotional traits appear to influence both tendencies to silence or communicate anger, as well as the choice of target or recipient for that anger display. Results indicate that employees with positive affectivity were more likely to express anger toward a relevant other (i.e., one involved in the situation or a manager) and less likely to vent their anger to unrelated others, at work or elsewhere. Also, those committed to their organizations appear more likely to express anger to those in a position to affect change and less likely to remain silent or vent muted anger to uninvolved individuals. Conversely, individuals with negative affectivity and those emotionally exhausted at work were more likely to remain silent when angry or vent their anger to individuals unrelated to the initial anger-evoking situation. Taken together, these findings suggest that expressed anger, rather than demonstrating hostility, may reflect concern or commitment to make a better workplace.

Our findings illustrate the interpretive value of DTM conceptualizations for workplace anger expression. However, limited research in this area prompted us to conduct additional research to replicate and extend the first study. In Study 2, we collected and analyzed new data, replicated our analyses from Study 1, and added a situational change outcome variable to better understand the workplace impact of expressing or suppressing anger.

Study 2

Myriad negative outcomes are associated with workplace anger, including physiological stress and illness feelings of hostility, blame and revenge, negative organizational climates, incivility, aggression, and violence (Gibson & Callister, 2010). However, emerging research indicates that anger can and does lead to

positive outcomes (Geddes & Stickney, 2011; Gibson, Schweitzer, Callister, & Gray, 2009). The DTM argues that when anger crosses the expression threshold, the probability of positive outcomes increases. That positive potential is greatest if the anger expression does not cross a second, *impropriety* threshold—a symbolic representation of organizational emotion display rules or norms (Geddes & Callister, 2007).

In contrast to expressed anger that stays between these two thresholds, suppressed anger following an anger-provoking situation is less likely to generate favorable resolutions (Geddes & Callister, 2007). That is, when employees either silence or mute anger, their anger remains hidden from and unknown to management and those most responsible or able to make a change. In the case of silent anger, the aggrieved individual does not express his or her anger to anyone, finding neither emotional support nor conflict resolution. Further, although muted anger displays often generate a sympathetic ear from one's support group, research suggests that venting one's anger does not necessarily produce beneficial, cathartic effects (Bushman, 2002). Especially with regard to outcomes, expressing one's anger primarily to gain emotional support from colleagues (muted anger) may actually damage organizational functioning and morale due to negative emotional contagion. Ironically, muted, organizationally silent anger may ultimately be worse for organizations than outwardly intense anger expressions that observers find inappropriate or hostile (deviant anger). With deviant anger, because of the more public display, responsible parties learn of problematic situations, and perhaps individuals, that need prompt attention by management (Geddes & Stickney, 2011). However, with muted or silent (suppressed) anger, individuals in a position to remedy the problematic situation remain unaware, so the situation endures and possibly escalates. Thus, in Study 2, we re-examine all previous hypotheses from Study 1 and add the following:

Hypothesis 5a: Expressed anger at work will be positively associated with situation change.

Hypothesis 5b: Muted and silent anger at work will be negatively associated with situation change.

Data Collection

Samples and Procedure

A total of 424 adults employed full time provided usable data for Study 2. Participants were associates of students at a large research university, a medium-sized university, and a small liberal arts college, all in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Data were collected in one of two ways. Students were asked to give a paper survey or an online survey link to an associate working full-time.[2] Participants who completed the paper surveys returned them to the students, sealed in the envelopes, and students returned them to the instructors. Students received participation credit for their assistance with the surveys.

Fifty percent of survey respondents were female. Approximately, 49% of respondents were under the age of 30, with 19% between the ages of 31 and 40, 17% between 41 and 50 years old, 13% between 51 and 60 years old, and 2% over the age of 60. Most participants were Caucasian (64%), followed by African-American (19%), Asian or Pacific Islander (8%), Hispanic (3%), and Other (6%). When asked about the highest level of education completed, 35% reported some college, 33% had a college degree,

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[2]To test whether the data collected by paper differed significantly from data collected online (37% of the sample), we ran *t*-tests on the demographic variables and all variables of interest. There were significant differences on two variables. Online respondents were significantly younger ($t[421] = -2.22$, $p < .05$), and paper respondents had higher dispositional positive affectivity ($t[424] = 2.28$, $p < .05$). As a result of these two differences, we ran our analyses including data collection method as a control. However, the control was not significant and the results were virtually identical to the results without the control. Therefore, we report the results without the collection method control.

15% had only a high school diploma, 9% had a graduate degree, and 8% were currently attending graduate school. Twenty-seven percent of the participants worked for their current employer for more than one but less than three years, 21% between three and five years, 19% between five and ten years, 15% one year or less, 11% for more than fifteen years, and 7% had held their job between ten and fifteen years.

Measures

Variables examined in Study 2 included expressed, muted, and silenced anger responses, emotional exhaustion (α = .91), positive trait affectivity (α = .88) and negative trait affectivity (α = .85), sex, age, race, education, and company tenure. These variables were measured using instruments described in Study 1. Additional variables used in Study 2 are described below.

Organizational Commitment

To capture an affective dimension of organizational commitment, we replaced Mowday et al.'s (1979) 14-item Organizational Commitment Scale used in Study 1 with Meyer, Allen, and Smith's (1993) six-item Affective Commitment Scale. Responses were assessed on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) then averaged. The alpha reliability coefficient for this measure was .84. Sample items include "I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own" and "This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me."

Situational Change

The *situational change* outcome variable is our dependent variable for Hypotheses 5a and 5b. It was created by averaging four items asking respondents about their current feelings regarding the anger-evoking incident: "The specific situation that made me angry got better," "My relationship with those involved improved," "The problem that made me angry was addressed," and "On the whole, I feel the problematic situation at work improved." Response options ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. A factor analysis (principal axis factor) produced a one-factor solution using all four items. The one factor explained 62.6% of the variance in the items, and the Cronbach's reliability coefficient was .86.

Control Variables

Sex (1 = male, 0 = female) and race (1 = Caucasian 0 = not Caucasian) were included as controls because empirical research shows them to affect anger expression (Maier et al., 2009), as does age (O'Neill, Vandenberg, DeJoy, & Wilson, 2009), which we assessed by membership in one of the following categories: under age 21 (1); age 21–30 (2); age 31–40 (3); age 41–50 (4); age 51–60 (5), and over age 60 (6). In addition to these demographic variables, we included three other variables as controls that previous research links to either anger expression or workplace outcomes after anger expression: *recency of the anger incident* (Geddes & Stickney, 2011), *felt anger intensity* (Gibson et al., 2009) and *work environment* (Skjørshammer, 2003). Recency of anger incident was assessed using a single item, interval variable with five possible response options: 1 = within the last day or two, 2 = some other time during the past week, 3 = more than a week but less than a month ago, 4 = more than a month, but less than six months ago, and 5 = more than 6 months ago. Felt anger intensity was measured with a single item: "On a scale of 1–10, how angry were you?" Higher numbers indicate greater felt anger intensity.

Work environment was assessed using the semantic differential scale Geddes and Stickney (2011) developed to assess supportive work environments. We averaged responses to five forced-choice adjective pair items. The five items were sets of opposing adjectives anchored on a 7-point scale. Sample items were "hostile-friendly" and "obstructive-supportive." Higher scores reflected perceptions of a more positive,

Table 3
Study 2 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 Sex	.50	.50													
2 Age	2.95	1.22	-.04												
3 Race	.64	.48	.01	.06											
4 Recency of anger incident	2.64	1.27	-.03	.13**	-.07										
5 Felt anger intensity	5.53	2.45	-.06	-.07	-.08	.18***									
6 Work environment	5.07	1.22	-.04	.16**	.02	.40***	-.17***								
7 Positive affectivity	3.67	0.68	.06	.11*	.03	.18***	.01	.19***							
8 Negative affectivity	2.04	0.64	-.00	-.19***	.03	-.25***	.10*	-.19***	-.29***						
9 Organizational commitment	3.27	0.92	-.02	.24***	.11*	.28***	-.06	.42***	.27***	-.23***					
10 Emotional exhaustion	3.30	1.39	-.06	-.16**	-.00	-.41***	.23***	-.41***	-.26***	.43***	-.41***				
Response to anger incident															
11 Expressed anger	0.52	0.50	.09	.14**	-.06	.07	.06	.09	.13**	-.16***	.19***	-.23***			
12 Muted anger	0.30	0.46	-.15*	-.03	.01	.02	-.03	-.00	-.09	.08	-.09	.11*	-.68***		
13 Silent anger	0.18	0.38	.06	-.14**	.06	-.12*	-.04	-.12*	-.07	.11*	-.14**	.18***	-.49***	-.30***	
14 Situation outcome	3.00	1.02	.01	-.07	-.11*	.35***	-.12*	.32***	.19**	-.10*	.34***	-.33***	.31***	-.19***	-.18**

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

supportive work environment. The alpha coefficient for these items was .88. Descriptive statistics and correlations for variables used in Study 2's analyses are in Table 3. The anger responses (expressed, muted, silent) are listed as three mutually exclusive variables on this table.

Results

As in Study 1, we tested hypotheses one through four with ANOVAs followed by Tukey post hoc tests. Results of the ANOVAs are found in Table 4.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that individuals with positive affectivity would be more likely to express their anger and less likely to suppress their anger after an anger-evoking incident. The overall ANOVA for this model was significant indicating differences between groups. The Tukey post hoc tests showed that individuals with positive affectivity were more likely to express their anger than mute it. There were no differences between expressed and silent anger or muted and silent anger. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported.

The second hypothesis predicted individuals with negative affectivity are less likely to express anger to a manager or individual involved and more likely to be silent or mute their anger. The results fully support this hypothesis. The significant ANOVA indicated differences among anger expression groups, and the subsequent post hoc showed a significantly lower mean for expressed anger than for either muted anger or silent anger.

In our third hypothesis, we expected individuals committed to their organizations would be more likely to express anger and less likely to mute or silence anger. The ANOVA for this model showed significant differences between types of anger expression. Further analysis revealed high organizational commitment employees are more likely to express their anger to an individual in a position to affect change and less likely to be silent or mute their anger. These results fully support Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that emotionally exhausted individuals would be more likely to suppress their anger than to express it. The significant ANOVA showed differences between the expression groups, and the subsequent Tukey indicated they are as predicted. Silent anger and muted anger did not differ significantly from each other and both occurred more often than expressed anger. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Hypotheses 5a and 5b examined the effect of anger expression on the situational change outcome variable. These two hypotheses were tested with hierarchical regressions. The control variables—gender, age, race, recency of anger incident, felt anger intensity, and work environment—were entered in step 1. Step 2 added the independent variables expressed anger, muted anger, and silent anger responses. Results of the regressions are found in Table 5.

Hypothesis 5a proposed the anger-evoking situation would improve with expressed anger. The results of this regression are in the first column of Table 5. In this analysis, silent anger was the omitted dummy

Table 4

Study 2 Results of ANOVAs Predicting Anger Expression and Suppression (Muted & Silent)

	Expressed anger		Muted anger		Silent anger		ANOVA
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	$F_{(df)}$
Positive affectivity	3.75_a	0.70	3.58_b	0.62	3.57_{ab}	0.68	$3.88_{(2,423)}$*
Negative affectivity	1.94_a	0.64	2.12_b	0.64	2.18_b	0.62	$5.71_{(2,423)}$**
Organizational commitment	3.43_a	0.91	3.15_b	0.87	2.99_b	0.97	$8.51_{(2,425)}$***
Emotional exhaustion	2.99_a	1.39	3.53_b	1.34	3.83_b	1.40	$13.64_{(2,424)}$***

Note. Across rows, means sharing subscripts are not significantly different from each other.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 5

Standardized Regression Coefficients Predicting Outcomes After Anger Expression

	Situational change	
	H5a Final β	H5b Final β
Step 1		
Sex	−.03	−.03
Age	−.20***	−.20***
Race	−.06	−.06
Recency of anger incident	.24***	.24***
Felt anger intensity	−.10*	−.10*
Work environment	.19***	.19***
Step 2		
Expressed anger	.31***	
Muted anger	−.01	−.29***
Silent anger		−.23***
Overall model F	15.23***	15.23***
Change in R^2 at Step 2	.09***	.09***
Adjusted R^2	.25	.25

Note. A positive β indicates the anger-eliciting situation improved.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

variable. The overall regression model for the expressed anger response model was significant as was the change in R^2 in step 2. The significant, positive coefficient on expressed anger supports this hypothesis. Compared to employees who remained silent, employees who expressed their anger saw the anger-provoking situation improve.

Hypothesis 5b predicted that muting anger or remaining silent would not be associated with an improvement in the anger-provoking situation. In this model, expressed anger was the omitted dummy variable. Regression results are found in the second column of Table 5. The overall model for the silent and muted anger model was significant as was the change in R^2 in step 2. Negative coefficients for muted and silent anger indicated that respondents believed the problematic situation deteriorated with anger suppression, in contrast to anger expression. These results fully support this hypothesis.

Significant controls in these regression models include respondent age, recency of the anger incident, felt anger intensity, and work environment. Younger respondents, less recent anger-eliciting incidents, lower felt anger intensity, and more supportive work environments were predictive of perceptions that the anger-provoking situation improved.

Discussion

Study 2 results support our hypotheses, replicating and extending findings from Study 1. As hypothesized, PA and organizational commitment were positive predictors of expressed anger while emotional exhaustion and NA predicted silent and muted anger behavior. Unique to Study 2 was our finding that expressed anger predicted perceived improvement in the anger-evoking situation. Suppressed anger, in either silent or muted form, influenced perceptions that the situation deteriorated. Taken together, these findings support key features of the DTM, including its conceptualization and categorization of workplace anger and the proposition that anger expression can promote positive organizational outcomes.

Significant control variables provided additional insights on employee perceptions of anger episodes. For instance, younger respondents were more likely than older respondents to believe the situation improved. This result could reflect greater optimism among younger employees or perhaps increased organizational cynicism among older employees with greater tenure. Subsequent analysis showed that despite a strong relationship between age and company tenure ($r = .48$, $p = .00$), tenure was unrelated to perceptions of the situation outcome ($r = -.01$, $p = .88$).

Higher felt anger intensity increased perceptions that the situation got worse and vice versa. This is not surprising. Lower felt anger intensity likely helps generate expressed anger that does not violate emotion display norms. Alternatively, less intense anger may indicate employees were less concerned about the situation in general, or were more confident of its eventual resolution. If an incident at work infuriates employees, subsequent anger displays may cross the impropriety threshold, resulting in focus and sanctions on the out-of-line individual rather than increased attention to the problematic situation (Geddes & Callister, 2007). Our finding on felt anger intensity complements research showing that expressed anger intensity is negatively related to workplace outcomes (Gibson et al., 2009). Thus, both felt and expressed anger intensity are important factors in the study of workplace anger. Future research should examine their interaction with anger display outcomes.

We also found supportive work environments increased perceptions that the problematic situation at work improved. This finding complements research showing higher perceptions of organizational supportiveness contribute to positive individual outcomes at work (O'Neill et al., 2009). Thus, work environment plays an important role in individual perceptions of emotional workplace incidents. Finally, our significant control variable, time since anger incident, suggests that anger episodes may be best studied using a longitudinal approach. That is, anger research that asks respondents to recall their most recent anger incidents may generate more randomness, but also more negatively skewed results on perceptions of anger episodes. With time, many problematic, anger-provoking situations at work are resolved.

Concluding Thoughts, Moving Forward

Our studies of workplace anger draw connections among affect-based individual differences and anger expression tendencies as well as demonstrate the potential for positive outcomes when employees choose to communicate their anger to relevant others. Utilizing Geddes and Callister's (2007) DTM conceptualizations, we argued that expressed anger is more similar to upward dissent, employee voice, or integrative assertion than the concepts of aggression and hostility aligned with anger-out. In contrast to expressed anger, both forms of suppressed anger (silent and muted) are more aligned with negative outcomes at work. Thus, the DTM conceptualization of workplace anger offers a useful alternative to the traditional anger-out/anger-in classification that may prove challenging and insufficient for understanding complex workplace emotion data.

These two studies challenge conventional views that anger displays at work accompany individuals who are emotionally hostile, organizationally deviant, and, overall, problematic employees. Our findings demonstrate that employees with high organizational commitment and positive affectivity do express anger in a manner that solves problems. Those with less commitment, more negative affectivity and higher burnout appear less inclined to speak out—keeping their anger silent or expressing it only to sympathetic, but uninvolved others. Further, when individuals express their anger to relevant others, they promote conflict resolution and problem solving. Those suppressing anger watch the problematic situation remain unresolved. Overall, the findings suggest that emotionally strong, optimistic, and prosocial employees express anger at work, typically to the betterment of the organization. Given this conclusion, we align with recent assertions that anger expression serves a valued and moral function in society by signaling injustices and improprieties, and preserving individual dignity along with firmly held social values (Lindebaum & Geddes, 2014).

Limitations and Future Research

There are potential limitations with this study, including traditional critiques of cross-sectional, self-report data. Longitudinal designs that examine an emotional episode over time may provide a clearer understanding of workplace anger dynamics. Further, assessing organizational outcomes and dispositional traits separately is typically preferable. In organizational behavior research, there is concern that single-source data may overstate relationships among variables (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2011). However, research alleviates these fears somewhat. Two meta-analyses found considerably fewer problems with spurious correlations than expected when testing hypotheses that significant correlations were an artifact of single-source data (Crampton & Wagner, 1994; Podsakoff et al., 2011). Crampton and Wagner (1994) found that problems caused by using self-report data "may be more the exception than the rule in microresearch on organizations" (p. 72). With this study's focus on perceptions of a personal anger-provoking incident at work, it was neither possible nor relevant to manipulate participants' emotional state; thus, we believe it was an appropriate method for our construct of interest (see Fox & Spector, 1999). However, asking participants to recall a single anger incident may or may not be representative of behavior in other workplace anger incidents. Weiss and Cropanzano's (1996) Affective Events Theory asserts and we encourage future research to examine incidents of experienced anger as ongoing events that over time produce affective reactions at work that impact work attitudes and behaviors.

Future research on workplace anger may also benefit from examining other variables that impact organizational member attitudes and behaviors, including emotional contagion and emotional intelligence. Both individuals and groups are susceptible to emotional contagion, where employees catch others' emotions (Barsade, 2002). Research indicates that negative emotions, in particular, may transfer more readily than positive emotions to individuals (Sullins, 1991) and groups (Bartel & Saavedra, 2000). These conditions of heightened negative state affect may impact both the tendency to express anger and one's affective organizational commitment (Kiewitz, 2002). Thus, future research should examine emotional contagion resulting from muted anger displays.

One's ability to "function in an optimal manner in complex situations" (Ben-Ze'ev, 2002, p. 175) is a defining behavior of those high in *emotional intelligence*. When employees are allowed to express honest emotion as a result of tolerant organizational emotion display norms and management forbearance, it is nevertheless important for individuals to manage their emotional displays. For negative emotion such as anger to serve a positive, adaptive function at work, its intensity and form need to reflect genuine emotion without being so excessive or at odds with established norms that it interferes with message receptivity (Gibson et al., 2009; Parrott, 2002). Future research should examine how both an individual's emotional intelligence and emotional expressiveness interact with an organization's emotion display rules to define, generate, and promote more favorable outcomes from employee anger.

Finally, one relationship that remains somewhat unclear from these studies is positive affectivity and anger expression. In our studies, respondents with positive trait affectivity were more likely to express anger and less likely to mute their anger. However, there was no difference between PA and expressed versus silent anger. Perhaps those with higher PA may be better able to distinguish when it is beneficial to express anger and when it is best to simply let it go. Given our ability to only speculate on these findings and limited use of the PA variable in anger studies, we hope future research will include both positive and negative trait affectivity when examining workplace emotions.

Implications for Management

Organizations and management can benefit by reframing anger and adjusting their response to employee anger displays at work. For instance, managers need to fight the natural urge to respond angrily to employee anger. Managers who can respond to expressed anger with concern and interest (vs. defensive-

ness and sanctions) may find valuable information about serious organizational problems that need their immediate and focused attention. Further, employees who approach management often do so because of a belief in the efficacy of those persons to respond appropriately. As was apparent with our muted anger data, if employees are not approaching management when angry, they are likely expressing their anger to accessible social support networks. Management should not interpret a lack of visible anger among employees as evidence that no one is upset. Worse, given our data indicating that some with PA remain silent when angry, managers need to recognize that prosocial but angry employees may choose to silence anger because they feel it is more professional or better for the organization to do so. Evidence shows this is a common reason employees give when asked why they do not speak out when something at work makes them angry (Stickney & Geddes, 2011).

Finally, managers should not accept conventions of employee anger expression that view this behavior solely in negative terms, as something or someone threatening, to be avoided or punished. Managers need to recognize that expressed employee anger may not be insubordination, disagreeableness, or even self-serving posturing. Instead, it may reflect employee commitment to their company, their colleagues, or assigned tasks while communicating their indignation and angst about unethical, inappropriate, or insensitive practices or policies. Managers who expand the *zone of expressive tolerance* (Fineman, 2000) detailed by the DTM, help create more supportive work environments that allow honest emotion expression among employees without fear of sanctions. While they may get more lively debate at work, managers may also help promote effective conflict resolution and ongoing organizational change. Anger and other human emotions are a natural part of the everyday workplace experience. Managers who recognize this reality will be more prepared to identify situations where even negative emotions can be used effectively to further organizational goals.

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Lisa T. Stickney, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Management at the University of Baltimore. She is a two-time recipient and current holder of the Dean James Chair for Distinguished Teaching. Her research interests include anger in organizations, gender studies, and management pedagogy. Her research has been published in *Human Relations*, *Research in Emotions in Organizations*, *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, *Organization and Management Journal*, and the *Journal of Management Education*.

Deanna Geddes, Ph.D., is Associate Professor and Chair of Human Resource Management at the Fox School of Business, Temple University. She is the honoree of several teaching awards including the Musser Award for Leadership in Teaching. Her research interests focus on workplace emotion and performance feedback. Her conceptual and empirical work is published in the *Academy of Management Review, Academy of Management Learning & Education, Human Relations, Aggressive Behavior,* and *Management Communication Quarterly,* among others.