

## Tenet #9: Know Your Anger Traps

### The Deeper Cut:

I was 24 years old when I first met Dr. Nicholas Long, creator of the Conflict Cycle and co-founder of the Life Space Intervention Institute. I'd been a graduate student of his for several months when he said the oddest thing to me: "Steve, you have to learn to make friends with your anger."

At the time, I thought this a patently insane notion. I'd spent the first 17 years of my life in an alcoholic home where expressing your anger might get you a beating, and I'd long since learned to bury that dangerous feeling in a shallow grave. But feelings aren't meant to be buried, and my internship at Dr. Long's psycho-educational day school had uncovered a frightening capacity for anger in me. Maybe he meant control my anger?

"No, I mean understand it and accept it. Embrace it like an old friend. Only then will it become familiar and understandable, rather than terrifying."

It took many years to fully appreciate what he meant: Anger is a feeling, a natural outcome of our stressful work. It doesn't have to be dangerous or destructive. Professionalism doesn't require us to bury our anger, only to manage it, and this begins with self-awareness.

### Five Anger Traps

Anger is often a secondary emotion, a cover-up for more vulnerable feelings like guilt or sadness that are hard for many of us to process. Dr. Long shared five anger traps with me during the months that followed. These included:



1. Outside Stress: Leftover stress from other exhausting home or work problems overloads us, making it easy to overreact angrily to an overwhelming situation.
2. Embarrassment: We feel helpless or inadequate trying to handle a challenging situation, then turn uncertainty and embarrassment into anger.
3. Shock or Fear: We feel a sense of shock or fear in response to a threatening situation, then turn our surprise or anxiety into anger at the youth.
4. Values Violation: A core value is violated by a young person's offensive words or actions, disgusting us and sparking powerful feelings of righteous anger.
5. Authority Challenge: We stubbornly engage in an angry power struggle to establish control or dominance over a defiant youth who just won't listen.

Each trap ends with anger, but begins with more subtle feelings. For instance, in the Stress trap, we may feel exhausted, overloaded, or overwhelmed long before we feel angry.

The Embarrassment trap is accompanied by a sense of helplessness and inadequacy, whereas the Shock trap finds us feeling fearful, threatened, or surprised. In the Values Violation trap, we often feel violated, offended, disgusted, or righteous just prior to the rush of anger. And the Authority Challenge trap creates feelings of stubbornness, rigidity, and a need to control. These preceding feelings serve as emotional red flags, warning signs that our anger is on its way. Face your anger — or don't, at your own peril.

## Waves of Emotions

Imagine that you're at the beach with your kids. You're playing in the breakers not far from shore, jumping the waves as they roll in. Overconfident, you turn your back on the ocean — the water's barely waist-deep, after all! A few moments later a big wave unexpectedly crashes into your back, knocking you down. You find yourself buffeted by fast-moving water, dragged over rough sand, and for a moment, unable to regain your footing. But the wave recedes, as does your panic, and you climb shakily to your feet, a lot wetter but a bit wiser.

Anger is like a big wave in an ocean of emotions. You have to accept that strong feelings are going to roll in once in a while. If you face them, you can often sense them coming and safely jump them.

However, if you choose to turn your back on strong anger, you may miss the early warning signs. You'll find yourself knocked down and overwhelmed, struggling to regain your self-control.

An awareness of our individual anger traps and a recognition of their emotional red flags are essential to facing our feelings. This insight allows us to acknowledge strong emotions and manage them effectively rather than burying them beneath layers of denial, shame, and blame. We feel calmer, healthier, and more balanced, and our kids feel safer around us. Win-win all the way around.

Summary: A sense of emotional and physical safety is an essential condition for a therapeutic learning and living environment. When kids enter our homes, schools, or programs, they ask an unspoken question: "Is this a safe place? And are you a safe person?"

Adults who can manage their own emotions, especially anger, form the foundation of the safety young people crave. Self-awareness is the essence of self-control.

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