



The Wrath of a Great Leader

How Martin Luther King, Jr. wrestled with anger and what you can learn from his example.

By Hitendra Wadhwa | Jan 15, 2012

Average leaders focus on results, and that's it. Good leaders focus also on the behaviors that will get the results. And great leaders focus, in addition, on the emotions that will drive these behaviors.

One emotion that shapes our behavior is anger, and Martin Luther King Jr., whose 83rd birthday would have been today, knew of the power that came packed in this emotion.

King had reason enough to be provoked, time and again. He was physically threatened and attacked by bigoted people, repeatedly jailed by state authorities (sometimes on trivial traffic violations), harassed by the FBI and even vilified by fellow black leaders who preferred more aggressive forms of resistance.

In his autobiography, King wrote about this incident that occurred in 1943: *"When I was 14, I traveled from Atlanta to Dublin, Georgia with a dear teacher of mine, Mrs. Bradley (to) participate in an oratorical contest. We were on a bus returning to Atlanta. Along the way, some white passengers boarded the bus, and the white driver ordered us to get up and give the whites our seats. We didn't move quickly enough to suit him, so he began cursing us. I intended to stay right in that seat, but Mrs. Bradley urged me up, saying we had to obey the law. We stood up in the aisle for 90 miles to Atlanta. That night will never leave my memory. It was the angriest I have ever been in my life."*

Great leaders often have a strong capacity to experience anger. It wakes them up and makes them pay attention to what is wrong in their environment, or in themselves. Without anger, they would not have the awareness or the drive to fix what is wrong.

But they also know the downside of anger, and wage a firm battle to tame it within themselves. One such moment for King came when, in December 1955, he led talks with the authorities in Montgomery, Alabama on negotiating the end of the bus boycott that was hurting both whites and African Americans. He realized that the whites were not ready to give up their segregation privileges, the talks were heading for a stalemate, and, what was more, the other party was trying to portray King as the sole stumbling block to an agreement.

"That Monday I went home with a heavy heart," he wrote in his autobiography. "I was weighed down by a terrible sense of guilt, remembering that on two or three occasions I had allowed myself to become angry and indignant. I had spoken hastily and resentfully. Yet I knew that this was no way to solve a problem. 'You must not harbor anger,' I admonished myself. 'You must be willing to suffer the anger of the opponent, and yet not return anger. You must not become bitter. No matter how emotional your opponents are, you must be calm.'"

Only by taming his own anger did King earn the right to become a messenger of peaceful struggle to the people of the nation. An acid test came his way on a night in 1956 when his home in Birmingham, Alabama was bombed by white extremists. In his autobiography, he wrote: *"While I lay in that quiet front bedroom, I began to think of the viciousness of people who would bomb my home. I could feel the anger rising when I realized that my wife and baby could have been killed. I was once more on the verge of corroding hatred. And once more I caught myself and said: 'You must not allow yourself to become bitter'."*

That night, he didn't just quell his own stirring for vengeance, but also that of the restless and roused masses who were outside his house, angered and ready to strike a blow at the establishment until they were soothed and moved by his words: *"We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know that you love them."*

But don't get me wrong. In these moments, he wasn't trying to crush his anger, or that of his people. He was trying to channel it into a higher purpose.

In September 1962, as King sat on the stage during an Southern Christian Leadership Convention, a white member of the Nazi party jumped up to the podium and punched him several times in the face. As the security guards rushed to his help and pulled away the hate-filled youth, King responded, calmly, that he would not press charges. In response, he said in *Martin Luther King on Leadership*: *"The system that we live under creates people such as this youth. I am not interested in pressing charges. I'm interested in changing the kind of system that produces this kind of man."*

Great leaders do not ignore their anger, nor do they allow themselves to get consumed by it. Instead, they channel the emotion into energy, commitment, sacrifice, and purpose. They use it to step up their game. And they infuse people around them with this form of constructive anger so they, too, can be infused with energy commitment, sacrifice and purpose. In the words of King in *Freedomways* magazine in 1968, *"The supreme task [of a leader] is to organize and unite people so that their anger becomes a transforming force."*

So now, what is *your* relationship with anger?

- Are there situations that you're ignoring or minimizing that instead should rouse you up? For instance, when your organization is not delivering products on time,

customers aren't being given the experience they should, top management isn't taking action on a festering issue, or you're not changing a habit that is derailing you? In such cases, how might you benefit from getting in touch with your feelings of anger, frustration, or disappointment and channeling them into a higher purpose?

- Or is anger in fact a frequent visitor in your inner home? In such situations, does anger control you, or do you control it?
- Do you sense when others around you are angry, or when anger in fact needs to be ignited within them so they get all fired up for the right reasons? Do you help them channel it into positive action?

In my personal leadership class at Columbia Business School, we discuss specific techniques all of us can use to master anger. Some of these involve behaviors such as deep breathing or hitting the pause button in a heated argument, while others involve reframing the situation and challenging your own thoughts. King was a master at challenging and re-sculpting his thoughts, and he was doing exactly that on that dark day in 1956 when his house was bombed, *"And once more I caught myself and said: 'You must not allow yourself to become bitter'."*

I'll end this column with the words of another great leader, the one who taught Martin Luther King, Jr. his signature technique of peaceful struggle, Mahatma Gandhi. *"I have learnt through bitter experience the one supreme lesson to conserve my anger, and as heat conserved is transmuted into energy, even so our anger controlled can be transmuted into a power that can move the world."* (*Young India* journal, September 1920.)

May the force of constructive anger be with you.

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