



Exploders: How to Stop Them and Change Them

By Alan Zimmerman

You want peace of mind. You want it every day everywhere. And then an Exploder comes along and erupts in front of you or on top of you. If you don't know how to defuse them, your peace of mind is suddenly shattered, your professional composure is scattered, and your productivity is reduced. The good news is you can defuse those Exploders and you can refuse to let them ruin your day by doing the following.

1. Put on your mental shield. I know this sounds corny, but it works. When you sense an Exploder is about to dump on you or around you, protect yourself. Imagine that you are covered in a non-stick coating, where nothing the other person says or does sticks to you. It just runs off like water on a duck's back. Without this mental shield, you'll easily fall victim to the Exploder's venom.

2. Let the Exploder vent. It's not easy to sit there and let the other person act crazy. But give her time to run down and run out of venom. The research says that if you let an Exploder vent, shout, rage, cry, swear, or whatever they do, almost every one of them will climax at 3 ½ minutes or less. In other words, around that time or before, their explosion starts to lessen.

However, if you say anything like, "Now just a minute ... That's not the way it was ... You're mistaken about that ..." or whatever, it adds fuel to their fire. They'll think you didn't hear them and they tend to go on longer and stronger.

So let the Exploder vent, just as long as no one is in danger. As you're sitting there, you can let your nonverbals show that you're listening. Nod your head, maintain eye contact, and say "uh-huh." When the Exploder begins to repeat herself, you know the venting is almost over.

3. Move to clarification. When the hot lava has stopped flowing out of the other person's mouth, try to repeat exactly what she said. Don't put it in your own words because she might find something else to get upset about. You want the Exploder to feel understood. You can even ask questions to get more information.

Make the Exploder feel heard and understood and you'll see a lowering of their emotional temperature.

4. Lead the Exploder in another direction. Once the Exploder feels understood, you can gently turn the conversation. If it's a customer service situation, for example, you could ask, "How would you like to see this situation resolved?" You're moving the conversation from problem to resolution.

Perhaps you've got someone in your personal life who is Emotionally Ignorant. They never learned how to deal with their emotions appropriately and they're not fun to be around. Instead of giving advice, ask questions that move them in another direction. You might ask such things as, "What do you think would work better? How could we prevent this problem from happening again? What are you doing about the situation?"

If the Exploder is one of your subordinates or colleagues, there are some additional steps you'll need to take.

5. Confront the Exploder's unprofessional behavior. Let the Exploder know that your intent is positive. You want to improve your work relationship and his/her effectiveness.

Then be very specific about the Exploder's problematic, explosive behavior. ***Give examples of their explosions***, but don't tell the Exploder they shouldn't get so upset. That only makes things worse. Instead *point out the adverse effects of the Exploder's behavior*. Tell them "What you're doing is hurting the company's image as well as your coworkers. It's even hurting you and your future. I know you don't want that."

6. Ask for specific positive behaviors. As a leader, you have a right to ask for certain behaviors because that's why an employee is paid in the first place. Ask for what you want. Say "A better way to handle that situation would be..." and then fill in the blank.

You could even put the monkey on the Exploder's back. Tell them you'd like them to come back in 24 hours with three behaviors that they think would work better than what they've been doing. When they come back, discuss those behaviors, and together agree on what is going to change.

Most people run from Exploders. Others try to push back. It doesn't work. It's hard to outrun the volcanic lava when it's flowing in your direction and it's almost impossible to push the lava back into the volcano. You're much better off if you channel the explosion as the above tips indicate.

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