

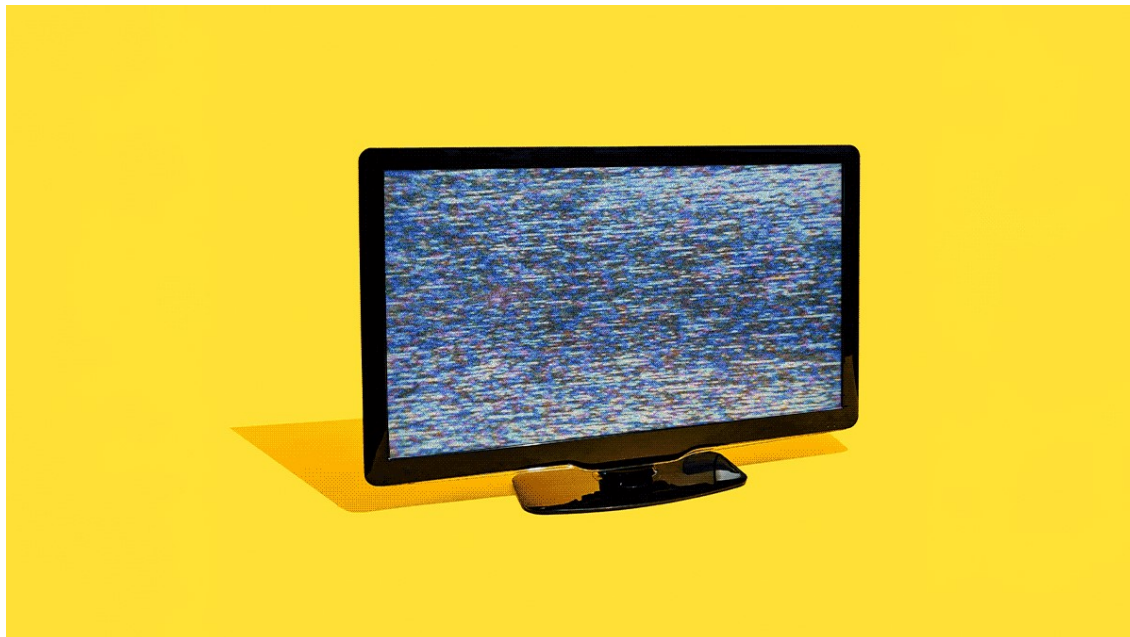
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Managing People

Supporting Your Team When the News Is Terrible

by Mollie West Duffy and Liz Fosslien

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Summary. Trying to figure out a path forward, let alone focus on getting work done, in the face of a continuous stream of devastating news can feel impossible. Chances are that your team is feeling a host of emotions, from anger to despair to helplessness. While the world might feel out of your control, how you choose to respond to as a manager is not. And your team needs you. The authors share five steps you can take to help you and your team feel better when everything seems terrible. First, don't default to silence when something tragic or traumatic has happened. Acknowledge it. Second, given that so many of the recent tragedies affect underrepresented groups, make it safe to talk about identity-based issues before crises happen. Third, create space for different reactions from team

members; they won't all feel the same or want to express their emotions in the same way. Fourth, let some things go – for you and your team. Fifth, help your team channel their emotions toward positive change. [close](#)

The past few weeks (years?) have been heavy.

In recent conversations with managers and teams, we've consistently heard people say, "I'm angry. I'm upset. But most of all, I feel helpless." Trying to figure out a path forward, let alone focus on pulling together a client presentation, in the face of a continuous stream of devastating news can feel impossible. As Twitter senior engineering manager Ronnie Chen tweeted, one of her reports admitted in a 1:1, "I'm trying to compartmentalize but I've run out of compartments."

Here are five approaches that might help you and your team feel better when everything seems terrible.

Don't pretend it's business-as-usual.

The world might feel out of your control, but how you choose to respond to it as a manager is not. Often when we don't know what to do or say, we default to silence. But if you say nothing, your team will assume you either don't know or don't care about world events — which will erode trust.

Depending on the size and global scale of your team, you can either address what has happened in a meeting or in a group email. Communicate like a human and from the heart. For example, in response to a mass shooting, you might say, "When reading the news this morning, I felt deep sadness, fear, and frustration. I know this news is heartbreaking and difficult for all of us to process, and is particularly painful for our colleagues near the shooting. Here is how I/the organization can support you."

This last piece is particularly important: provide a path forward. That might mean creating an opt-in space for people to process their emotions (see the next point), offering employees paid time

off if they need it, or sharing other resources or company policies that might be helpful during a time of crisis.

Make it safe to talk about identity-based issues before crises happen.

Research by Dr. Angelica Leigh, an assistant professor of management at Duke's Fuqua School of Business who studies diversity and emotions in the workplace, shows that widely publicized news of marginalized groups suffering violence (what she calls "mega-threats") have a greater negative effect on minorities of color in the workplace. When an event is targeted at a minority group (for example, the May 2022 Buffalo shooting), members of that group may feel what Dr. Leigh calls an "embodied threat," or a fear that there is a greater chance they will personally encounter identity-based harm. In her words, this fear can consume "psychological resources leading to heightened avoidant work behaviors, or higher work withdrawal and lower social engagement."

In other words, when you're more worried than ever about your own safety, your family's safety, or your community's safety, it's hard to push that out of your mind and focus on work.

Trust cannot be earned overnight or with a single email. In the wake of a mega-threat, you can't expect employees to feel safe opening up (especially about how they feel as a targeted minority) if you've never previously made an effort to ensure they feel comfortable having identity-based discussions. Leigh recommends managers make these kinds of conversations a regular occurrence, and her research shows that identity-based discussions that are psychologically safe can help reduce the negative psychological effects of mega-threats on minority groups at work.

The goal is to create an environment "where you're talking about those differences and they're being highlighted in conversations before an event happens, so when something happens, your

employees can say, ‘Yes, when my manager asked me how I was doing, I told them I’m not doing well,’” Leigh explained in an interview with Charter. She says that when an employee is sharing what they did over the weekend, they should feel comfortable mentioning the fact that they went to a church function at their predominantly Black Baptist church in their community. “If I don’t feel comfortable telling you about these things that I do in my off time, or things that are connected to my identity, then how am I going to feel comfortable telling you when things are bad?” she asks.

Create space for different reactions.

Acknowledge what’s going on, but don’t ask everyone to say something about it in a team meeting. People will have a range of responses to an upsetting event. Some may want to dive into work as a distraction, and some might be too distracted to do good work. One employee might find comfort in talking about what they’re feeling, while another might be too overwhelmed, upset, or exhausted to say anything.

Instead, provide an optional time and space for those who would like to get together and share their emotions. Have someone who is trained in facilitation, such as an HR lead, loosely guide the conversation, focusing on making space for anyone to share what’s on their mind. A facilitator should listen to understand, rather than trying to solve. If Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) at your organization are hosting discussions, you can also point employees towards these events. Some team members may feel safer sharing tough emotions in smaller groups with people of similar identities.

Finally, make it clear that your door is always open. You might say something like, “In light of _____, I want to reiterate that if there is anything I or the organization can do to help you in the coming weeks, do not hesitate to let me know. And if you need to take time to decompress, please do so.”

Intentionally let some things go.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, don't put extra or unnecessary pressure on yourself. Take a moment to identify one part of your day or week that you could make easier. For example, order takeout so you don't have to cook, move a meeting to the following week (or see if you can check-in on pressing action items over email), or intentionally say no to a non-urgent ask. Research shows that adjusting your expectations can help you give yourself a bit of kindness and relief.

Aim to do the same for your team. During challenging times, your role as a manager is to make work a place of solace, not a source of additional stress. Ask each of your direct reports to come to your next 1:1 meeting with a list of everything on their plate.

Acknowledge the present situation, and emphasize that you'd like to help them prioritize their work so they can achieve better balance and more easily invest in their mental health. Go through each item and help them understand which ones are priorities, which can be delegated, and which can be pushed back or removed from their lists.

Help your team channel their energy towards positive change

It's okay to feel angry or anguished about the news. Of course, emotional outbursts in the workplace can be upsetting, but having a strong reaction itself isn't inherently bad (and, with anger in particular, continually suppressing it isn't good for anyone). If you know how to channel them, your emotions can even serve you by increasing your confidence and making you certain that you are capable and strong.

As a leader, it's useful to keep in mind that anger can be seen as a form of compassion. As professor Myisha Cherry writes, anger often "expresses compassion for the downtrodden and the desire for a better world. Anger at racial injustice makes people eager to do something about it."

We're not suggesting you condone screaming and yelling in your workplace, but you can gently encourage your team to channel any anger or despair they express towards improving a situation or advocating for a larger change. That could mean establishing a new employee resource group, finding opportunities for the team to volunteer or make a donation, or simply recommitting to supporting each other by establishing inclusive and equitable norms.

Our friend Joy Ekuta, a Black woman who co-founded Retrospect Studios, was part of a Slack group with many of her Black friends. In the wake of George Floyd's murder, "We were all talking about how tired we were," she told us. "Tired of watching the news, tired of feeling desensitized, tired of hearing from people. And we all just thought maybe we should do something for us." When a few people suggested hosting a Juneteenth celebration, the group realized many of them didn't really know many details about what it stood for. They decided to put together hellajuneteenth.com, a website that would help people learn about the holiday and encourage them to celebrate it.

"Then we thought: We're going to take the day off. Could we encourage others to do the same? Wouldn't it be cool if we could get a bunch of companies involved?" she said. The group started to circulate the website more widely.

When Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey tweeted a link to the site, "Things just kind of snowballed from there," Joy told us. Over the next two weeks, more than 650 companies (including TikTok, McKinsey, Netflix, and Mastercard) publicly committed to observing Juneteenth on hellajuneteenth.com. Offers to help grow the movement poured in: A PR company took them on as a pro-bono client and the website hosting service for hellajuneteenth waived their hosting fees. And a year later, in 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden signed a bill into law making Juneteenth a national holiday.

"We were able to create institutional change," Joy told us, "It was

really empowering.”

Even with all these steps, people will still have a wide range of emotional responses to overwhelming news. And that’s okay. If there’s one thing you can do as a manager or employee, it’s to allow yourself, and those around you, to feel okay about not feeling okay.

MD

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LF

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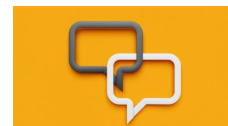
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