

Managing Employees

When Your Employee Feels Angry, Sad, or Dejected

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Summary. Dealing with the negative emotions of employees isn't easy, but knowing what to do or say can make a huge difference to their well-being, the quality of your relationships with them, and team performance. The trouble is, many leaders fail to respond at all because... [more](#)



You walk by your employee's cubicle. He has his elbows on his desk and is resting his forehead on his hands. He's emanating stress. Do you say something? If you do, what should you say?



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Dealing thoughtfully with employees' negative emotions is a critical yet difficult leadership skill. When employees are angry, sad, or dejected, knowing the right thing to say—or what not to say—can make a world of difference to their well-being, the quality of your relationship with them, and your team's ability to perform. In our research on emotions in the workplace and our engagements with a wide variety of global organizations (including Exxon Mobil, General Motors, Oracle, and PepsiCo), we have identified how leaders can respond to the emotions of others in ways that sustain workers' health and their organizations' culture and effectiveness.

The best leaders, we've discovered, pay close attention to the goals employees have in the workplace—to feel valued and connected, to have a sense of purpose, and to perform their jobs well—and react to people's emotions in ways that support those goals. They also know when to simply acknowledge employees' feelings, when to give advice, and when to provide employees with the space and time to handle their emotions privately.

The choices leaders make here matter. In a review of 220 studies on the effects of how people respond to others' emotions at work, which was published in 2024, we found clear evidence that what

leaders say or do when they see that employees are upset, frustrated, or overwhelmed can have enormous consequences.

Separately, in a study we conducted in 2018 we tested whether leaders' reactions to employees' emotions influenced team performance. We had 190 teams engage in a complex decision-making task. In half the teams the leaders were instructed to acknowledge their employees' feelings during the team discussion and were given various suggestions on how to do so. For instance, if they saw someone looking unhappy, they could say, "Hey, I notice you seem to be down." Or they could ask something like "How are you feeling about that decision?" In the other teams the leaders were instructed not to acknowledge employees' emotions. The result? Teams whose leaders acknowledged members' emotions performed significantly better than those whose leaders did not.

In this article we offer leaders a road map for providing emotional support to their employees. But first let's address three common misconceptions.

Misconception #1: Discussing Emotions at Work Is Unprofessional

Many leaders believe that talking about emotions at work can escalate tensions or distract employees from doing their jobs. This may stem from the long standing idea that people shouldn't express emotions in the workplace. In a survey of 2,250 UK workers conducted in October 2019 by Totaljobs, an online hiring platform, 51% of managers said that emotions should be suppressed on the job. In Western countries, in particular, talking about feelings at work has long been considered "unprofessional."

While there may be occasional benefits to not engaging with the emotions of others, more often than not there are tremendous advantages. For example, a series of studies published in 2021 by Alisa Yu, Justin Berg, and Julian Zlatev found that acknowledging

the emotions of colleagues—for instance, by saying, “I can understand why you might be worried about the deadline,” or simply, “You seem to be a bit down”—can build trust. It conveys a willingness to invest in the person and the relationship by going out of your way to check in. Similarly, a field study and two laboratory experiments published in 2022 by Michael Parke and colleagues found that management teams with a culture conducive to expressing and responding to emotions outperformed teams that expected their members to check their feelings at the door.

In short, contrary to what many think, leaders are more likely to help their teams achieve their professional goals when they dare to engage with the emotions of their employees.

Misconception #2: Getting Involved in Personal Matters Is Too Perilous

Leaders are often reluctant to engage with their team members’ feelings because they don’t think they have a right to intervene in employees’ personal matters. They may also not know how to respond appropriately and worry about saying or doing the wrong thing.

Emotions are bridges that connect people, however. Going out of your way to show employees that you care about how they’re feeling demonstrates to them that they’re not alone in their experience and that you’re looking out for them. This could be as simple as letting employees who are going through a hard time know that you’re available to talk if they so desire or doing something special such as offering a compliment, telling a joke, or leaving a cookie or a flower on their desk.

If you’re concerned about overstepping boundaries by asking your employees how they’re feeling, start with simpler gestures, such as acknowledging the tension in a room during a challenging meeting. For example, in one meeting we were in, the leader

made a point of catching the eye of an employee who felt hurt by a colleague's comment and giving that person a small smile and a wink, acknowledging that she saw what the employee felt and understood it. This helped the employee manage his own emotions and regroup to stay an active participant in the discussion.

Misconception #3: People Who Share Their Emotions Want You to Solve Their Problems

Since leaders are often expected to fix things at work, many assume that their job is also to tackle the problems causing employees distress. Consequently, they immediately jump in and offer advice rather than first listening and understanding more about what their employees are truly seeking. Our published research indicates that in about 80% of such situations, leaders attempt to change, rather than simply accept, the emotions of others.

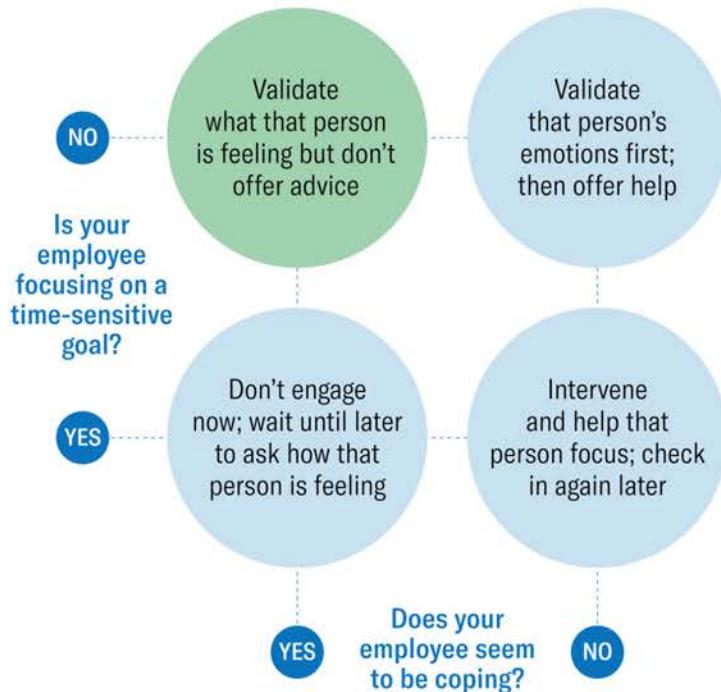
While sometimes employees may indeed want their leaders' help with an issue, there are instances when they simply want to inform their leaders about what they're experiencing and be heard and understood. It's crucial for managers to recognize their bias toward coming up with solutions and to listen closely to what employees need when they share how they're feeling.

A Framework for Effective Responses

When addressing an employee's emotions, start by asking two interrelated questions: (1) Does your employee seem to be coping? (2) Is your employee focusing on a time-sensitive work goal? The answers will determine which of four approaches will be the most helpful. (See the exhibit "Figuring Out How to Respond to an Employee's Emotions.")

Figuring Out How to Respond to an Employee's Emotions

The answers to two questions will point you to the best approach.



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Context A: Your employee seems to be coping and isn't focusing on a time-sensitive work goal. Here's a hypothetical example. Say that when you run into your employee, Alex, on the way out to the parking lot at the end of the day, he mentions that he's been rather down about everything at work. Although he seems to want to share how he's feeling, he doesn't appear to need or be looking for your help. In this scenario the best approach is to let him know that you hear him and convey that whatever he's feeling is OK, but don't jump in and offer advice.

There are various approaches you could take here. You could validate his emotions by letting him know that they're normal and saying, "It totally makes sense why you would feel that way. It has been tough." Alternatively, you could show that you're curious about the source of his gloominess by asking, "From your perspective, what happened to make you feel this way?" You

could also acknowledge the situation that caused the emotion by remarking, “It was a rough day, wasn’t it? I think everyone is feeling a little low.”

Even if it may seem that you’re not doing much, validating the emotions of others can often be better than helping them find a solution to their distress—a strategy supported by a pair of experiments involving 318 participants conducted by Razia Sahi and colleagues. In that research people were asked to share experiences that were causing them to feel negative emotions. They then received a response. Half got a validating response such as “I can get why you reacted like that.” The other half were given a solution-oriented response, for example, “It’s better that this happened now rather than later,” “Try to see both sides of the situation,” or “Try to focus on the positive things in life.” The researchers consistently found that simply validating the person’s emotion, without attempting to offer a solution, was perceived as the most comforting, helpful, and preferred response.

Here it’s important to keep in mind that more often than we expect, people vent emotions to us without the intention of getting us to give them advice. They may just want to feel connected to and seen and heard by a colleague. But all too often we jump in and try to fix whatever’s bothering them, even if we’re not being asked to.

Context B: Your employee is focusing on a time-sensitive work goal but seems to be emotionally handling things.

Consider Diego, who is grieving the passing of his beloved dog and is about to walk into a packed room to deliver an important presentation. While he may appreciate your concern in a different context, acknowledging his sadness at this moment could sabotage his efforts by opening the floodgates of feelings he has temporarily tried to dam up.



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When individuals appear to be coping well with their emotions while handling pressing work, it is not the time to engage. Avoid making statements like “You seem nervous” or “Don’t worry—this is not a big deal” or asking, “Are you feeling all right?”

Wait for an opportunity after the crucial task has been completed to check in and convey that you care and that you’re there to help if needed.

Context C: Your employee is working on an important time-sensitive task and doesn’t seem to be coping emotionally. In such cases, if the employee has asked for or clearly needs help,

you do have to intervene. An attending surgeon we interviewed told us that when resident physicians on her team are obviously overwhelmed with fear during difficult procedures, she has to help them manage their emotions in the moment. She will calmly tell them to focus or offer an affirmation like “I’m confident in your abilities; trust your training” to lessen their anxiety. If that isn’t enough, she’ll take additional steps like assuming the challenging task herself or delegating it to another member of the surgical team.

When pressure is high and people need immediate help handling an emotion so that they can focus on a critical task, there are various tactics you can apply. One is to say something positive—whether it’s reassurance, a compliment, or a joke—to snap them out of the negative spiral that might derail them, their team, and their mission. A Navy SEAL commander told us that when he notices someone on his team emotionally floundering, he’ll find a lull and go up to that person and make a joke or say something encouraging like “You can do this. Hang in there.” He will then continue to monitor the team member closely to determine if further intervention is necessary to help that person concentrate.

Do you have a go-to response? For example, like many, you may tend to jump into solution mode too quickly.

How do you know if people aren’t coping well? While they might ask explicitly for help, it’s highly likely that you will have to infer it from their facial expressions, tone of voice, posture, breathing patterns, or inability to focus.

Leaders should also check in with employees after the task is complete. When you help people manage their emotions and stay on track, you may inadvertently suggest that what they were

feeling wasn't justified or that you don't genuinely care about them. Therefore, make sure to follow up to explain why you did what you did and let them know that you value how they feel. For instance, the attending surgeon might say to the resident, "I needed to help you focus since that was a critical point in the surgery, but I want to check in now to see how you're doing—that was a tough procedure." This approach can make someone feel seen and heard, contributing to a better team culture.

Context D: Your employee doesn't seem to be coping but isn't working on a time-sensitive task. Imagine that you're in a meeting with Melissa. She tells you that while she isn't facing a pressing deadline, she's feeling overloaded with everything on her plate, is uncertain about what to do, and is worried that she might have to hand off projects she's excited about. Instead of immediately jumping into problem-solving mode by saying something like "Well, here's how I manage such situations..." or, worse, changing the subject or not engaging with what she's shared, realize that you have time right now to address her emotions because she isn't in the process of trying to accomplish something urgent.



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Accepting your employees' feelings before offering help is the most effective response in this situation. People who feel understood are more open to considering suggestions and are more grateful for assistance. Try this two-step response: Start by letting your employee know you recognize her feelings and that they're understandable. Begin with a validating remark like "That really is a lot; I'd be overwhelmed too." Once she feels heard by

you, you can then follow up with advice, by saying something like “Would it be OK if I shared some ways that I manage my time? Maybe some of my strategies could help you.” Or you may offer to help her prioritize her projects and find ways to delegate some of her less-important duties.



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When time allows, being able to engage in both steps—accepting the emotion and then helping shift the mood—is the most impactful strategy a leader can use to support an employee. For example, in a pair of experiments Lisanne Pauw and colleagues asked people to imagine that they were talking with a friend about a situation in which they were experiencing an intense negative emotion. They were then asked to evaluate the helpfulness of a variety of responses by the friend: only accepting the emotion, only providing help, or first accepting the emotion followed by providing help. The response with the highest evaluation? The two-step one: validating the emotion and then helping resolve the situation causing it.

You can also use this approach to manage your team's collective emotions, as the beloved coach Ted Lasso did in the eponymous Apple TV+ series after his team suffered a tough loss. He first acknowledged the team's emotions by saying, "This is a sad moment right here. For all of us. There ain't nothing I can say standing in front of you right now that can take that away." He then advised his players that once they felt a bit better, they should, like goldfish with a 10-second memory, move on and focus on the next game.

Building Your Skills

In our work we have found that there are three ways for leaders to develop their ability to support their employees' emotions.

Identify your default behavior. Do you have a go-to response? If you do, you're not alone. It's common to get stuck in the habit of acting the same way every time, with everyone. For example, like many, you may tend to jump into solution mode too quickly.

To combat that tendency, try to be aware of what you do in different contexts. Does your response match what's needed in each situation?

Pay attention to others'—and your own—reactions. Did your employees seem grateful for your concern? Did they provide any feedback that could help you respond better to them or to others next time? What is their reaction telling you about their needs? Be curious.

Also, learn from others' responses to your own emotions. How does it feel when someone tells you to get it together during a difficult time when you only want acknowledgment? Or when someone recognizes your emotions and asks you how you're doing?

Expand your repertoire. Dealing with employees' emotions in a way that fits each context requires having a portfolio of responses

to choose from. You can expand yours by observing how others respond to people's emotions. Maybe one colleague gives particularly good advice, and one friend knows how to ask questions that help you see a different perspective.

When you spot new and better approaches, try experimenting with them. Even a mundane encounter while in line at the market is an opportunity to test a new way of positively engaging with those around you, such as apologizing for causing frustration when you hold up the line or offering a smile to another customer who looks sad. Such small experiments can help you be ready when the stakes are high and you need to know exactly how to approach an upset team member.

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Leaders must be able to respond in a supportive manner to the emotions of their employees. That requires them to learn how to handle others' feelings in different contexts, be more aware of their own behavior, and hone their skills. If they can master those three things, the result will be a healthier, more successful organization.

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