



Emotional Triggers and Responses in the Workplace

The workplace can be a stressful environment and involve many situations that may trigger strong negative feelings. It can be important for managers not only to be able to control their own feelings, but also help workers de-escalate emotional situations. This can help maintain workers' morale, allow them to perform according to their potential, and contribute to a healthy work environment. For most stressful situations, it is helpful when a manager is able to respond in a calm, rational and positive manner. This can help lessen the intensity of workers' emotions and encourage them to see the situation more objectively. In contrast, it can be very unhelpful when managers overreact or add their own emotions into the mix, further fueling workers' emotions. When managers react in unhelpful ways, it can send the message to workers that the managers are incapable of remaining calm and leading the team through hard times. On the other hand, managers who can help resolve an emotionally charged problem or demonstrate empathy can give workers confidence that they are overseen by strong and competent leaders.

Here are some common situations in which workers may feel scared, angry or sad, as well as examples of unhelpful and helpful ways managers can respond.

Situations that Trigger FEAR and Ways to Respond		
Situation	Responses More Likely to Trigger Fear	Responses Less Likely to Trigger Fear
Worker makes a costly mistake at work.	Blame the worker and question his or her ability to do the job properly.	Remind the worker that mistakes happen. Help them focus on problem-solving.
There have been talks about budget cuts and layoffs. Workers are asking you for information.	Thoughtlessly state: <i>"I think I have an idea who will be let go, but I can't talk about it."</i>	Empathize with their concern. Tell them you will share as much information as you can and keep communication ongoing. If layoffs are inevitable, talk about resources available to those who may need it (e.g., community resources and/or company benefits).
A worker is about to make a presentation but thinks that it will go poorly.	Urge the worker to make a good presentation no matter what, as the whole department depends on it.	Reassure the worker that he has prepared well for the presentation. Make encouraging comments: <i>"I'm not concerned at all about your ability to give presentations. I've seen you speak in meetings and you do a great job."</i>



Situation	Responses More Likely to Trigger Fear	Responses Less Likely to Trigger Fear
A worker shows up at the manager's office for a performance review. The worker jokes nervously, "Okay, so how bad is it this time?"	Ignore the joke and maintain a serious look.	Keep a warm, relaxed expression. Ask if the worker is nervous. Remind them that a review is a positive, growth opportunity.
It's a worker's second month on the job and she seems to have a hard time learning the tasks.	Point out that most workers are able to learn the tasks by this time.	Show concern about the worker's progress, but focus on asking what you can provide to help her succeed.
Workers on your team are likely unable to meet a looming deadline for an important project.	Express your frustration openly to them: "My reputation is on the line. I'll be pissed if we don't meet the deadline."	Point out the problem in a calm manner, without placing blame on anyone. Accept responsibility as a manager for the delay. Focus on problem-solving: "How can we work together to meet this deadline?"
A worker reports to you that a fellow worker has been bullying him about his sexuality.	Ask the worker about his sexuality. Don't take his complaint seriously. Express doubt that he is telling the truth.	Maintain a calm presence and do not act surprised or shocked. Assume the worker is telling the truth. Express empathy: "I'm sorry to hear what you are going through." Thank the worker for informing you. Indicate that you take these complaints seriously and inform the worker of your next steps and actions.



Situations that Trigger ANGER and Ways to Respond

Situation	Responses More Likely to Trigger Anger	Responses Less Likely to Trigger Anger
You had to choose one worker to promote from several qualified applicants. Today, you announce which worker received the promotion.	Talk about workers in a disrespectful way: <i>“I know you’ve all been drooling over this job.”</i> Tell workers that only the successful applicant was qualified, while the rest were not good enough.	Thank everyone for their interest. Acknowledge the efforts they put into their applications. Acknowledge that it was a tough decision (if appropriate). Remind workers that new opportunities may continue to open up.
Your team is delayed in finishing a project because of a worker’s negligence.	Highlight to the team that it was the one worker’s fault. Show frustration by shaking your head, sighing and criticizing the worker behind his back.	Model a teamwork spirit to the workers. De-emphasize the blame from the worker and focus on finishing the project as a team. Validate feelings of frustration: <i>“I can understand that everyone is frustrated they have to work overtime. I really appreciate you for your professionalism and for pulling through this as a team.”</i>
Your team is expanding and there are not enough offices for everybody.	Give offices to your favourite workers, without consulting the entire group of workers about space allocation.	Make the process as transparent as possible. Let workers know the criteria upon which you are basing your choices (possibly workload, seniority or job description). Thank the workers for understanding. Let them know you are working on providing everyone the space they need.
During a team meeting that you are chairing, two workers engage in a debate that turns heated.	Join in on the argument. Say something disrespectful: <i>“Okay, let’s not have a fit over this.”</i>	Try to de-escalate with words in a calm and light-hearted tone: <i>“I’m glad to see that we all feel strongly about this issue.”</i> Reclaim control over the meeting: <i>“Unfortunately we have to move on to other topics. We might need to schedule another meeting just to talk about this issue.”</i>



Situation	Responses More Likely to Trigger Anger	Responses Less Likely to Trigger Anger
A front desk worker has just been verbally abused by a client and seems upset.	Ask what happened and then walk away, without offering any words of comfort or care.	Ask with a caring attitude what happened. Express concern about how the worker was treated. Show empathy for the worker: <i>“No one should be treated that way at work. We will need to file an incident report.”</i>
You and a worker are disagreeing over work-related issues. The worker seems to be getting frustrated and annoyed.	Keep emphasizing your point and take on a hostile tone. Say something disrespectful: <i>“Whether you like it or not, this is how I want it. Maybe you still don’t get it. Do I have to explain it again?”</i>	Pause the conversation. Acknowledge what you see: <i>“You seem really frustrated with this.”</i> It can help to get the emotions out before any rational thinking continues. <i>“Tell me what’s going on. Why are you getting upset?”</i> Remain calm, task-focused, and respectful.
A worker just ended a call with a customer and seems very frustrated.	Assume that the worker did not handle the call competently: <i>“Do you need help with handling phone calls?”</i>	Give the worker the benefit of the doubt. Ask about what happened. Empathize with the worker. Sometimes it helps the worker calm down when you paraphrase what they said using simpler, calmer words: <i>“So the client got upset and called you stupid because he thought that you had lost his file?”</i>
It’s late Friday afternoon and you have just given a worker a large and important task that is due at the end of the day.	Tell the worker matter-of-factly about the last-minute task. It is her job, after all.	Recognize the worker’s need to leave work on time. Acknowledge the late notice of the task and thank the worker for her understanding. Make a plan for what is reasonable and feasible to complete.



Situations that Trigger SADNESS (or HURT) and Ways to Respond

Situation	Responses More Likely to Trigger Sadness (or Hurt)	Responses Less Likely to Trigger Sadness (or Hurt)
One of your workers has just been rejected for a grant that he had worked hard to apply for and was hoping to get.	Dwell on the negatives and on the past. Say things that are unproductive: <i>“Wow, that’s too bad. That grant would have helped you a lot. You worked so hard for it too. That’s two weeks of your life you’ll never get back.”</i>	Empathize with the worker: <i>“That’s frustrating, because you worked really hard to apply for this.”</i> Focus on the positives: <i>“You didn’t get the grant but you put together a really good proposal that you can use for future projects.”</i>
During a team social event, you notice that a worker is trying to mingle with others but is not being accepted.	Ignore what you saw and go mingle with other managers.	Make an effort to make everyone feel included. Make small talk with the worker.
A worker seems ashamed as he is receiving negative feedback from you about his work.	Ignore what you see, thinking, <i>“That’s not my problem.”</i> Continue with the negative feedback.	Speak in a respectful, light-hearted tone. Acknowledge what you see. Empathize with the worker’s feelings: <i>“It’s hard to hear this kind of feedback. But, we know that it helps us be better in the long run. How can I help you make improvements?”</i>
A well-liked staff member is quitting, and the workers seem sad to see her go.	Do not acknowledge her upcoming departure.	Acknowledge the situation and the workers’ feelings: <i>“We are all sad to see her go.”</i> Focus on the positives: <i>“She is off to a very exciting new job. We will all wish her the best.”</i>
There has been a massive layoff today in the company and some of the workers, although spared, are quiet and somber.	Focus on the negatives: <i>“It’s so quiet in here now that some of you are gone. It’s going to be a ghost town here.”</i>	Empathize with the workers’ feelings. Maintain a neutral attitude. Focus on the positives: <i>“The company always tries to find laid-off staff other positions within the company.”</i> (if applicable).