It can be natural to question whether emotional reactions serve useful functions in the workplace: after all, when we’re at work we have a job to do, and experiencing unpleasant or intense emotions can feel like an unnecessary distraction. Managers in particular may wonder whether it is correct to accept emotional reactions in the workplace. It is important to realize, however, that emotions can serve a valuable role and can be an important source of information to guide our behaviour. Emotions (positive and negative) can serve a useful function, even if this function is not always immediately evident. Thinking about why a worker is demonstrating a particular emotional reaction can help you understand how to best manage and support the worker.

All emotions serve one (or more) of the following core functions:

- **Emotions motivate action**: Emotions can motivate us to respond to situations. Our emotions may inform us about our circumstances and the environment we are in, which helps us act appropriately. For example, if we sense discomfort or fear, we may respond by addressing, avoiding, or leaving the situation. If we feel anxious about a new work task, we may respond by practicing in advance to enhance our preparedness.

- **Emotions communicate valuable information to others**: Emotions can communicate important messages to those around us. They may tell others how we are feeling and what we need in a given situation. If we look sad, for example, we are communicating to others that we need support. If we are angry, we are signaling to others that they have crossed our boundaries.

- **Emotions are self-validating**: Emotions can communicate to ourselves that something important is happening that may impact some important part of our life. Our emotions may let us know what we like/don’t like, or when something is missing or needed. Feeling rejected, for example, highlights that we miss the acceptance of others. If we feel lonely, it’s a sign that our need for social contact may be unmet.

Identifying the function served by a particular emotion can help us know what action to take and what types of support we and/or workers may need. Here are some examples of the specific functions (useful or problematic) that different emotions may have in the workplace:

**Fear**

*Example*: A new worker is afraid to speak up and be assertive because he fears saying the wrong thing, and worries about his inexperience relative to other workers.

- **Motivate action**: Fear motivates avoidance of stressors. The new worker may avoid the situations creating stress by not showing up to important team meetings or calling in sick instead.
- **Communicate to others:** Fear communicates to others that we need support. The new worker’s anxious and avoidant behaviour indicates to managers that he might need help coping with his new job situation. As a result, they might provide more orientation and training, as well as more confidence-building positive feedback.

- **Self-validating:** Fear self-validates that something is worrisome. The anxious feeling tells the new worker that he doesn’t feel skilled or confident enough to do his new job. He might conclude that he needs more training to overcome his anxiety, and so decide to sign up for an evening course.

**Anger**

*Example:* A worker is angry at a colleague for taking more breaks than allowed, leaving others to pick up the slack.

- **Motivate action:** Anger motivates self-protection. The worker needs to protect herself from becoming overloaded with work. Her angry feeling prompts her to address an unfair situation so that she doesn’t end up being stressed and unhappy at work.

- **Communicate to others:** Anger communicates to others that we are feeling disrespected, it sets boundaries with others, and it alerts them when they may overstep those boundaries. The worker’s angry response communicates to her colleague that he may have done something upsetting. As a result, he might decide to approach his co-worker to identify her concerns.

- **Self-validating:** Anger self-validates that we are being disrespected or attacked, or that our boundaries are being crossed. The angry feeling alerts the worker that she feels she is being treated unfairly and disrespectfully. She might conclude that she needs to stand up for herself and try to talk things out.

**Sadness**

*Example:* A worker is being teased excessively by his workplace colleagues. He feels sad that he is rejected at work.

- **Motivate action:** Sadness motivates protection behaviours such as withdrawal from excessive stressors. The worker needs to protect himself from having his self-esteem damaged. His sad feelings send him a message to do something about this situation.
- **Communicate to others:** Sadness communicates to others that we need support. The worker’s non-verbal presentation of sadness concerns his manager and indicates to her that the worker might need support. As a result, the manager might inquire what’s behind the sadness and whether there’s anything that she can do to help.

- **Self-validating:** Sadness self-validates that something upsetting is happening, or that a loss may occur. The sad feeling tells the worker that he is missing acceptance from his work colleagues. He might conclude that he needs to change jobs, or he may ask his supervisor to address the issue with the other workers.

**Guilt**

*Example:* A manager feels guilty because a newly-hired worker has already needed to put in a large amount of overtime to replace two workers absent due to illness.

- **Motivate action:** Guilt motivates us to make amends or apologize (for the purpose of our relief). The manager feels responsible for addressing the worker’s circumstances. Her guilt tells her to do something to improve the situation.

- **Communicate to others:** Guilt communicates to others that they matter to us. The manager’s guilty feelings and apologies indicate to the worker that the manager is aware of her obligations and cares about his situation. As a result, the worker might feel less resentment and accept reparation graciously.

- **Self-validating:** Guilt self-validates that you have violated internal standards (that you have done something you feel bad about or that you missed out on something you should have done). The guilt tells the manager that she should have intervened earlier to prevent the worker from becoming overloaded with work. She might conclude that she should apologize and hire a temporary substitute worker to ease the load.

**Shame**

*Example:* A worker feels ashamed because he begins to stutter almost every time he presents at team meetings.

- **Motivate action:** Shame motivates self-protection, avoidance of actions that might be destructive of relationships. The worker needs to protect himself from further public embarrassment. He might avoid the situation by not speaking up at meetings. Or, he may be motivated to work on reducing his level of stress and anxiety during meetings to decrease the likelihood that he stutters.
- **Communicate to others:** Shame communicates to others that we need support. The worker’s demonstration of shame and or avoidant behaviour indicates to his manager that the worker might need help overcoming his public speaking problems. As a result, the manager might change certain aspects of the meeting or offer supports to the worker to improve his comfort when speaking in public.

- **Self-validating:** Shame self-validates that our social boundaries have been violated or that our value within a group has been threatened. The feeling of shame tells the worker that he’s frustrated by not feeling as skilled as other workers at public speaking. This validates the importance of doing well in his position.