Responding to Emotionally Distressed Workers

When we see a worker who is distressed (e.g., due to personal problems, mental health difficulties, co-worker conflicts, performance issues), we may experience a variety of emotions ourselves: fear, anger, frustration, guilt, pity or helplessness. It is very natural to have these emotional reactions, but they can interfere with our ability to effectively respond to a distressed worker. Our own emotions can have a powerful impact on our attention, perception, thoughts and behaviour. Emotions can be the motivating force behind our actions, and can determine whether we respond effectively (by providing support or assistance) or less effectively (by avoiding a situation).

Identifying and responding to distressed workers can be a core component of a manager’s role. Since struggling workers can be less productive and more often absent, their impact on the success of the entire team can be substantial.

As a manager, it’s not only important to know the warning signs of distress and possess the knowledge and skills required to respond to it appropriately, but also to be aware of the impact our own situation (e.g., emotional state) can have on our ability to help. It is important to be “present” and calm when responding to a distressed worker.

The emotional reactions we experience can pose barriers to responding effectively to distressed workers.

- **Fear:** Responding to a distressed worker can be daunting. Anxiety is a normal, natural response to an unknown situation. Our own discomfort or fear may cause us to avoid or ignore the situation.
  
  o **Alternative Approach:** Remind yourself that a worker’s emotional distress is rarely about you. Remain focused on workers’ needs. Avoiding a situation may reduce your fear in the short-term, but addressing the situation promptly and directly can be the better approach.

- **Frustration, anger:** A distressed worker might make us feel angry or frustrated, for example when the worker’s emotional state interferes with teamwork or affects customer satisfaction. The anger emotion may cultivate aggression and revenge. If we are frustrated or angry, we may become verbally abusive (e.g., blaming or yelling at the worker) or act intensely agitated.
  
  o **Alternative Approach:** Try to understand where the worker may be coming from and focus on depersonalizing your reaction. Consider having a conversation with the worker when you yourself are in a relatively calm or neutral state. Set parameters for respectful communication – both yours and the worker’s.
- **Guilt** (blaming ourselves): Sometimes we find ourselves feeling responsible for a worker’s situation (e.g., if a worker is overloaded with work). We may feel guilty and might have the urge to *make amends* or *apologize* (for the purpose of our relief). We may feel pressured to solve the worker’s problems. For some, guilt will delay taking appropriate action.
  
  o **Alternative Approach:** Ask yourself if your guilt is valid. If it is, make amends (apologize, take action to resolve the situation). If the guilt is not valid, then think about what other function the guilt may be serving for you.

- **Pity:** The emotion of pity can evoke ‘rescuing’ behaviour. If we are feeling sorry for someone, we may feel the need to ‘fix’ their situation. This can reinforce feelings of powerlessness or helplessness in the individual. Although feeling sorry for someone may be reasonable sympathy for their pain, a better approach may be to help empower workers to take control of their own circumstances.
  
  o **Alternative Approach:** Ask yourself whether it is your role and responsibility to help the worker, and whether potential change is within your control. This could be true if the issue is work-related. If yes, then take action. If no, where appropriate support the worker to find other solutions.

- **Helplessness:** Confrontation with a worker who is experiencing personal problems (e.g., alcohol use) might be more than we can handle. If we perceive a situation as beyond our control, we feel helpless: we don’t know what would be best to do. The feeling of helplessness can make us *indecisive* and *unable to find an effective coping mechanism*.
  
  o **Alternative Approach:** Seek other supporters at work (other managers, human resources personnel, union stewards) who can provide you with an objective perspective on what action may be helpful.

Managers’ personal emotional reactions can create powerful obstacles to dealing effectively with distressed workers. Other, interrelated factors may complicate the situation even further. Common barriers to responding appropriately to negative emotions in the workplace include the following:

- **Inability to read the signs of distress:** The distressed worker must be identified before we can respond to him or her. If we can’t recognize the signs of distress (e.g., absenteeism, poor job performance, erratic or unusual behaviour), or if we misinterpret the signs, we can miss our chance to react early. We sometimes tend to ignore the first signs of distress, maybe because we perceive them as trivial, or because they are difficult to differentiate from normal behaviour. *Responding to the first signs of distress can be beneficial from a preventative perspective.*
- **Lack of resources:** If we lack the skills to respond to a distressed worker appropriately (e.g., we don’t know what to say or do, we don’t know where to get help), we might avoid or deny the situation. *Taking steps to obtain additional skills training, and seeking assistance from others in your workplace (e.g., your boss, human resources, etc.) can be helpful.*

- **Our own emotional state/stress levels:** If we are not feeling well physically or emotionally, we tend to focus on our own issues and devote our energy to getting through our tasks and responsibilities. At times like this we may not notice a worker’s distress. Our negative emotional state can also make it more difficult to assess someone else’s situation objectively. We may pay more attention to negative signs (ones that match our mood), which may lead to misinterpretation of the worker’s behaviour. *Whenever possible, have conversations with distressed workers when you are in a relatively calm/neutral state. Working to manage your overall levels of personal and work-related stress and using strategies that help you self-regulate in the moment (e.g., deep breathing) can help.*

- **Our own work demands:** When we are overloaded with work ourselves, we might simply be too busy to notice a worker’s distress (e.g., we don’t leave our office anymore, or are often away on business trips). Or, we may recognize the signs but simply don’t have time to deal with the situation, and choose instead to prioritize our own workload and concerns. *If your role includes supervising, managing, supporting or leading others, be mindful of paying attention to workers on a regular basis. Knowing your team and connecting regularly with workers is important.*