

The Smart Way to Respond to Negative Emotions at Work

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BY CHRISTINE M. PEARSON

“Our company was acquired and our workforce was cut by 70%. We’re each carrying about twice the workload now, with a fraction of the resources. Employees at all levels are frustrated, angry, and anxious about their futures, and not one of our new executives seems to care. Pride in the organization has dried up. People are too stressed to do anything but keep their heads down and pound out their work. Morale is at an all-time low. You can feel it when you come in the door. Yet our new leaders are stunned when they learn someone else is quitting.”

— **Manager, global services organization**

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to block negative emotions from the workplace. Whether provoked by bad decisions, misfortune, or employees’ personal problems, no organization is immune from trouble. And trouble agitates bad feelings. However, in many workplaces, negative emotions are brushed aside; in some, they are taboo. Unfortunately, neither of these strategies is effective. When negative emotions churn, it takes courage not to flinch. Insight and readiness are key to developing effective responses.

Savvy managers and executives quickly learn to cultivate sunny emotions at work. Practical recommendations and abundant research accentuate the benefits of encouraging positivity in the workplace.¹ Reinforcement is often immediate. The swell of good feelings is palpable when executives successfully cheerlead for

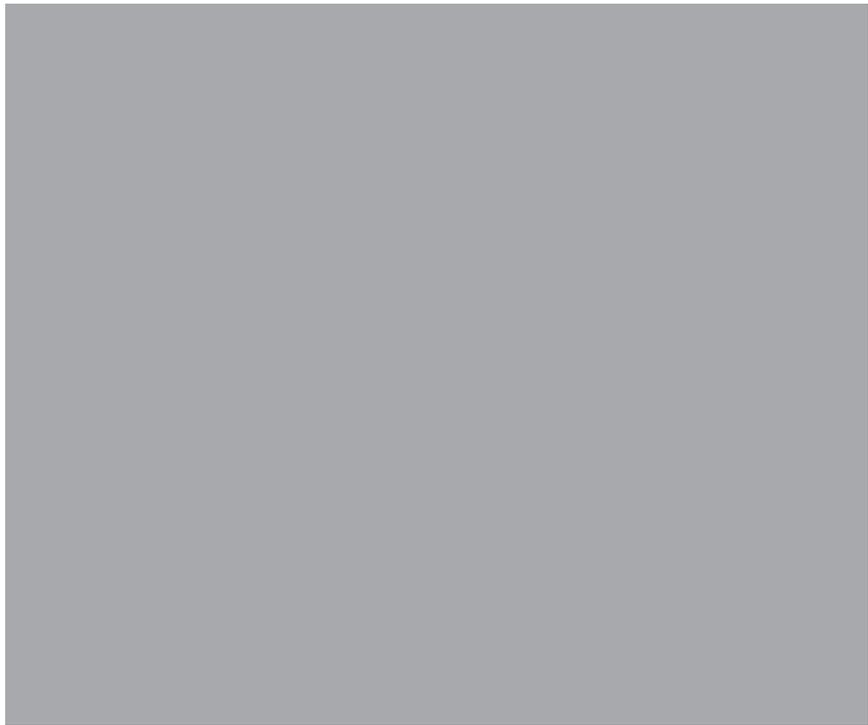


THE LEADING QUESTION

How should executives handle negative emotions in the workplace?

FINDINGS

- ▶ Many managers don’t know how to respond to employees’ negative feelings.
- ▶ Promptly stepping up to face emotions like anger, sadness, and fear can stem interpersonal turbulence and keep satisfaction, engagement, and productivity intact.



stretch goals, muster enthusiasm about new products, or celebrate team successes. Sometimes, these efforts are irrefutably tied to greater improvements, providing additional opportunities for positive emotional crescendos from leaders.

Steering toward positive emotions is the norm. But there are reasons for negative emotions in the workplace — from erosion of the implicit work contract between bosses and employees, to ever-growing demands to do more with less, to relentless rapid change. Today, it takes both positive and negative emotional insight for organizations and individuals to function effectively over the long term. Negative emotions, it turns out, not only punctuate obstacles but also unleash opportunities.² Negative emotions can provide feedback that broadens thinking and perspectives, and enables people to see things as they are. When executives step up to deal with rising anger among employees, they may discover exploitations of management power. Similarly, managers who address signals of employee sadness may learn that the rumor mill is spreading false news about closures and terminations.

For more than two decades, I have studied workplace circumstances that evoke negative emotions. (See “About the Research.”) My research, often conducted with colleagues, explores the darker side of work — from exceptional, highly dramatic organizational crises (such as workplace homicide or product tampering) to the everyday problem of disrespectful interactions among coworkers (a phenomenon for which my coauthor Lynne Anderson and I coined the term “workplace incivility”³). Via surveys, focus groups, and interviews, thousands of respondents have described their experiences with causes, circumstances, and outcomes that involved negative emotions.⁴ A crucial finding across our studies is that few leaders handle negative emotions well.

When it comes to managing negative emotions, most executives respond by pressuring employees to conceal the emotions. Or they hand off distressed employees to the human resources department. A small proportion consider emotions detrimental to operations and assert that feelings should be kept out of the workplace. Some blame their own bosses’ compulsions for unbroken cheeriness, which obliges them to tamp down negative sentiments of their own and those of their subordinates. A general

manager I interviewed voiced a typical rationale: “Our CEO doesn’t want to hear anything negative. Not a word about dissatisfaction.”

Many executives complain that dealing with employees’ negative sentiments drains too much time and energy. Some express concern that their interventions might exacerbate rather than improve circumstances, or that addressing concerns might unleash stronger reactions than they could handle. Additionally, executives worry that uncorking employees’ negative emotions might trigger an unwelcome flood of their own bad feelings.

Many executives report they’ve had no training about handling negative emotions effectively and a dearth of role models for doing so. One of my recent studies validates this claim. I asked 124 managers and executives about their personal experiences of negative emotions at work. About 20% reported that they have never, in their entire careers, had a single boss who managed negative emotions effectively.⁵ Every respondent was readily able to name bosses who had mismanaged relevant issues and to describe specific opportunities that had been missed, as well as associated organizational costs.

Most managers admit that they simply do not know how to deal with negative emotions. I would like to change that. The advice here is based on research by my coauthors and me about workplace crises and incivility, as well as our observations of the impacts and responses engendered by both. Within these contexts, my fellow researchers and I have studied how organizations handle negative emotions. We asked about what works and what doesn’t. Some recommendations here flow directly from data collected for our studies. Others are based on lessons I have learned while shadowing and consulting to employees at all levels as they prepared for, managed, and learned from crises and instances of incivility. Additionally, in light of sensitivities toward negative emotions, I turned to clinical psychologists who work with managers and executives to validate the following recommendations.

Facing Negative Emotions

In the short term, ignoring or stifling negative emotions is easier than dealing with them. However, my research with colleagues has shown that discounting or brushing aside negative emotions can cost

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This article draws on a stream of research that the author, in collaboration with coauthors, has carried out for more than two decades to understand how managers and employees handle the dark side of workplace behavior — from exceptional incidents involving organizational crises to commonplace uncivil interactions among employees.¹ All of the studies examined some aspect of the role of negative emotions.

In our crisis management research, my coauthors and I have worked directly with senior executives and observed, interviewed, and surveyed managers as they prepared for, dealt with, and learned from crises and near misses in their organizations. In our foundational research into workplace incivility, we

collected survey data from thousands of employees at all organizational levels. We deepened and broadened our understanding through further studies, in hundreds of interviews and additional surveys, and in scores of focus groups with employees, managers, and executives. Insights across studies also reflect consulting and collaboration with organizational leaders as they attempted to assess and improve their capabilities for dealing with crises and incivility.

At the heart of this article is an ongoing, multifaceted study to understand the management of negative emotions in the workplace. To date, the research reported here has been developed with the active engagement of more than 350 managers and executives from more than 200 organizations and three dozen

countries. We have gathered data from focus groups, in-depth interviews, surveys, observation, and other field research. In many cases, we began our inquiries by asking participants to describe a critical incident that evoked their negative emotions at work and to base their responses and recommendations on that situation. Information such as the causes, contexts, and consequences of the negative emotional experiences, as well as the nature and effectiveness with which the negative emotions were managed, were assessed through simple content analysis of the open-ended data. Our respondents represent a cross section of industries (public and private companies, government, and nongovernmental organizations), job types, and management positions.

organizations millions of dollars in lost productivity, disengagement, and dissipated effectiveness.

In a study of 137 managers enrolled in an executive MBA program, Christine Porath of Georgetown University and I found that negative emotions led them to displace bad feelings onto their organizations, either by decreasing their effort or time at work, lowering their performance or quality standards, or eroding their commitment to their organizations.⁶ Employees who harbor negative sentiments lose gusto and displace their own negative emotional reactions on subordinates, colleagues, bosses, and outsiders. They also find ways to stay clear of coworkers and circumstances that they associate with their negative feelings, which can short-circuit communication lines and clog resource access.⁷ Consider these pricey consequences as incentives to face, rather than avoid, darker workplace emotions.

Look yourself in the mirror. If you lack emotional self-awareness, your own concerns will inhibit your abilities and color the emotions that you tune into.⁸ Next time your own negative emotions are rising, reflect. Recognize and harness your own emotional triggers. Which conditions or individuals provoke emotional reactions from you? Note circumstances and your typical responses. Ask trusted colleagues and friends for their observations of your behavior.

Stay calm, breathe deep, and model behavior. When your negative feelings stir in the workplace, take a slow and deliberate account of what is going on. Our earliest studies of incivility uncovered a

typical escalating cycle of tit-for-tat behavior when emotions were high.⁹ Rather than fueling that cycle, let agitation serve as a signal to step back.

Instead of engaging in reciprocal behavior, practice overcoming physiological signals that could draw you into the drama. For example, when you feel your emotions rising, pause and take a focused deep breath rather than bursting forth with a knee-jerk reaction. That momentary delay can help reason rather than instinct drive your response. Think broadly, and aim to spread composure by modeling it. Build a habit of passing on fewer negative emotions than you receive, regardless of the circumstances.

Fine-tune your radar. Watch facial expressions and body language, especially when nonverbal behaviors don't seem to match what you are hearing. To build this skill, practice observing and interpreting emotional actions and reactions at meetings and in public settings. As the chief legal officer of an international chemical company said, "The greatest benefit of preparing for crises as a team is learning the 'tells' that the other leaders exhibit when their negative emotions rise. Over the years, those subtle signals have helped me determine when to step in and how to frame my suggestions, especially when crises are brewing." Take account of the context and the stakes for individuals. Afterward, check your accuracy by seeking others' perspectives about what occurred.

When you're listening, listen fully. This requires much more than simply focusing on the speaker. If you are checking email on your phone or laptop, you're not listening fully. If your internal dialogue is

blaming or criticizing, you're not listening fully. If you're jumping to solutions or thinking about the story that you will share when it's your turn to talk, you're not listening fully. Cease these behaviors to demonstrate that you care. You will catch signals earlier and interpret their meanings more astutely.

Stepping Up to Negative Emotions

When managers fail to notice or respond to negative emotions, they subsequently encounter increases in rifts, resentment, and dissatisfaction among employees.¹⁰ When negative emotions are allowed to brew, physiological predisposition can cause coworkers to mimic the movements, postures, and facial expressions of those feeling bad.¹¹ Notably, this synchronization happens automatically, so others may mirror negative expressions without awareness that they are doing so. Unconsciously passing on negative emotions can erode productivity and cooperation. In the worst cases, managers have described a cloud of negative emotions that can spread throughout the workplace, making it more difficult to recruit and retain the best employees.

Leaders can be strategically shortsighted when they ignore or miss negative emotions in the workplace. In a recent study exploring negative incidents at work, 99 managers at an international Fortune 100 manufacturer shared examples of early warning signals that were missed prior to negative incidents, despite employee concerns.¹² In some of the cases, larger problems grew in the interim, and delays complicated rectifying or learning from difficult circumstances.

The benefits of addressing negative emotions can be significant. Promptly stepping up can stem interpersonal turbulence and keep satisfaction, engagement, and productivity intact. Moreover, those who take the initiative to step up often experience personal gratification from helping others in meaningful ways.

How to Step Up

Tend to signals of negative emotions early. Watch for warning signs across your team. Are individuals putting in fewer hours or less effort? Has engagement dwindled? Are fewer employees showing up for discretionary activities such as celebrations or noncompulsory meetings? In our research and practice, these behaviors have signaled underlying negative emotions. Take a close look at hard data and trends that can be signs of

dissatisfaction and withdrawal, such as late arrivals, absenteeism, and voluntary turnover.

Even small supportive gestures from managers can improve employees' ability to cope. Anticipate that employees facing tough times will have negative feelings. Discuss and determine what employees need and what you are able to offer. Convey frank optimism and confidence that they can manage the challenges. Find ways to offer additional support and resources to help them.

Seek out troubled employees. When behaviors seem emotionally charged, it can be challenging to understand what is happening. Start by gathering data. Ask simple, neutral questions to get a conversation going, such as "How are you doing today?" or "Everything OK?" Then, tune in sharply to the response, taking stock of subtle indicators like volume, pitch, and speed of speech. Consider whether an employee's behaviors and expressions are unusual or out of sync with the rhythm of your conversation. Listen for veiled references to negative emotions. Employees may not be comfortable saying they are sad, but they might tell you they feel discouraged or disappointed.

Resist the urge to fix others' problems for them. Be quick to listen and offer support but slow to advise. As a senior production manager in a manufacturing company explained, "What works for me is to voice my concerns, lightly, and then wait for the response. I'm also really careful not to jump into the role of being the parent." Ask questions to help employees determine what the best approaches would be. Help employees map out specific individuals in their network who could provide the support they need.

When negative emotions are rooted in conflicts among employees, strive to get adversaries to work together to resolve their differences. Urge them to prepare for a discussion together and, in that discussion, to stick to the issue at hand. To drive reconciliation, help them understand the personal costs and larger stakes if they cannot move past their differences.

Sometimes, individuals cannot get unstuck from their negative emotions. If troubled employees are unwilling to consider alternative perspectives or approaches, accept that for the time being. Rather than push harder, take a step back, observe, and remain available, as appropriate.

Do not assume that negative emotions have dissolved when hard times seem to have passed. The full

significance of negative circumstances may not become evident to those affected until later. For example, although you may be relieved by employees' initial acceptance of organizational shakeouts, don't miss or ignore what often follows. Sadness can emerge as reality sets in about losing colleagues or routines. During this time, don't dispassionately direct employees to put the past behind them. The impact can be depleting. As an information technology (IT) manager who survived layoffs explained, "The new leaders keep warning us, 'It's time to move on.' I resent it. They make it seem like having legitimate concerns is a personal shortcoming."

Dealing With Anger, Fear, and Sadness

Anger, fear, and sadness are three primary negative emotions commonly encountered in the workplace. Knowing more about these specific emotions can increase your skill at handling them and build the confidence you need to take effective action.

Anger This may be the most prevalent negative emotion at work. It is certainly the most acceptable. As I have observed in field research and found across surveys and interviews, displays of anger can be so common and powerful in some organizations that employees sometimes learn to habitually use anger to get their way.

Working with and around angry people is exhausting: It wears others out, undermines their drive, and suppresses their cognitive abilities. When individuals dare to respond to anger, brain chemistry can cause them to have difficulty communicating well or thinking clearly.¹³ Unfortunately, inferior responses can strengthen angry employees' self-serving biases about being right, stoke their confidence, and reinforce their use of anger.

Angry encounters can spin into long-lasting resentment and unhappiness. Based on thousands of survey responses regarding incivility, research colleagues and I found that (1) employees who are treated angrily typically seek retribution, harbor animosity, or both; (2) some employees who simply witness or hear about others' angry outbursts may seek recourse; and (3) employees in anger-tainted workplaces find ways to get even with offenders and with their

organizations.¹⁴ The following guidelines are imperative for effective managerial response to anger.

Don't let yourself get sucked in. When anger is stirring, expect your own anger or fear to rise. Whether you are the target of anger or a referee among angry employees, aim to slow down the situation. Do what you can to quiet yourself and the environment. Remain still. Listen carefully. Aim to project a composed, neutral demeanor by speaking calmly, clearly, and deliberately, but do not be condescending. When you are the target of anger, do not attempt to justify yourself or argue the point. Rather, strive to contain your own negative emotions.

When dealing with anger in the workplace, calmly try to unknot and understand the full situation without being absorbed by it. Speak with individuals one-on-one to ascertain their perspectives. Help angry employees consider appropriate ways of handling heated issues, by discussing problems and developing plans to deal with similar challenges more effectively in the future. When anger is directed at you, fully evaluate whether complaints are justified. If so, apologize and take action promptly to correct the problem. If not, aim to remain respectful and carry on.

Don't side with an employee you think has been wronged. Doing so can harden negative attitudes, making the situation more brittle and more resistant to improvement. Instead, aim to speak from a position of neutrality. Resist the temptation to empathize with negative comments about any individual or the circumstances. Do not attribute harmful intentions, even if they seem obvious. As an executive at a public-sector organization recommended, "Create an environment where employees understand the personal costs if they're not pulling for the team. Help angry employees consider and initiate forward-focused thinking and action in a solutions-based environment, rather than dwelling on the negative."

Fear Full-scale organizational crises, dismal quarterly results, and even off-the-cuff negative comments by those in charge can kick-start fear in a workplace. When fear strikes, the physiology of survival readies individuals to fight, flee, or freeze. However, organizations expect employees to carry on, even when employees' perceptions of personal or

professional risks are acute and realistic. Even in the midst of unthinkable crises, workers are expected to continue to meet their typical performance targets. The prevalence and strength of this workplace norm cause employees to be very reluctant to admit that they are afraid.

Nonetheless, it is essential to address fear at work because this negative emotion packs a wallop. Fear seizes individuals' attention while simultaneously diminishing their objectivity. Being afraid can erode employees' decision-making abilities and confidence. Fear stimulates catastrophic thinking, leading employees to replay the past, fret about the future, and disengage from the present. Being scared undermines employees' tolerance for ambiguity and complexity, a crucial success factor for today's competitive environment. Further, the negative impact of fear can linger long after dangers prove unfounded. In the meantime, studies I've worked on show that worried employees may attempt to unload their concerns on colleagues, setting off additional negative emotions across the workplace.¹⁵

When fear is engendered by coworkers or bosses, employees trim their time at work, accept fewer responsibilities, and accomplish less. When their fears are ignored, employees take action to protect themselves from the dangers that they recognize or imagine. Rather than striking out at the individuals who scare them, employees often displace their negative reactions onto the organization that has failed to protect them.

If fear lingers, employees start looking for new jobs. In fact, of the negative emotions that Porath and I have tracked for more than two decades, fear is the emotion most likely to cause employees to quit, although they are unlikely to cite fear as the catalyst for their departure.¹⁶

As individuals are unlikely to report their fears in the workplace, the burden is on executives to address this commonplace challenge. Nonetheless, some executives choose to ignore the problem of frightened employees or even deny or minimize the situation engendering fear in the first place. Others may recognize the cause of fear but leave the burden of dealing with it to those who are afraid, despite costly outcomes. The following two actions are essential when fear churns.

Deal with employee fear head-on. Action is a powerful antidote to fear. Our research suggests that being frank and providing reasonable, realistic reassurance can signal that someone is in control. This awareness can help employees who are afraid. One executive described how he successfully approaches fear in the workplace: "I allow fearful employees to vent, and I try not to let their fear spiral out of control. I assure them as much as I can. I listen carefully to their concerns and honestly provide whatever facts I can."

Help employees avoid exaggerating perceived dangers. To keep fear from spinning out of control, be honest and up front about challenges while infusing authentic enthusiasm about realistic opportunities and benefits that may lie ahead. Share your own concerns reasonably to ease others into discussing theirs. Encourage employees to gather facts and help them face their individual fears rather than slipping into the victim's role, a perspective that engenders hopelessness and unhappiness.

A common source and stimulant of workplace anxiety is the rumor mill. My fellow researchers and I have observed managers and executives attempt to mitigate fear by withholding details of changes on the horizon. Rather than assuaging concerns, however, lack of information leads to speculation, often with worse outcomes than reality would hold. To ward off fear and avert this problem, overcommunicate and find ways to recognize or reward those who persist despite their fears.

Sadness Sadness may be the most unwelcome emotion at work. Working with sad people crushes enthusiasm, drains productivity, and dulls esprit de corps. Sad employees display low energy and lose interest in what once engaged them.

According to our survey and interview data, sad employees tend to show up later, leave earlier, avoid potentially unpleasant meetings, seek offsite assignments, and seize opportunities to work remotely.¹⁷ Those deeply saddened become apathetic. Some sad employees give up and quit. Despite such costly consequences, however, executives will find scant research or recommendations about dealing with sadness. To improve this, I offer the following suggestions based on my research and consulting.

Be present. Sadness is often accompanied by feelings of isolation. As I have observed in crises and less extreme negative circumstances, executives who remain accessible impart strength, as well as a sense of communal concern and connection, to their followers. However, while engaging with sad employees, resist the temptation to push for higher spirits or to provide advice about how an individual should cope with sadness. Specifically, do not tell sad employees that you know how they feel — you couldn't. Do not compare their sad situations with your own: Your examples may seem insensitive and irrelevant.

With dramatic loss, employees may seem detached or disoriented, behaviors that can increase a manager's reluctance to intervene. Nonetheless, practical approaches from managers and executives can help lighten the burden. If employees have experienced a serious personal loss, help them temporarily make work a lower priority so that they can focus on dealing with their grief. Allow employees to overcome their sadness at their own pace. Help them connect with their natural support systems. Some options to temporarily relieve the full burden of work include providing time off or a few days of shortened work hours, permitting affected employees to work remotely, identifying avenues for transferring some of their responsibilities to colleagues, and encouraging them to postpone or cancel work travel.

A senior manager who faced family trauma described the relief, gratitude, and impact she experienced after receiving compassionate treatment at work. "My boss's immediate response was that now was not a time to be concerned about work," she said. "He acknowledged, without flinching, just how traumatic my personal loss was and that it had implications for me personally and professionally. He did what he could to help me delegate my obligations so that I could spend more time with my family. When I returned to work, my colleagues accepted that I would be working in a haze of sadness for quite a while. All of this helped a lot. I was always dedicated to my work and to my workplace. This experience deepened my connection to both."

Support from business leaders during a tough time can have an immense impact on an employee's morale. The founder and former president of a very prosperous network services organization

credited empathy during times of duress as a key contributor to his company's extraordinary success. As he put it, "We were especially intent on supporting people through difficult experiences. All of us go through them. It's the right thing to do. What we learned over time was that our employees, even those who simply knew about the company's responsiveness and were not direct beneficiaries, more than reciprocated with unflagging loyalty."

In times of loss and sadness, seize opportunities to demonstrate character. Many managers confess that they become befuddled when employees cry. Of course, this is not a helpful reaction. To improve, begin by accepting that crying is a legitimate way to display negative emotions (even if you prefer to express sadness or frustration in a different way). Allow employees some time to work through their initial reactions to an upsetting circumstance. If needed, offer a dignified, temporary exit with respectful cues like, "This has been a long day. Shall we wrap up for now and reconvene tomorrow morning?"

Study participants who speak or write about their personal experiences of sadness at work tend to focus on their bosses' attitudes and behaviors. They attribute courage for "normalizing the emotions," "dealing with the situation rather than allowing the negative to fester," and demonstrating "grit." They portray bosses who stayed in the moment, reset priorities, and gently guided forward movement. In the best cases, they tell us that bosses who faced into emotional adversity inspired them to behave similarly, to contribute more, and to grow professionally. Some point to organizational impact when their bosses' willingness to address negative emotions helped others find the strength to endure and succeed through grueling circumstances. One executive told us how his employer had provided support to employees who were terminally ill: "He watched, monitored, observed each individual's needs, and adjusted his support accordingly. His ability to cope with adversity and the pressures it puts on his business will always be inspiring to me."

The Benefits of Acknowledging Emotions

When negative emotions are acknowledged openly, I have found that employees learn to anticipate and

interpret their colleagues' reactions to difficult circumstances more astutely. They grow to understand their own reactions better, too. With these improvements, appropriate responses to challenging situations can be made earlier, when adjustments are generally easier, more effective, and less expensive.

In good times, it's easy to celebrate success and happiness. In darker times, those who respond to negative emotions effectively stand out as they manage their own reactions to stress, deal with the negative emotions of others sensitively and effectively, and face reality — seeing things as they fully are.

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