Managing emotions in the workplace
Managing emotions in the workplace: 5 scenarios and how to keep your cool

Can you remember a time when you received some feedback you didn’t like and immediately got into defense mode? Or maybe a time when you were triggered by an employee’s behaviour and you lashed out, causing a rift in the trusting relationship you’ve been working so hard to build?

Welcome to being human.

In a recent survey on emotions in the workplace, we asked a group of managers:

“Have you ever felt unhappy with how you managed your emotions or reacted to a situation at work?”

You might have guessed it — 100% of respondents said YES.

In this post we look at the different situations at work where managers feel they need to ‘keep their cool’ and handle the situation with emotional regulation. Plus, we asked our in-house organizational and team coaches for expert tips and frameworks to tackle each situation like a pro!
What’s in the guide:

• Why emotions at work are ok, and how to embrace them
• We asked real managers about their most emotional moments at work
• 5 tricky workplace situations & how to keep your cool
Why emotions at work are ok, and how to embrace them

We’re not in the industrial era anymore where being mindlessly mechanical in an assembly line is more valued than being a thinking and feeling human. The modern workforce encourages emotions and authenticity, because that’s when we get to the depths of people’s ideas and creative potential. The nuance between encouraging emotions in the workplace and also needing to manage our emotions at work is that we want emotions to be enablers of success, not detractors.
During the recent pandemic and grand exodus from our offices to remote work, manager and employee emotions alike have run high. People have a lot going on. They might be on edge, or facing burnout. Managers might have trouble gauging their employees’ emotions through a screen. While we need to give room to display these feelings, it must be done responsibly as the way we express emotions can affect attitudes and morale, therefore employee engagement and job performance.
We asked real managers about their most emotional moments at work

The emotions we see surface the most in our manager survey on emotions at work include:

• Anger & defensiveness
• Frustration & loss of patience
• Stress & anxiety
• Self-doubt & insecurity

According to our survey, emotions in the workplace are triggered from four sources:

• The pressure you put on **yourself** as a manager
• Difficult situations with **employees**
• Difficult situations with **your boss**
• Difficult situations with **other managers**
As a manager, you’re surrounded by relationships that you’re likely both personally and professionally invested in. Building meaningful relationships is key to the success of your team and directly impacts the emotional culture of your organization. You set the tone for how you want these relationships to unfold. One of the pillars of great management is to lead by example, so whatever behaviour you model will be what you can expect in return. Ensure that the emotional contagion you put into effect is a positive one.

Let’s get into specific scenarios!
5 tricky workplace situations & how to keep your cool

1. Poor employee performance triggers anger and resentment

Your employee is not completing their work on time and not meeting objectives. It makes you angry since the whole team is counting on them to do their part. How do you handle this productively, instead of letting workplace anger get in the way?

**Reflect:** Ask yourself honestly, what needs lie underneath your anger? Anger arises when something that matters to you is hurt. Often, the ego. For a manager, this could mean a desire to succeed and have a performing team. Instead of getting angry, see this as an opportunity to help develop a team member, a great sign of a true and successful leader.
Don't assume: Get curious and empathetic to find out what circumstances might be contributing to their under-performance. Until you learn what has been impacting them, you can't really create a proper solution for it.

Prepare: Before a 1-on-1 meeting, use Radical Candor’s SBI Framework to help you discuss the situation objectively. Practice with a trusted colleague so they can point out anything you might be missing to avoid assumptions clouded by emotions like anger.

• Situation: Give as much context as possible. Last Thursday was the deadline for the report to be submitted.

• Behaviour: Describe the behaviours you observed without assumptions. Your report was submitted on Friday, and it was incomplete.

• Impact: Explain the specific impact of their behaviour on you and the team. This caused frustration amongst our clients, and resulted in the team not meeting its goals.
2. Negative feedback gets your defenses up, every time

You get defensive when people give you negative or constructive feedback, or when an employee questions your decisions. You know it’s not productive and doesn’t model a learning culture, but you get your back up and can’t control it.

When we face a difficult moment like receiving negative feedback, we tend to do one of three things: avoid it, face it and handle it badly with an emotional outburst, or face it and handle it well with emotional regulation and grace.

Ironically, the more crucial the conversation, the less likely we are to handle it well.

— Crucial conversations
Here’s a framework to manage human emotions in the workplace when the stakes are high:

**Before – Plan and prevent:**

- If a specific negative emotion keeps coming back or if you’re preparing for a difficult conversation, you might want to ask yourself, “How will I know that things are getting out of hand?” If you can name it and visualize it, you’ll have a cue for when to step back.

- Be aware of words that trigger you. If you know that specific language gets you riled up, when you hear it you’ll be more prepared to react properly.

- Let them know that you’ve been struggling with receiving criticism and that it’s something you want to work on. This can diffuse the situation, and make them your ally!
During – Take a step back:

- If you said something you shouldn’t have, try to slow things down to gain perspective.

- Ask for a breather! Go for a short walk or splash water on your face, then look at the big picture and see what you can do to have the greatest impact going forward.

- If you say something you regret, pause and say “sorry, that didn’t come out right, let me rephrase that.”

After – Repair and reflect

- If you did not succeed at controlling your reaction, admit where you went wrong. Asking for feedback is humbling, and people respond well to this element of emotional intelligence: self-awareness.

- It’s not too late to turn what happened into a learning moment, especially if this is a recurring behavior pattern for you. Reflect on what went wrong.

Reflection questions:

- What is it about that feedback that really triggers you? Unpack it.

- What is another way that you could have reacted to bring you closer to your goal? Write it down so you have a goal for your next conversation.
3. Feeling insecure in your capabilities triggers stress

You often compare yourself to other managers and don’t feel good enough. You end up feeling insecure and that you need to prove you were the right choice for the job. You don’t really know what your employees think of you as a boss, or if you’re doing a good job. These feelings of self-doubt are getting in the way of your performance.

The imposter syndrome is real and everyone’s been there, especially new managers. As one survey respondent says, “I often feel stressed that I need to have the right answers all the time, when sometimes there just are none.” But, you weren’t hired because you knew everything, you were hired because you had certain skill sets and qualities that are valuable to the role.
Tips to deal with feelings of insecurity in your role:

1. Seek out mentors who are more advanced in your field.

2. Start co-development sessions where managers can share experiences and learnings.

3. Ask your manager and employees for feedback on your performance. You might be pleasantly surprised, and any criticism is only fuel to help you improve.

**Officevibe** helps managers like you get a real honest glimpse into how employees feel about your leadership, and surface pain points on the team so you can take action where they really need it.

![Relationship with manager](image)
4. Unclear expectations from upper management triggers cynicism

When expectations and communications from your boss are not clear, you can’t properly lead your team. But no matter how many times you ask, you’re not getting what you need. You, and your team, are getting frustrated. It’s becoming hard not to dump your cynicism and negativity onto your team.

There are two situations at play here. You need to manage your emotions with your boss, and not let your emotions affect your team. Let’s look at both!

How to manage up to your boss when your needs are not being met

• Put your emotional intelligence to work: Know your audience and how they like to receive feedback to ensure it’s best received.

• Think about how you would want your employees to approach you. Use that as a starting point to approach your boss.
• Seek to understand why providing clarity has been hard for them. This will help diffuse negative emotions and build empathy.

• Objectively explain the negative impact of their lack of clarity.

Express your specific needs clearly, then get in solution mode and map out how you can work better together going forward. Follow up in a structured 1-on-1 conversation.

How to shield your team from your own negative emotions

If you’re not sharing your experience with your team, then you are essentially duplicating your experience for them.

• Explain to them what’s preventing you from getting the clarity they need.

• Allow yourself to be vulnerable, especially when it can offset cynicism and negativity.

• Try saying: “I know it’s not easy. I’m here with you. I’m doing my best. And thanks for your support.”

• Find a peer coach to act as a confidential sounding board and offer another perspective.
5. An employee’s constant negative attitude triggers frustration

You have an employee on your team who is constantly negative. They don’t bring solutions to the table, they just talk about problems and feed the fire. Their bad attitude is affecting the rest of the team and you get extremely frustrated when you talk to them about it.

It can be challenging to work with people who are negative, especially when you want to maintain a culture of positive emotions on your team for the sake of employee engagement. As one manager shares, “I have a hard time managing an employee who only sees the negative aspects of their work.”

Here’s how to handle it.
1. **Seek to understand**

Get curious and ask questions that help you get to the bottom of their attitude. The problem is usually a symptom of something else.

- What makes you happy in your day-to-day at work?
- What elements of your day do you find difficult or unmotivating?
- If you could change one thing about your daily work life, what would that be?

2. **Create team principles around team dynamics**

Empower your team to have difficult conversations. Set aside a time to discuss team dynamics and how they hope to work together. Give each employee a turn to answer the following questions either out loud or using post-its so you can cluster common points afterward:

- What are we doing well as a team?
- What are we not doing well?
- What are our ideas for improving the way we work together?
- What team principles can we solidify around relationships and behaviours?
- Learn how our team came up with team principles to overcome our challenges!
Learn how our team came up with team principles to overcome our challenges!

3. Collect 360 degree feedback:

Have employees share their voices by submitting anonymous 360 feedback about their peers. Do this for each employee so you don’t single anyone out. Once you collect this information, use the results to discuss behaviour with your employee from a holistic vantage point.

Some questions you can include in your request for 360 feedback:

- What should X keep doing?
- What should X stop doing?
- What should X start doing?
- How has X positively contributed to the team’s culture?
- What can X improve in their contribution to the team dynamics?
- Any other thoughts to share?
You got this!

Remember that you’re only human. Communication is hard but it will get easier with practice. Negative feedback is not fun to hear but when you let it help you grow you’ll become addicted to it. Bad apple employees are just a symptom of something else; your job is to help them move toward more fruitful orchards. Be easy on yourself, ask for help when you need it, learn to admit when you’re wrong (it’s liberating) and don’t aim to be perfect, just aim to always do a little better than the day before. As one manager in our survey sums it up: “my professional journey is about controlling my emotional instincts to make them useful in the bigger and long term scheme”

We hope this article helped you do just that!

*Special thanks to our coaches Simon Chauvette, Dena Adriance, Laure Vessier, and Eric Charest for their thoughtful insights.*
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