



## Managing Emotions in Your Team

*Adapted from MindTools*

During these uncertain and unsettled times brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees will be dealing with a number of changes in both their work and personal lives and this can create a real sense of unease and stress. It is to be expected that tensions and emotions are likely to be quite high in the workplace as a result of this increase in stress and unease.

### What to Do When Emotions Run High

Imagine arriving at work to find team members sobbing in the restroom, shouting across their desks or arguing with one another in front of patients.

Your first instinct may be to respond like an angry parent. But you know that telling everyone to "calm down" or "grow up" will likely only make a bad situation worse.

But you can't ignore the problem, either. The emotional upheaval may leave team members feeling awkward, upset or even frightened. It's up to you, as their manager, to get the situation under control.

So, when you face an emotional situation that's become disruptive, aim to:


- **Stay neutral:** taking sides, attributing blame, or reacting with anger or frustration may "add fuel to the fire." Instead, take a deep breath, and speak quietly and calmly to reset the mood. Show that you're in control of the situation, and of your own emotions.
- **Call a time-out:** in the heat of the moment, it can be hard for people to back down. So, give them a chance to step aside with dignity, perhaps by asking them to take a walk around the block, or to meet in your office.
- **Acknowledge what's happened:** after you defuse the situation, let onlookers (and your own manager) know that you're going to deal with it. This helps everyone to see that the issue is being managed, and signals that they should return to work.

### Five Ways to Handle Emotions in Your Team

When the emotional upheaval has died down, your task is to discover and understand its cause, and to restore a lasting calm. These five steps can enable you to do so:

#### 1. Find out What's Going On

Sometimes, people just need their feelings to be acknowledged. They will likely feel relieved when you engage with them about the issue.



So, after an outburst, make time to meet with your employees in private. This is your chance to get to the heart of the matter.

Begin by asking simple questions, such as, "It seems that you have strong feelings about this – what's behind it?"

Use your active listening skills, and pay close attention to the answers. People might feel threatened, or think that they've failed in some way. They may be worried about workload, and feel that they can't cope.

To make sure that you've understood everyone's replies, reflect their language back to them. For example, you could say, "So, you're feeling stressed about the tight deadline – is that right?" Give everyone the chance to agree or disagree. This doesn't mean that you agree with them; it just affirms their feelings.

## **2. Address the Issue**

Once you've heard your team members' points of view, try to agree a way forward that addresses the issue.

For example, you might be able to restructure the team's workload to reduce stress. Or, you could arrange mediation with other team members,

Write down what you've agreed, and ask the people concerned to read and sign the document, so that everyone knows the next steps and commits to them.

But, remember that not all emotional reactions **at** work are triggered **by** work. An employee might feel short-tempered because he or she is the exhausted parent of young children, for example. In these cases, simply let them talk. You don't have to offer advice, and you likely won't be able to transform the issue. So, just hear what's going on in their life.


However, if the employee's emotions affect their performance, or impact team morale, don't be afraid to offer appropriate feedback. Be sensitive, but explain the problems that their behaviour is causing.

Seek support from People and Culture, if necessary, and direct your team member toward our Employee Assistance Program.

## **3. Adapt to Changing Emotions**

Check in regularly with your employees to gauge how each person is feeling. It could be as little as five minutes set aside at the end of one-on-ones or team meetings.

This need not be structured time, and you don't have to respond to your employees concerns straight away. Just give them the opportunity to be heard.



If people don't want to talk, their body language can provide you with clues. A team member who's clenching her jaw, for example, might be stressed or slumped shoulders could indicate disinterest or disengagement.

As you learn how your people are feeling, try to attune to it and adapt your management style accordingly. Even small gestures like bringing in chocolates can boost motivation and make people feel supported. Equally, calm, measured tones of voice can help to settle excited nerves.

#### **4. Lead from the Front**

You can't tell people how they should manage their emotions, and you can't manage their feelings for them. But, you can offer an example for others to follow.

The key to this is to develop your emotional intelligence. People with high emotional intelligence recognize and acknowledge their emotions, but they aren't driven by them. For example, they may feel angry, but they hold back from "acting out" their feelings.

Instead, they showcase the behaviour and values that they expect from their team members, such as dignity, restraint, respect, and self-awareness. In short, they are in control of their emotions, rather than controlled by them

#### **5. Spot the Early Signs of an Emotional Crisis**

Ignoring a full-blown emotional outburst isn't an option. But if you observe more subtle emotional behaviours, such as a team member who seems withdrawn or irritable, it can be best to maintain a watchful eye rather than to take action straight away.

This may sound counterintuitive. But even the most capable, professional people can have "off days" when they feel moody, distracted or agitated.

Your employees need to know that they can talk to you if they want to, but they may not feel like talking at all. Sometimes, people just want to "keep their heads down" and get to the end of the day.

If they're not causing a problem or upsetting others, consider letting things go for a short time. The emotion might just play out. However, if it persists the next morning, it may be time to start figuring out what's wrong.