



Management Assistance Program

DEALING WITH EMOTIONS AT WORK:

Ways to reduce conflict and control emotions for more effective workplace interactions

GOALS:

To provide organizations, managers and employees with a heightened understanding of how to deal effectively with emotions in the workplace. This module will discuss how senior management, managers, and employees can build an environment where emotions are managed effectively and in a positive manner.

The specific goals are to help organizations, managers, and employees:

- Understand emotions in the workplace.
- Be proactive in handling emotional conflicts in the workplace.
- Control emotions for better interpersonal relations and more productive results.

OVERVIEW:

"Emotions must be managed to keep a healthy staff and a growing bottom line." ¹ Experiencing emotions is part of being human. "When you walk through the door on Monday morning you do not just leave your personal life behind. What you do and where you work inevitably becomes a part of who you are."² Emotions affect your ability to think, communicate and act effectively.

Organizations are emotional places. Organizations and businesses may use emotions to motivate employees to perform, and events in organizations create emotions and can affect an employee's sense of satisfaction or outrage.³

¹ Gerson, Vicki. "Managing Emotions in the Workplace." 12 June 2002. NFIB.com -Business Toolbox Online. Available at: nfib.com/object/3380901.html

² McGowan, Kathleen. "Bad Habits on the Job: Emotional Hang Ups Can affect how you function at work and sabotage your career in the long run." [Psychology Today Online](#). 1 October 2005.

³ Emotion Management and Coaching. The Need for Better Coaching Training in the use of psychological methodologies to better deal with emotions. Behavioral Coaching Institute. Available at: 1to1coachingschool.com/Managing_Emotion_in_the_workplace.htm

While dealing with emotions in the workplace is important for employees and managers alike, managers are the target audience. Managers set the standard of emotional behavior, and have the power to create a positive framework for their staff through leadership and communication.

According to The Behavioral Health Coaching Institute, emotions can harm employees, affect how they react to pressures and be the cause of low productivity and poor results. They state, "Emotional pain (described as pain that strips people of their self esteem and disconnects them from work) is an inevitable part of life. It can come from the outside (family or personal crisis, traumas and tragedies), but it often stems from painful incidents at work, such as the behavior of immediate bosses, uncooperative employees, abrasive clients, poorly handled mergers or changes, bad work policies and practices, or the stress and grind of everyday work." However, if issues are handled correctly and managers are successful in creating a positive work environment, it is more likely these "emotional pains" can be minimized.

Negative consequences arise if employees are encouraged to suppress their emotions or allowed to have outbursts and treat their co-workers poorly. The work environment could potentially become hostile, resulting in a high turn over rate, sub-par performances, and low morale, which ultimately affects the bottom line.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Understanding Emotions in the Workplace

For an effective workplace, it is important for managers and employees to understand their own emotions, as well as the emotions of their co-workers.

- According to a research study from the University of Missouri-Columbia, management and many employees do not want their co-workers to express any type of strong emotion, positive or negative. The new research found the only "appropriate" way to manage negative emotions at work is for employees to hide or "mask" their emotions. Positive emotions need to be expressed in moderation, according to those surveyed. Employees expect others to hide negative or positive emotions in order to maintain what they call "professionalism". They also expect co-workers to hide positive emotions by not showing too much pleasure with promotions or raises that may trigger resentment or jealousy in a fellow employee.⁴

⁴ "How Employees Deal with Emotions in the Workplace," University of Missouri-Columbia. 2 February 2002. Available at: newswise.com/articles/view/?id=EMOTIONS.UMC

- For employees, it is important to know that managers are not only doing their own jobs, but they are constantly dealing with the issues of their staff, and superiors. They become problem solvers and sometimes must sacrifice getting to their own work. It is important that employees recognize that it is sometimes difficult for managers to juggle all of the different components of the workplace both to achieve organizational goals and make the work environment productive and congenial. It is important that employees practice patience and understanding when considering the manager's emotions, just as managers must treat employees with equal regard.
- Managers must understand that employees look to them for guidance when they have issues. If an employee is having a problem with another coworker, or a client, or has a personal issue, managers should be ready and willing to deal with the problem.
- Managers must take necessary action when employees are acting on their emotions inappropriately. They must establish rules about the display of emotion by acting as a role model for their staff and asserting disciplinary action when emotions are acted on in an unacceptable manner.

2. Being Proactive in Handling Emotional Conflicts in the Workplace

Being proactive is a manager's way of taking a preemptive "strike" on emotional conflicts in the work place.

- **Proactive Step #1 – Be Sensitive.** In the world of business, sensitivity in a boss might seem beside the point, but it couldn't be more important.⁵ In the book, "The Softer Side," author Daniel Eisenberg states, "Softer skills, such as empathy, intuition, and self- and social awareness, are what distinguish great leaders--and successful companies. In addition to plotting strategy, planning budgets and recruiting talent, providing positive emotional leadership is part of a boss's job; if he or she fails to do that, the bottom line, and not just morale, will suffer." Eisenberg continues, most leaders have what is often called "CEO disease"-they have no sense of how their moods affect the organization.
- **Proactive Step #2 – Managers should be role models for their staff.** According to the University of Missouri-Columbia study, "Emotion management is not something that is taught at work. Rather, participants learn to manage their emotions by observing

⁵ Eisenberg, Daniel. "The Softer Side. A great boss needs EQ, not just IQ, a new book argues." [Time Magazine Online](http://time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1001815,00.html). 2 February 2002. Available at: time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1001815,00.html

others in the workplace to learn what is and what is not appropriate." Vicky Gerson supports this when she indicates that when managers scream or berate their workers, it creates an unhealthy and potentially dangerous work environment. Some employees will deem this behavior acceptable, and other employees will repress their emotions for fear of being reprimanded. Managers need to lead by example, and deal with their own emotions in positive ways so they inspire others to deal with their own emotions effectively, particularly in difficult situations. Managers must be careful when expressing anger, anxiety, and frustration, and open about portraying maturity and professionalism and a sense of serenity.

"You don't leave emotions at the door when you enter the office, then pick them up again when you go home. If you think you can run rampant over people and it's not going to affect how well they can work, you're being naive." (Excerpt from Daniel Goleman in Time Magazine's, "The Softer Side.")

- **Proactive Step #3 - Communicate with your staff.** As a manager, it is important to always be aware of the concerns of your staff and to address them, as appropriate. Vicky Gerson indicates that according to Dr. Melissa Kay, a licensed clinical psychologist, the steps listed below can help you create an emotionally friendly environment:
 - *Plan Regularly Scheduled Meetings:* Regularly scheduled meetings where people have an opportunity to discuss their concerns open lines of communication between business owners and their employees. Managers will in turn know what their employees are concerned about and be able to provide reassurance and possible solutions. These meetings will likely improve company morale and work productivity.
 - *Meet with Employees Individually:* While staff meetings and other group-oriented meetings are important, it is equally important to meet with employees individually if possible. This not only lets them know that they matter, but it gives the employer/manager and opportunity for the manager to assess one-on-one situations. This does not have to be a "scheduled event" - it can be a "water cooler" conversation or a stop on your daily "rounds" through the office.

In addition, the one-on-one atmosphere gives employees an opportunity to voice concerns and speak more openly about issues they may not feel comfortable addressing in front of their peers. The employee may have a personal problem, or

may be experiencing difficulty working with a fellow co-worker. For example, an individual may be having a child care arrangement problem which explains a series of recent absences. The employee may be worried, tense, and even embarrassed at his or her current situation, and may need the manager's help.

- *Step in to Solve Unsavory Business Practices:* "Employees want to protect his or her own position in the company, and some are willing to engage in cut-throat competition to do so. Bickering among employees can't be ignored because it has an effect on all employees in the workplace. As the business owner or manager, you must calmly step in and put a stop to such behavior."
- *Personal Habits Can Raise Tensions in the Office:* Employees can get annoyed about the behavior of other employees. For instance, an employee is always on the phone, another employee is telling inappropriate jokes, or his or her poor job performance affects productivity. It is the manager's job to make sure that one individual's behavior does not disrupt the harmony of the office.
- *Provide workshops on stress management:* Stress management courses can help employees suffering from on the job stress or personal stress, and improve the health of employees. When managers provide workshops on stress management, employees can improve their individual skills. Employees could be suffering from on the job stress because they are not meeting company goals. Other employees could have serious problems at home such as a child involved in drugs or money troubles that are generating emotional volatility.

- **Proactive Step #4 – Be prepared.**

Though not an everyday occurrence, tragedy and unfortunate events could occur (i.e. September 11th, school shooting, fire etc.), and there is no doubt that employees will look to managers for guidance and leadership. Events of such a large scale cause emotional trauma and the work place can become chaotic. Managers have the difficult task of dealing with their own pain and helping their employees deal with their emotions at the same time. Therefore, it may be wise to create a crisis communication plan or procedure guide for these types of events. Crisis Management plans also put employees at ease because they know there is a concrete plan that will guide them in the time of

emergencies. Even if it is something simple as a “Crisis Management” section in a handbook that shows employees what stairways to take if there’s a fire, which floors evacuate first, emergency lines to call, and which Security Guards are on call when its late.

3. Controlling Emotions for Better Interpersonal Relations and More Productive Results

According to the earlier article by McGowen, “Some employees may prefer to think of work as a straightforward money-for-labor transaction between them and the employer. In truth, it is much more emotionally complex. Work engages powerful psychodynamics– how you feel about your co-workers, your feelings of being told what to do, your own self respect, and confidence in your abilities. Even if you are a hard worker, and a dedicated employee, it does not mean you can prevent your emotions from playing a role while you’re on the job.”

She states, “Most people think of the workplace as a peer group or even a family. That belief tends to encourage self-defeating behaviors such as being defensive or thin-skinned, being overly blunt or worrying too much about whether or not your colleagues like you. By recognizing some of these tendencies and understanding their origin you may be able to circumvent them.”

Dr. Mark Goulston’s book, *Getting Out of Your Own Way at Work...And Help Others Do the Same*, offers several ideas for avoiding some particularly bad habits, as reported by Kathleen McGowan in *Psychology Today Online*.

- **Be Self-Aware.** Being able to reflect on who we are and contemplate our own behavior is the source of great achievement, but it is also the source of many pitfalls. Taking things too personally, being overly self critical, or mistrusting our own instincts are all possible side effects. These self defeating tendencies can have a huge impact on how well you function at work.
- **Don’t Procrastinate!** People procrastinate when they are afraid to take responsibility for a decision –afraid to commit to a course of action and, ultimately afraid to fail. For the most part, the work of a procrastinator suffers and the constant emotional stress is exhausting. The emotional stress can cause unnecessary outbursts, and ultimately sabotage your productivity.
- **Don’t be so defensive!** If you feel that your co-workers are constantly “shooting you down” and think that the subtext of many of your conversations with them shows that they are right and you are

wrong – you may be struggling with defensiveness. You may tend to feel attacked when people disagree with you, even if they do not intend to offend.

- **Other people may view you as the aggressor.** If there are a few people in the office you tend to argue with frequently, you might try to clear the air by asking, “When we disagree are you saying I’m wrong or simply trying to explain why you’re not wrong?” You may find that at least some of them are not actually trying to provoke you or dismiss your opinions.
- **Don’t “Fritter” Time Away:** If at the end of the day you feel as though you accomplished nothing, and your “to do” list has grown even longer, you may want to take a look back at how you spend your time. The anxiety of being overworked may cause you to turn first to whatever is on top of your pile, rather than prioritize. The stress of not getting things done can cause an emotional outburst at anyone or anything that crosses your path at the wrong time. Therefore it is important to prioritize your work tasks and take the time to react and evaluate your responsibilities. Perhaps a time management course would be helpful as well.

Understanding these bad habits can help employees avoid emotional triggers and be more proficient at work at the same time.

SUMMARY: Tips for Dealing with Emotions at Work

- Effective management skills encompass more than getting the job done and meeting company quotas. Being sensitive to the non-work related concerns of employees can prove to be equally as important.
- Maintaining a non-hostile work environment that balances the behaviors and needs of employees can effectively improve productivity.
- Offer and encourage stress management courses.
- Be proactive, and take steps to avoid unnecessary emotional outbursts.
- Watch your anger and avoid uncontrolled confrontations which will bring out inappropriate emotions and behaviors.
- Take necessary disciplinary action when employees express their emotions in an unacceptable way.
- Be aware of employee workloads and other employee anxieties. This is especially important during times of big change (mergers, lay offs, etc.).
- Understand that people have lives outside of the workplace that can affect their work positively and negatively.
- Be sure that staff understands what is acceptable behavior and what is grounds for insubordination.
- Encourage open inter-office communication, so employees will be more apt to voice their opinions. Weekly meeting and/or individual conferences will keep managers aware of any and all situations (both positive and negative) while also allowing the employees to have a proactive role in the workplace.