

Emotions matter at work



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How do you feel about feelings in the workplace? Now some people argue that emotions have no place at work. They reason that work should be a place only for rational thought and value creation.

But in reality, we all feel emotions automatically and constantly, whether we want to or not. We feel excited when we anticipate something good might happen and then proud and happy when it does. We feel sad when things go wrong or angry when people let us down.

Of course it may be inappropriate to vent extreme emotions. But multiple research studies tell us that covering up or suppressing our emotions exacts a mental toll on us: when we expend energy pretending not to be disappointed, annoyed, or whatever else, we become less effective at tasks such as numerical analysis or problem solving. Clearly, emotions matter at work.

The impact of your emotions matters even more if you're the leader of a team because emotions are contagious. The people around you can't help but be brought down or lifted up by how others – and especially you, their boss – are feeling.

If you don't believe me, just watch how the mood of your own boss affects you. When your boss feels angry, for example, you probably notice that you feel more on edge. You want to stay out of the way and are less likely to voice controversial opinions.

I mentioned that you can't suppress your emotions without experiencing a deficit to your performance. However, you can manage your mood more effectively.

How?

A good start is to become more aware of your emotions. At multiple points throughout the day, you could use what psychologists call the traffic light method for checking your emotions and behaviour:

- **Red light** – stop! What am I feeling? What label (“nervous”, “relieved”, “guilty” and so on) can I attach to how I feel?
- **Amber** – what is this emotion making me want to do or not do? And how is it affecting those around me? For example, anxiety may be discouraging you from confronting a colleague or anger may be bringing the mood of your team down.
- **Green** – what would be a more helpful way of behaving? That might mean, for instance, that you decide to confront your colleague in spite of how you feel. Or that you try to explain to your team why you’re feeling angry so they don’t think that they are to blame.

Perhaps you’re still thinking that this emotional stuff sounds too fluffy and inconsequential. But consider the results of a study conducted within a global accountancy/professional services firm by business school researcher Richard Boyatzis. (Unfortunately, he was not allowed to reveal which firm.) He found that the top performing partners – measured by both sales generation and profitability – were almost no different than mediocre partners in terms of their technical skills or knowledge. No, the key differentiators were their superior emotional and social skills.

In other words, emotional awareness and control helps people to make more money. So when will you work on your emotional skills?