

Emotional Leadership

Are your emotions at work a boon to your organization or a bomb?

Once upon a time, a leadership team had a big problem. While there were eight members in the group, two executives dominated. One executive believed in being emotionally real. She wanted to demonstrate passion for the work, which she did with a raised voice, fervent speeches and, occasionally, tears. The other executive believed in logic and action. From his perspective they had a job to do, and there was no room for emotion. Seeing little value in the other's approach, the executives regularly blocked each other's ideas, a stance that disrupted meetings and sometimes stalled them altogether. Their colleagues, weary of dealing with the emotional intensity and stony silence, avoided tackling difficult issues. Not surprisingly, the leadership team's productivity was abysmally low, as was respect for the group throughout the organization.

While few of us fall into the extremes demonstrated by these executives, many of us could stand to improve how we deal with our own emotions at work. As a leader, you have an even a greater responsibility to manage your emotions. Why? Because a team's emotional climate wields great influence on what you are capable of achieving together. And guess who has the greatest impact in setting that emotional climate—that's right, you do.

The fact is, emotions are contagious, and a leader's emotions will spread faster and farther as others take their cues about workplace norms from above. That's both a challenge and an opportunity. If your emotions have the power to hinder your team, they also have the power to help it. Experienced repeatedly, any dominant emotion can become a pervasive mood. Just as high levels of resentment or fear will close people off to new ideas and opportunities, high levels of excitement and positive energy can do the opposite.

So how do you create a healthy, productive emotional climate? Begin by taking an honest look at the emotional tone you're setting for your team.

Do co-workers often come to you for advice or assistance? If so, you're likely perceived as an empathetic leader. Some people can walk into a room and sense the subtlest hint of emotional strain or discomfort. Their empathy is so finely tuned that they can read, often with a high degree of accuracy, what others are coping with. As evidenced by much of the current literature on emotional intelligence, the ability to empathize helps a leader build trust with employees, which influences engagement and commitment.

Do employees and peers seem wary of approaching you with contentious issues?

Do you find yourself getting angry or irritable when they do? While authenticity in the workplace can build trust, if you are too quick to share your anger it may prevent your team from coming to you with problems or even opportunities. Mind you, consistently suppressing your emotions can also be counterproductive. Sensing that something is

wrong but lacking solid information, people may jump to their own conclusions, which can be more harmful than the actual emotion you've tried to hide. In the long run, attempting to understand why you react so negatively in certain situations will be more productive than covering up such feelings.

What mood dominates your average workday? Once a pervasive mood of negativity takes hold of an individual it can be incredibly tenacious and difficult to shift. The same goes for a team. Pay attention to your emotional responses to different individuals and situations. Is your mood predominantly positive or negative? By increasing your awareness you increase your ability to choose a different response.

There are many things we can do to improve the emotional climate in our workplaces. Trusting and honest relationships with mentors, colleagues and coaches can help to build skill in this domain. There are also professional assessments that can give you a deeper understanding of where you are now. Again, the first step is being honest with yourself about how your emotions are affecting your leadership. It's not always easy, but it's worth it. When our leaders are more aware of their emotions and how they impact the people they work with, we're all better off. Just ask those other four executives.

Rosie Steeves (rosie@refineryleadership.com) is the co-principal of The Refinery Leadership Partners Inc., a Vancouver based consulting company. This article was written in collaboration with Lisa Eckmyn, a Refinery consultant. For more ideas on leadership and change, visit our website at www.refineryleadership.com or contact us at info@refineryleadership.com.

This article previously appeared in the March issue of BIV.