

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



ESSENTIAL
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TELE 818.788.5357
info@essentialcomm.com
www.essentialcomm.com

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Dealing with Emotional Responses ▶ 05/06/10

The do's and don'ts

I've known Charlotte more than twenty years. We've often joked that somewhere along the line our gender roles got swapped. She is analytical, results-driven and uncomfortable in the realm of feelings. I, on the other hand, am high in empathy and intuition, and enjoy processing things—some say a little too much!

Recently, she asked for a little coaching.

"I've got a crier," she moaned. "This woman's got high potential but she needs a lot of guidance. The moment I give her any sort of feedback, she looks like I ran over her cat and the river starts flowing. You know me, Tom, I'd rather eat raw eggs than face the waterworks."

Charlotte's not alone; most of the high-performing men and women I coach are uncomfortable with emotion in the workplace—whether it's tears, anger, defensiveness or self-deprecation. I gave Charlotte my six points for dealing with emotions, three do's and three don'ts. I'll begin with the don'ts.

Don't get infected

When someone's emotions are running high, you're in a danger zone: emotions are highly contagious. One reason Emotional Intelligence (EQ) has so much traction these days is the evidence showing that we transmit emotions to each other almost instantaneously.

So the first rule for dealing with emotions: don't get infected. Inoculate yourself.

When I feel the risk of infection rise from escalating emotions, I imagine zipping myself inside a little pop-up tent. As emotions spray the room, I picture myself completely sealed in my protective tent except for a little porthole I unzip so I can watch the proceedings from a safe emotional distance.

If you can remain calm and unflustered by the person's emotion, you may help him regain some control. A matter-of-fact response—without judgment or disapproval or diminishment—can begin to de-escalate the emotion.



Rule one: Stay calm. Be separate. Don't get infected.

Don't take it personally

I asked Charlotte how she was contributing to this woman's emotional response.

She thought for a moment, then ventured, "I don't think I'm contributing. I think she cries over her kid's report card."

This is a crucial point.

When faced with an emotional response, ask yourself if you've contributed significantly. If you have, lessen your impact: it won't help your career to be known as a person who induces terror or reduces others to tears.

But usually the emotion resides within the other person and is not about you—even though it happens in response to something you said.

What feels awkward is the sense that you should do something to comfort the person who is upset.

The truth is, if the emotion has nothing to do with you, you don't have to "do" anything. If it's not about you, you can't make things better; it's their emotion connected to their personal history.

Rule two: Don't take their emotion personally. It's not about you.

Don't get sidetracked

During an emotional reaction, all sorts of alarms are firing in the person's brain. His thoughts are zipping like a pinball. He is deep into a reaction. Any manner of things may come out of his mouth.

Don't react to his reaction by getting sucked into a discussion of irrelevant side issues.

Listening is fine. It can even be helpful to acknowledge the reaction in a neutral way. A comment like, "I see this is hard for you," or "I understand this is upsetting for you," can help diminish the emotion. But don't take the bait of all the random topics that get thrown out.

Rule three: Don't go down rat holes. Don't get sidetracked.



Do state your intention

Did you initiate this conversation? If so, why? Will it improve the person's performance? Is it a follow-up to a prior conversation? Is this a consequence of some violation of values or behavior?

Don't enter this conversation without forethought.

Just as you should be prepared with phrases that acknowledge the person's emotion, be prepared to state what your intentions are as well as what they are not.

For example:

"It's not my intention to upset you. It *is* my intention to keep our agreement to address this behavior whenever it comes up."

"I'm talking about this with you because I want to keep you moving towards more responsibility. But I don't want to sound blaming or shaming."

Clearly stating your intentions will help you stay on track and may help the other person focus on why the conversation is important.

Rule four: State what your intentions are and what they are not.

Do hold people accountable

It is important that you view the situation as an "and" situation: This person is having an emotional response AND he needs to be accountable for what's being discussed.

You can use "AND" statements such as:

"I see how upsetting this is for you AND I need you to really hear this feedback."

"This is obviously difficult for you AND I still need you to understand what behaviors I'd like to see in the future."

Sometimes getting the emotional person physically engaged in the conversation can help calm him down and also make him accountable. For example, you might ask him to write down what's being discussed. Similarly, asking him to listen carefully and repeat back what he hears can focus his attention enough to begin diminishing the emotion.



Rule five: Hold people accountable. Emotions don't absolve the person of personal responsibility.

Do take a time out—if necessary

I prefer to work through the emotion without a time out. But if the person really can't listen or focus, then take a time out. But make it short. Set a specific time to begin the conversation again. Ten minutes. Or thirty. Not hours. Certainly not days.

Rule six: Keep time outs short.

We judge maturity in each other in many ways. One measure is our ability to manage ourselves. The person who has frequent emotional reactions needs to learn to manage him or herself. And, as I told Charlotte, when faced with the emotion of others, managing your own reaction to the emotion is critical to achieving *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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