

First Things First

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I recently read some advice suggesting that when we're stressed or feeling non-positive emotions because of situations out side work—the illness of a spouse or child, a divorce, or other personal problem--employees should hide their emotions and pretend to be eager and positive.

I can't endorse that advice.

Let me tell you a little story that shows why.

The other day I had conference call scheduled with a colleague, Alysa. We'd emailed back-and-forth before hand, so we had a rough agenda going into the meeting. It only took a minute to list the 3-4 topics.

“Where should we start?” I asked.

“Let's start with the conference session. No, I mean the consulting proposal. Did you send me email about this?” Alysa said.

“Yep, last Tuesday,” I said.

“Oh, I guess I lost it. Sorry, I'm sort of spacey today.”

“That's OK,” I said. “I have it right here,” and started listing the open items.

“Did I tell you my husband's been laid off?” Alysa blurted.

“No....sounds like we should talk about that first,” I said. “Tell me what happened.”

Alysa told me the about the layoff, how she was trying to give her husband, Harvey, support, and what Harvey was doing to find a new job. She was feeling anxious, worried, and angry. Mostly I listened and offered a few words of commiseration.

After about five minutes, Alysa had finished her story.

“Ok, I can concentrate on our agenda now,” Alysa said.

We continued our meeting, accomplished what we set out to, and ended the meeting on time.

Here's the paradox: If I had tried to force Alysa to stick to the agenda from the start, and told her that Harvey's layoff was off-topic, we would not have gotten our work done. Alysa wouldn't have been fully present or focused. By taking a few minutes to acknowledge what was happening, we were able to move on to productive work.

We all deal with the potential for people to be emotionally pre-occupied at work everyday. It may be an argument with a spouse or a sick child. Perhaps the school has called to report that Junior is up for detention. All sorts of events outside of work come with us when we enter the office door. Work events can cause emotional responses, too. Mergers, re-orgs, new bosses, downsizing, and even mundane events can create emotional situations. We don't turn off our human-ness or our emotions when we come to work.

For the organization, ignoring emotions takes a toll on productivity—people are distracted and unable to focus. For individuals, it adds to stress and alienation.

Now, I don't believe that we should let it all out at work—even when we know our co-workers really well, we're not in the bosom of our family. Consider the context recognize that we are all human, and our emotions are part of what and who we are. We need to manage our emotions, not hide, fake, or ignore them. Deal with the “human stuff” first, and it will be easier to get the work done.

Here are some strategies for managing emotions that make it to the office:

Confide in a friend.

Alysa and I know each other pretty well, and it was only the two of us in the meeting. Alysa feels comfortable saying things to me that she might not choose to say in a more formal meeting.

Sometimes it's enough to tell someone what's going on, like Alysa did with me. If you have a good friend at work, talk to him or her. Often when we feel heard and understood it's easier to put the matter aside and concentrate.

Acknowledge emotional responses.

Karen, a team lead in a software company, was upset because her manager, Ted, had countermanded a technical decision she had made. When Karen told Ted she was upset, Ted responded “I've thought about it, and there's no reason for you to feel that way.” Karen was not soothed.

We feel that way we feel, whether there's a “reason” or not. Ted would have made more headway had he simply accepted Karen's emotional response and talked about solving the problem... clarifying decision boundaries.

Notice what's happening.

Earlier this month I was working with a group to surface requirements. I noticed that one of the key experts, Rosalind, was awfully quiet and kept looking down at her hands. When I looked more closely, I could see there were tears in her eyes. When we reached a reasonable stopping point, I called a break and called Rosalind aside.

“What’s happening for you?” I asked. Rosalind had just learned that her husband had cancer. We took the time before the break ended to decide what to do. Rosalind decided she’d stay for the session, and leave to be with her husband as soon as the meeting was over. Having that settled and telling someone what was going on allowed her set aside her worry and distress (at least for a short while) to participate in the requirements gathering session.

Use check-ins.

For a longer meeting or working session that requires everyone’s participation, consider doing a short check-in. A check-in serves as a boundary between outside and inside the meeting and allows people to say just a bit about their background noise, if they choose to. Something as small as being stuck in traffic and feeling rushed can block concentration. Saying it aloud can help to let it go.

Use the resources available.

Sometimes emotional distractions last longer than a few days. Jon, a programmer on my team, went through a nasty custody negotiation when he divorced. He needed to take time off work for legal appointments and mediation. When Jon came to talk to me about it, he was worried that between the emotions, stress, and time off, his work would suffer.

I put Jon in touch with the company’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP). He was able to find a support group for divorcing dads. (I didn’t try to be Jon’s therapist... that wasn’t my job as a manager. I did put him in touch with HR and worked out a flexible schedule with him, both of which were within my job as a manager.) Jon was able to remain productive at work.

If your company has an EAP, you usually don’t need to wait for your manager to bring it up. It’s there for you to use and there’s no shame in seeking support to cope with a difficult life event.

Manage employees who can’t or won’t manage themselves.

Once in a great while I encounter people who are unable to manage their emotions at work. It’s not your job to be a therapist or to fix your employees. When a member of your team is repeatedly unable to focus on work because of emotional issues, coach the employee to obtain appropriate professional help. If the employee continues to be unable to focus and do the work he’s paid to do, coach him out of the job.

What do you do to manage emotions at work? What's the price of ignoring emotions at work?