

# Interpersonal of managing emotion at work



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AListair Ostell, Sian Baverstock and Peter Wright outline ways of handling damaging emotional reactions.

**O**UR primary focus here is on managing the emotional reactions of others — colleagues, subordinates, even managers — at work, although most of the principles and tactics discussed are also relevant to self-management. We begin by considering emotion at work and whether such emotion *should* be ‘managed’.

## Emotions at work

Although organisations have been portrayed as unemotional places, this is far from the truth. The emotional experience of people at work is often varied and intense (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). It can also be positive or negative: individuals might be elated at gaining a promotion, fearful of redundancy, excited by a new project, furious about their managers’ behaviour, jealous of a colleague’s success, and so on.

Emotions and their associated behaviours often lead to beneficial outcomes. Excitement is infectious because it can stimulate others to action through ‘emotional contagion’ (Hatfield et al., 1992). Happiness or joy resulting from achievement might promote further efforts to achieve, while high personal engagement in work can be emotionally satisfying and thus self-reinforcing (Kahn, 1992).

Alternatively, expressing frustration may at times be the only way to challenge deeply entrenched ideas. Even generating worry in others is sometimes necessary to promote behavioural change, as when a doctor issues a health warning to a patient.

However, whether experienced positively or negatively, emotional reactions are dysfunctional when they have adverse effects upon judgement, task performance, individual well-being and relations with others (Ostell, 1996a). For example, in a task simulating the performance appraisal of employees, Sinclair (1988) found that appraisers in an elated state considered less information, and were less accurate in picking up the appraisees’ positive and negative behaviours, than appraisers in a more ‘depressed’ mood.

Some organisations prescribe particular emotional behaviours for certain roles (e.g. the ‘smiling welcome’ of a hotel receptionist or ‘caring support’ of a paediatric nurse). Hochschild (1979) describes the effort of performing these behaviours, which can be taxing psychologically, as ‘emotional labour’.

Further, the damaging effects of, for instance, strong anger on interpersonal relations, or suppressed anger on individual well-being, are well documented (Averill, 1982; Chesney & Rosenman, 1985; Ostell, 1992; Spector, 1975). Such effects were graphically illustrated in the recent BBC series *Hotel*, which explored staff and customer relations at the Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool.

## Managing emotion?

The concept of managing other people’s emotions is an emotive issue! To some, it smacks immediately of exploitation. This undoubtedly occurs when managers

intimidate subordinates, staff ostracise colleagues, or subordinates employ particular emotional strategies to influence their managers.

Our purpose is to outline ways in which people’s emotional behaviour can be managed at work for the benefit of those concerned. ‘Managed’ does not mean denying or suppressing emotion. Rather, it means enabling people to fulfil their job demands, while avoiding the adverse consequences of unregulated emotional behaviour.

We acknowledge that, in cases when the goals of two people are incompatible, one party might benefit at the expense of another — particularly in the context of manager/subordinate relations. This is inevitable. Yet, in such cases, emotion management can still occur in a way that takes constructive account of the needs, goals and circumstances of those involved (Ostell, 1996a).

## Objectives and strategies

Attempts to manage emotional behaviour focus around two objectives. First, they can be a means to an end. For example, reducing an employee’s fury about not being promoted so as to be able to discuss, more calmly and rationally, how chances of future promotion can be improved. Alternatively, emotion management can be more of an end in itself: helping someone who characteristically reacts in emotional and dysfunctional ways to respond in a more constructive and

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ersonally satisfying manner.

Managing everyday emotional experience can be achieved through two broad strategies: changing external circumstances and changing ways of thinking about those circumstances (Ostell, 1991). The emotional reactions of people at work often stem from the behaviours of their colleagues, managers and subordinates. In this case, the 'offending party' can, if aware, simply change their behaviour (e.g. by not making disparaging, vocal remarks about another person). Managers, in particular, often have control over the situational factors causing problems, so they can resolve a subordinate's difficulties directly by such actions as obtaining resources, extending deadlines or taking action to prevent harassment.

However, situations are not always amenable to change, or require time for it to occur. Colleagues might also refuse to modify actions which others find offensive. In these instances, it is important that people facing such circumstances learn how not to generate dysfunctional emotional reactions in themselves. Managers and colleagues can assist in this process by helping these people change how they think about the potentially distressing circumstances (Ostell, 1991, 1992; see Principle 4 below).

## Principles and tactics

There is a paucity of research into emotional behaviour in organisations. Pekrun & Frese (1992) have commented that 'there is little

research that speaks directly to the issue of work and emotion' (p.153). Thus, the principles and tactics for the management of such behaviour, discussed below, have been derived from relevant research (e.g. Baverstock, 1994; Baverstock & Wright, 1996), psychotherapeutic practice (e.g. Ostell, 1988, 1991, 1992) and organisational training experience in such fields as redundancy counselling, dealing with difficult staff and stress management (Ostell, 1996a; Wright & Taylor, 1994).

The principles represent guidelines of good practice in that they increase the probability of managing emotional reactions in such a way as to avoid or minimise adverse effects on the job performance, job satisfaction and general well-being of those concerned. Tactics refer to specific things a manager might say or do to implement a principle.

It is of paramount importance to recognise that managing emotions effectively requires considerable skill, and is not simply a matter of saying certain words (Wright & Taylor, 1994). Unless the tone, pitch and tempo of what is said — and a person's facial expression and gestures — are consistent with the intended effects of the words, the latter will be of little value.

Although we tend to discuss the use of these principles and tactics primarily in the context of line manager/subordinate relationships, they apply equally well to relationships between colleagues. The circumstances in which exchanges take place between the people concerned might be a formal meeting, such as an annual appraisal, or a more *ad hoc* encounter.

**PRINCIPLE 1:** Deal with the emotional reaction before attempting to resolve the problem

When people are emotionally upset, perhaps

angry about an event, it is unlikely that they will be able to engage in rational problem solving until their level of emotion is reduced (Wright & Taylor, 1994). Reflective statements can be a very appropriate tactic here, as can the use of apologies if managers recognise they have behaved inappropriately in some way.

Reflective phrases ('you seem unhappy about...', 'you are annoyed that...') derive from Rogers' (1951) non-directive counselling approach. They seem banal when written down, nevertheless, when used appropriately, they encourage people to admit to and discuss their feelings.

Such phrases also have obvious limitations. First, while they might uncover specific emotions, they offer little insight on how to handle them. Second, reflectives are usually inappropriate when a person is very obviously upset: saying 'you seem annoyed...' to an employee who is visibly enraged and threatening dire action would be somewhat naive (Ostell, 1996a).

Some managers find it difficult to offer an apology, believing that they will be exposed to criticism. Yet they can gain credibility for having 'owned up' and an employee, perhaps feeling justice has been done, is then often willing to focus constructively on the problem.

**PRINCIPLE 2:** Avoid behaviour that heightens adverse emotional reactions  
When attempting to dissipate adverse emotion, it is wise to avoid using emotive verbal expressions which, because of their connotations, are likely to exacerbate the problem (Wright & Taylor, 1994). If employees are already angry, or feeling depressed, describing them or their work as 'stupid', 'worthless' or 'lacking any substance whatsoever' will obviously intensify their emotional state.

Other behaviours that often result in heightened emotion include unconstructive mood matching (UMM) and confrontation. Ostell (1996a) defines UMM as the act of responding to other people in a similar emotional state to the one that they are displaying, with negative consequences. An example is people becoming angry with a colleague because the latter is angry with them.

Confrontation simply disparages another's emotional reactions (e.g. 'don't be so childish', 'getting upset about it won't help'). Recipients of such comments are likely to become more angry or depressed. But they will often disguise their heightened feelings, particularly when dealing with a

manager. As a consequence, behaviour which the manager perceives as firm and effective actually alienates the subordinates, and their relationship just deteriorates.

Modelling the appropriate or desired behaviour would be a better response than UMM or confrontation (Ostell, 1996a). A first step would be to empathise, to convey some understanding of the other person's views. This often encourages the emotional person to respond to calmer and more rational suggestions about, or demonstrations of, how he or she might identify a solution to their situation (see below).

PRINCIPLE 3: Employ behaviours likely to dissipate adverse emotional reactions. Using empathy rather than sympathy is important when attempting to handle negative emotions. Empathising with others involves showing, through non-judgemental questioning and reflecting their views back to them, that the other person's thoughts and feelings are understood (Hallam, 1992). It also encourages looking for a constructive way of dealing with the situation (Ostell, 1996a).

Sympathy, on the other hand, involves a heightened awareness of need or suffering in other people and a desire to alleviate it. The sympathiser often encourages (inadvertently) the other person to maintain their current emotional state by agreeing with and reinforcing their definition of circumstances ('Poor you, how terrible, it's no wonder you want to give up!').

Other tactics for lessening negative emotion (see Ostell, 1996a) include: giving someone permission to express emotions they are finding difficult to control; 'normalising' emotional reactions by reassuring the other person that their feelings are commonplace and normal, rather than bizarre; and calling 'time-out' — a temporary end to a discussion so that it can be reconvened later when both parties have had time to control their emotions.

In a recent study, Baverstock (1994) demonstrated that the directive approach of giving advice was associated with effective emotion handling in a work setting, while the overuse of reflectives could be ineffective.

PRINCIPLE 4: Recognise differences between emotions

If we are to manage either our own emotional behaviour or that of others, we need to know how and under what circumstances specific emotions are aroused, and by what means they can be influenced (Ostell, 1988). It is important not to treat all emotional reactions in the same way, as different emotions tend to

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be provoked and sustained by different patterns of thinking (Lazarus, 1991; Williams *et al.*, 1988). Consider three employees who have failed to gain a promotion: one feels angry, another anxious and the third depressed.

Anger often arises when people perceive that their important demands have been violated (e.g. 'I ought to have been promoted'), and it is maintained by ruminations about injustice ('it's not fair'), blaming others and sometimes 'getting even' (Ostell, 1992).

Anxiety, on the other hand, arises when people anticipate negative consequences which they believe they probably cannot control ('Having not been promoted I'll be stuck here for years'). Anxiety is often sustained by overestimating the likelihood and negative consequences of future events ('I'm certain to have to ... it will be intolerable').

People tend to feel depressed when they see themselves as unable to influence the course of events and prevent the occurrence of negative consequences ('That's my career finished!'). Depressive feelings are reinforced and maintained by ideas of helplessness and self-blame ('It's all my fault, I should have...') (Garber *et al.*, 1980).

It is often possible to manage such emotions in others over the short term: for instance, by apologising to an angered person, or by convincing someone who is anxious that the anticipated event is controllable and its consequences manageable. Similarly, identifying ways in which individuals can improve a situation (if feasible), convincing them of their ability to do so and perhaps providing them with some support, can lessen or dispel a depressed mood (Ostell, 1996a).

If these negative emotional states are well established, and particularly if there are no obvious external actions that can be taken to help the individual, then a manager might need to obtain more professionally qualified help for the person concerned.

PRINCIPLE 5: Where appropriate, attempt to find a solution to the underlying problem

Once negative emotion is dissipated, attempt can be made to find ways of resolving the problem that provoked the initial emotional reaction. This is important with respect to emotion management because, unless the underlying problem is dealt with, negative emotional reactions are liable to recur.

This stage will not be necessary if a person is satisfied simply to have had the opportunity to express their feelings. In a work context, however, managers can often resolve, or help their staff resolve, problems. Employees often feel very aggrieved with their manager if such help is not forthcoming.

Attempts to resolve the problem can be made using a non-directive approach where a manager helps a subordinate to find suitable solutions. With a 'double-funnel' questioning technique (Wright & Taylor, 1994), the manager first helps the subordinate identify the underlying causes of a problem. This is done through using open and probing questions, comparisons and hypotheticals, narrowing down to closed questions. The technique is repeated to help the subordinate discover a solution for him- or herself.

Directive methods (e.g. offering advice, telling what to do) are also commonly used in a work context, and may be particularly necessary with some subordinates and certain types of problems.

PRINCIPLE 6: Learn to 'actively accept' reality

Implicit in much of the foregoing discussion is the assumption that once people manage their emotions, they are then in a position to deal with the underlying problem that provoked their feelings. It is important to recognise that there are personal and work situations that cannot be solved, either because they are unchangeable (e.g. bereavement), or because others decide that the situation will not change (e.g. being made redundant, implacable opposition to a person's promotion). Circumstances such as these — that are by no means uncommon — often provoke intense reactions of anger or depression, which can prove disabling for long periods (Ostell, 1992).

In such cases the emotional person needs to actively accept reality. This entails learning to 'let go' of unattainable desires or goals (e.g. desire that the deceased person be alive, the redundancy be revoked) and to find ways of dealing with the circumstances they face in a constructive manner (Ostell, 1996a).

In theory, managers can help staff come to terms with these situations. In practice, however, third party help is often needed because staff can find it difficult to relate to

manager who is, or is perceived as, responsible for what has happened to them.

### Managerial role

People are often unsure about whether and how to respond when faced with emotional others at work. For some managers, it is a nightmare: they are comfortable dealing with risk-related issues but not emotional employees. Four guidelines can advise managers about this matter.

First, they should deal with disruptive emotional behaviour, not suspected emotional problems that might involve them prying into the personal experience of their staff. Second, it is important to distinguish between everyday emotional reactions (e.g. anger regarding the size of a bonus) and emotional problems of a more complicated nature (e.g. work-related post-traumatic stress) which should be left to professionals.

Third, it is important to focus on helping staff find ways of better managing situations and their reactions, instead of attempting to diagnose personality problems, which could result in the employee being stereotyped. Fourth, if managers find that they are operating beyond their experience, it is time to refer the employee for expert help (Ostell, 1996a).

### Developing skills

Emotion handling is something we learn, often by default, as we grow up. It is an activity about which many parents and teachers appear to lack insight. Therefore, it is not surprising that, as adults, people often shy away from it. Yet effective emotion handling is important at work, both in terms of self-management and of managing others. There are many potentially emotional situations (e.g. appraisal, grievance and disciplinary interviews, communicating bad news, etc.) which need to be handled skilfully.

Skill development is usually best facilitated through structured training in a non-threatening context where people can receive detailed feedback on their performance. We have designed various interpersonal skills courses, mainly using role-playing scenarios, in which participants can practise different behavioural approaches to handling emotional others or delivering bad news.

The responses of participants have been very positive to these events (Ostell, 1996a; Wright & Baverstock, 1997). Such training does not lead to immediate competence, but provides people with a firm basis for better handling negative emotional reactions. This should limit, if not pre-empt, the adverse

effects of such reactions on job performance, interpersonal relations and general well-being.

### Riders and recommendations

Skill or competence at emotion handling is no guarantee of success in dealing with others. Employees might not be prepared to discuss certain problems with a manager, however skilled, whom they see as responsible for provoking their emotional reactions. Nor will they discuss matters with someone in whom they sense a lack of 'genuineness'.

Further, implicit in our discussion is the assumption that managers and employees view organisational goals, practices and culture similarly. When this is not true, it could be difficult for a manager to understand and relate effectively to the reactions of an emotional employee (Ostell, 1996a).

Adaptability, which is a feature of skilled performance, will often be a key to the successful application of the principles and techniques discussed above. Observational studies of everyday situations in which people manage emotional exchanges, and comparisons of trained and untrained people in such settings, could provide valuable insights into adaptability and how it can be developed.

There is an increasing incidence of litigation by employees who believe their emotional problems arise from their job demands, working conditions and relationships. To fulfil their duty of care to all employees with respect to these issues, organisations need to develop sensible employment policies, work practices and jobs (Ostell, 1996b). Appropriate training of staff to handle everyday, dysfunctional emotional reactions when they arise, will also be needed.

Occupational psychologists can make important contributions in the areas of training and of helping organisations to develop work policies and practices that promote both the achievement of organisational goals and a supportive work culture.

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