

When emotions run high

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You've just announced another round of layoffs. A recent high-visibility project went very badly, leaving work relationships in tatters. Staff members are giving each other the cold shoulder. When you ask questions to understand what's going on, all you get are vague statements and veiled references.

How do you handle broken work relationships? What do you do when conflict seems to be bubbling just under the surface? How do you begin to restore trust and respect when anger and frustration are running high?

While you might wish to work in an environment where you never have to delve into the world of emotional or personal conflict, there are times when individuals and groups must have an opportunity to vent their concerns and feelings. They need to unload emotionally before getting down to work. They need to "vent." My friend Nancy Robb, a manager at Seattle City Light, calls this "degriefing."

In the conflict resolution and team building work I do, I have found that often the only way to *decrease* emotional conflict in the long term is to *increase* it in the short term. When emotions run so high that they cannot simply be put aside, they must be addressed head on. People need to have an opportunity to vent their feelings with each other.

Here's an example. Recently, I have been facilitating labor contract bargaining for a government agency. When we first started out building our agenda, we found that there was a backlog of complaints, perceptions, questions and strong emotions that needed to be expressed before we could get to work on the contract itself.

We had to vent these other issues in order to start building a productive and healthy work relationship. Once we dealt with the pent up need, the group was able to focus on the contract and get to work. (We were using a negotiating process—interest-based bargaining—that was new to people.)

Venting is not easy, and most people want to avoid it. It is risky because you don't want to make an already bad situation worse. It takes courage, patience and time for everyone feeling safe enough to say what's on their minds. Fear of venting is one of the primary factors that hurts team performance, delays projects and thwarts team building.

Yet, I find that venting, when it happens, is almost always not as bad as people fear. Under the right conditions and with good facilitation, a group can work through venting and get on to "business matters," provided that the venting process is allowed to play out.

How venting helps build trust and respect

In successful venting, the players lay out those issues and work through them together. This means that each person has an opportunity to express their concerns, perspectives and intentions—to

unload what's on their mind. Others listen respectfully, ask genuine questions, and then share their intentions and perspectives.

After everyone has had a turn to say their piece and be heard, and differences in perspectives have been resolved—or at least acknowledged—the group can then move on to making some agreements about how to work together and what to work on. By this point, trust and respect should be on the mend. Not totally restored but improved, because that can only be achieved by establishing a track record over time.

When venting works well, it helps people to reestablish mutual trust and respect by establishing a track record of listening and honesty. Topics and concerns that might have been considered out-of-bounds are directly discussed.

On the other hand, if the venting process is cut short or mishandled, it can lead to an increase in negative, destruction emotions and even greater difficulties getting the group to focus on the work at hand.

How can you make sure that venting works to build trust and respect? Here are some tips:

1. Determine that your group needs some venting. Are there strong emotions or opinions that people are stifling? Are you seeing more email traffic and less face-to-face talking? Do people seem to be walking on eggshells? Each of these can indicate a brewing problem.
2. Ask yourself, "Am I truly committed to doing what's needed to improve working relationships, including venting?" In my labor contract bargaining example, we made progress because both management and labor leaders were strongly committed to improving their working relationship. They believed union and management members needed to be able to vent before being able to move on.
3. Set up a special time and place for venting. Make sure to allow plenty of time so that everyone has a turn to talk and be heard. The process is likely to take longer than you expect. You may have to do more than one round of taking turns to get everything out on the table.
4. As the senior person (supervisor, manager or director) in the group, you are modeling behavior for others. Make sure you are listening closely and respectfully to what people are saying, and paraphrasing particularly important remarks.

Trust and respect

When trust and respect are low, people feel fear and anger. Fear that they can't trust others, and anger at not being treated with respect.

What is the difference between trust and respect? Trust means that you understand each other's motives and support each other in achieving your goals. In other words, there are no hidden agendas or plans to undermine each other.

Mutual respect means that each person considers everyone else important and deserving of being heard. What they feel and think about something is worthy of careful consideration. The ultimate way to show respect to someone is to truly hear and honor what they say—even if you see things differently. By listening to what people are thinking and feeling, you demonstrate that you care. You show respect.

Respect has to come before trust. You have to feel that the other person respects you before you will trust them.

You can't build trust and respect directly, with pleas, speeches or games. Trust and respect increase over time based on experience, not promises.

5. Do your best to treat what people say as “data” that can help you and the team succeed. You don’t have to agree with what people are saying, but you must hear and understand it. They need to see you taking their point of view seriously, so that they feel respected by you.
6. Make sure that others in the group listen, ask genuine questions, and really understand what the speaker is saying. If someone takes offense or gets defensive, ask them to wait for their turn to share their perspective.
7. In some cases—as the “boss”—you may have to “prime” the group with a question that indicates your openness to hearing “bad news.” If you have venting of your own, speak later, after you’ve established yourself as a strong listener.

Whatever the business issue at hand, when emotions are running high or trust and respect are running low, it’s essential to deal with the “elephants in the living room” in order to be able to move on to the business at hand.

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