

10 Workplace Behaviors You'll Regret (and How to Avoid Them)

For many of us, maintaining a professional demeanor in the face of daily workplace stress can feel like its own full-time job. It's called "emotional labor." This is where we actively manage our feelings (and the expression of those feelings) to have professionally appropriate interactions with customers, clients, co-workers, and higher-ups.

It includes both the expression of emotions, and the suppression of emotions that are felt but cannot be expressed.

The expectation to consistently express positive emotions at work can feel difficult. But not managing to suppress negative emotions can be damaging -- especially when these emotions trickle out in other ways. And when they do ooze out, they often lead to behaviors that may feel good in the moment as we release some pent-up negativity, but that tends to cause a "shame hangover" the next day. Here are some examples:

1. Giving someone the silent treatment, hoping they'll take the initiative and ask you, "Hey, did I do something wrong?"
2. Making cruel comments about someone's appearance.
3. Telling someone "I need to talk to you" and then letting them worry until the meeting.
4. Speaking negatively about someone behind their back (a boss, colleague, or client).
5. Playing devil's advocate just because you enjoy it.
6. Taking credit for someone else's idea.
7. Telling someone why the idea they are really excited about won't work, without offering helpful insights.
8. Saying "I told you so" (or its equivalent).
9. Sharing what you really wanted to say in the meeting after the actual meeting.
10. Asking lots of people for their opinions until you get the opinion you want.

Whether you see yourself as a leader already or becoming a leader is a goal for you, keep in mind that these 10 behaviors are credibility and career killers. Management expert and author Peter Drucker remarked, "We spend a lot of time helping leaders learn what to do. We do not spend enough time teaching leaders what to stop. Half of the leaders I have met don't need to learn what to do. They need to learn what to stop."

So, what do you do if you recognize one or more of these in yourself? Here are some strategies:

Become emotionally fluent.

When we are children, we learn to put words to feelings, known as "verbalization of affects." Then many of us stop learning how to do that. Furthermore, we are often discouraged from naming how we feel -- especially at work.

As a result, many of us have a limited vocabulary for our emotions, ranging from happy and sad to angry and wait, what else is there? Emotional labor and its impacts can feel compounded if you don't have the words to describe what feelings you're working to express or suppress. Start naming what you feel and you'll notice an increase in your emotional fluency.

Find a healthy emotional outlet.

When you don't have a safe or appropriate place to express how you feel, your emotions are likely to come out in destructive ways -- to you and to others. Find a person whom you can share openly and honestly with (without making them your punching bag). Find an activity that allows you to release your emotion, whether it's yoga or a book club. Do something that lets you express yourself directly, honestly, and regularly.

Make a deal with your future self.

Badmouthing your boss might feel terrific today -- but it won't tomorrow. Playing devil's advocate with your colleague might feel like a victory today -- but it won't tomorrow. Before you engage in any behavior that might give you instant emotional relief, think about your last "shame hangover" -- and how you'd prefer to feel tomorrow. Your future self will thank you for considering her emotional needs.

Emotional labor is work, indeed. And it's worth doing the work to make sure the behaviors that emerge from managing your emotions are ones that boost rather than break your career.