



Understanding Guilt in the Workplace

Guilt is a feeling we experience when we believe we have done something wrong or bad, or when we have not done something we think we should have. Guilt lingers when we dwell on thoughts of what we should or should not have done. In some situations (e.g., if you did in fact act in a way you shouldn't have), guilt is a natural and helpful response that motivates attempts to apologize or repair the damage. There are times, however, when guilt does not serve a useful purpose, and it can disrupt effective functioning in the workplace.

Guilt can often involve negative, self-judgmental thoughts (*"I should have"*, *"I shouldn't have"*), potentially causing us to see ourselves as bad, irresponsible, undeserving or selfish. Guilt can have mental and physical manifestations similar to sadness or anxiety. It might be felt in the gut ("pangs" of guilt), or lead to increased heart rate, rapid breathing or dryness in the throat. There can be a strong ruminative component to guilt, meaning we continue to dwell on guilty thoughts well beyond what might be useful in seeking a solution to their cause. It can thereby cripple us physically, destroying our motivation to do anything other than thinking about the guilt. Lethargy or fatigue can set in.

When we feel guilty, our natural response is to do something to offset the feeling, to right the wrong. This might mean saying something to justify the actions that caused the guilt. We might, for example, explain to others why we did or did not do something, hoping to convince ourselves and others that we were not wrong. Verbally justifying our actions in this way can come across as "being defensive." Guilty actions can also involve doing something to lessen the impact of the perceived wrong. For example, if something we said upset a person, we may do nice things for them to "make up for it." Finally, like other anxiety-related feelings, guilt can also naturally lead to avoidance. Someone who feels guilty about a past event may try to change the subject when someone brings it up in conversation.

The table below contains situations that can provoke feelings of guilt and related anxiety. Notice how these types of guilt-provoking thoughts can make us feel uncomfortable and can push us to do something to rid ourselves of the feeling. Also note how actions could or would be different if the thoughts were different.

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Situation	Guilt-Provoking Thoughts	Guilt-Driven Actions	Guilt-Moderating Thoughts
A manager keeps his job but a few of his workers were laid off due to restructuring.	<i>"I shouldn't be here. I'm not any more deserving than those people to be here."</i>	Dwell on reasons that might justify the layoff decisions and the decision to retain the manager.	<i>"It's normal for me to feel badly for the workers, and in fact shows I care...but I deserve my job and have worked hard for it and feeling guilty won't change the situation."</i>
A manager is respectfully giving negative feedback to a worker. The worker begins to cry.	<i>"I am such a jerk. I shouldn't have raised my voice. I'm a bad person."</i>	Desperately try to comfort the worker. Take back the criticisms and apologize profusely.	<i>"I had to provide the feedback, and not giving it wouldn't serve anyone well. I did the best I could to be respectful and understanding as I delivered the message."</i>
A manager sees that her worker is struggling because she has not found time to train him properly.	<i>"I am an irresponsible manager."</i>	Avoid looking at the worker. Try to make it up to them by lowering expectations about their work.	<i>"I've had so many demands on me that it's been impossible to do everything...the best I can do is express to the worker how I feel and set a time for when I can</i>

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			<i>provide proper training."</i>
A project is delayed for the entire department because a manager was unable to have his team complete their contribution by the deadline.	<i>"I have failed everybody. I dropped the ball. I am irresponsible."</i>	Do extra favours for others, offer to take on extra work on a future project.	<i>"The project has been huge and there is only so much I can realistically get done. I am usually excellent at meeting my deadlines."</i>
A manager finds out that one of her workers has skipped visiting home for Christmas in order to help finish a project she is leading.	<i>"It's all my fault that she can't be with her family for Christmas. I don't deserve her dedication."</i>	Apologize to the worker for "making her miss Christmas." Offer to help do her share of the workload.	<i>"I repeatedly and sincerely conveyed that I did not want her to change her plans and that we would manage without her. I can't be responsible for her choice."</i>
A manager has placed a worker on probation due to poor performance. The worker seems devastated.	<i>"I'm such a jerk. She doesn't deserve to be treated this way. I really should be more understanding."</i>	Be lenient on the rules of probation, letting the worker go unsupervised again to avoid hurting her feelings. Be extra friendly to all staff to highlight your kind and humane side.	<i>"I know from experience that performance would worsen if there weren't early steps taken to rectify this...it's unfortunate, but it's something that had to be done."</i>

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<p>A worker has requested to meet one-on-one with his manager to discuss further opportunities. Three weeks and several reminder emails later, the manager still has not made time to meet the worker.</p>	<p><i>"I don't care enough about my workers. I'm such a bad person."</i></p>	<p>Apologize profusely. Set up an extra long meeting in hope of making up for the delay.</p>	<p><i>"It's not that I don't care about the worker, as I do want to make time. My travel schedule hasn't allowed it, but I will make a commitment to schedule a meeting that occurs within the next two weeks."</i></p>
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Sometimes being a manager involves doing things you wouldn't normally do in your personal life, such as providing negative feedback or giving directive orders. When you do these things at work, you might start to doubt yourself and feel guilty. Guilt can drive us to do things that bring short-term emotional relief, but long-term difficulty. For example, a problem some managers face is having trouble saying "no". We may take on burdensome extra work simply because we feel obligated due to guilty feelings that we are not being a good manager. This can lead to poor work/life balance. Another danger related to guilt is that when we are overly apologetic, or always sound defensive when challenged, we lose credibility as a manager. It can be important to remember that guilt may not be rational. Sometimes we may in fact be at fault, but sometimes guilt might just result from the dictates of our unfair internal judge. Next time you feel guilty, you may want to ask yourself whether in fact you did anything wrong (e.g., *"Have I really been selfish, or is this just part of my job?"*) If the answer is "yes," then doing something about it, like apologizing or offering to do something for the person you have wronged may be a good strategy. However, if the answer is "no," then you need to be careful not to act against your interests (e.g., taking on work you don't have time for simply out of guilt). It is helpful to notice guilt when you feel it, and to pause to ensure you act rationally rather than simply following your initial feelings.