

Audio Transcript

Effective Emotional Expression at Work

Introduction

Feelings can be complicated, and you might be wondering if it's okay to talk about your feelings at work. Well, the truth is everyone brings their feelings to work, and the most effective leaders and managers they are the ones who recognize that employees are human beings with hopes and fears.

There are times when you'll have to express your feelings to others at work, whether it's through how you say "no" or how you talk directly about your feelings related to a particular situation. Conversations around feelings can be difficult, but not impossible.

In this course, I'll give you some strategies to help you have the difficult conversations. First, I'll discuss three methods to confidently say "no." Then, I'll explain two ways you can prepare to express your feelings, and finally, I'll take you through a six-step process to help you clarify your feelings. By the end of this course, you'll be in a stronger position to tell others exactly how you feel.

Let's get started!

Saying “No”

For some people, the word “no” can feel like the most difficult word to say. But learning how to say “no” can:

- Reduce the other person’s disappointment
- It can limit damage your relationships, and
- Keep others from taking advantage of you.

Now, there are different ways to say “no.”

First, you can use the Empathic “No”

This method softens your “no” by empathizing with the other person.

For example, one of your team members needs help with a challenging, new project, but you already have a lot to do – like meeting an aggressive deadline by the end of the day. You can use the empathic “no” by empathizing with your team member’s situation:

“I’m so sorry that I can’t help you today. I can see this project is really challenging for you, and I hope you can find someone who can help you with it.”

A second way is using the Preemptive “No,” which frees you from actually saying the word “no.” Instead, state facts about your situation that would suggest a “no” response.

Imagine that you’ve heard your manager is looking for someone to work overtime, something you don’t want to do. If your manager approaches you, you can casually mention how many commitments you have after work that day. This can make it less likely that your manager will ask you to work more hours.

Finally, there’s the Broken Record strategy. As the name indicates, you’ll have to shortly and simply restate your refusal. This strategy can be effective when the other person refuses to accept your “no” and tries to pressure you.

Consider this example between Sean and Jacob. Sean approaches Jacob and asks, "I'm really busy. Would you go to this afternoon's meeting in my place?"

Jacob replies, "Sorry, Sean, but I'm very busy myself. I won't be able to cover you this afternoon."

Sean doesn't accept Jacob's "no." "But I'm totally overwhelmed with work. I need some help."

Jacob expresses empathy and restates his refusal. "I'm sorry hear that. It sounds tough, but unfortunately, I won't be able to cover for you this afternoon."

Sean finally stops and leaves Jacob to finish his work.

Now this example shows the importance of politely stating your refusal over and over to emphasize your "no."

Sometimes, you may have to express more than just a "no." Next, I'll explain how you can prepare for expressing how you feel.

Preparing Your Goal

A common mistake when entering a conversation is having the goal of "getting things off your chest," or venting. This goal can lead to an uncontrolled expression of emotion, making the conversation more difficult between both parties.

When preparing to express your feelings, there are two things to consider.

First, is to identify a clear objective that sets out exactly what you want to achieve from the conversation. This is only for you; you don't need to share this with the other person.

Let's go back to our example of Sean and Jacob. Now, imagine that Sean continues trying to pressure Jacob. But you're normally so helpful. Why are you letting me down?

Jacob stays calm. "I'm really glad you find me helpful, and I'm sorry if you let down. But I won't be able to cover for you this afternoon."

Sean angrily leaves. Jacob is now upset over Sean's behavior and wants to talk to him about it. Jacob creates this objective for the conversation:

"To tell Sean how upset I feel about the way he talked to me."

Now it's best to keep your objective focused on the future – how you want things to be from now on. Stay away from anything in the past.

Second thing to consider is the other person's perspective on the situation. If someone has hurt or angered you, it's easy to only see their bad traits or any negative reasons for their actions.

To help you see the other person's perspective, here are some questions to ask yourself:

- How can I see their intentions as positive?
- How do I appear from their perspective? And,
- What might they be afraid of or anxious about?

Jacobs' reflection on these three questions may help him understand Sean's perspective rather than see Sean in an unrealistically negative way. Jacob may also be less likely to adopt an accusing or defensive tone.

So, once you've prepared by considering the other person's perspective, you'll need to understand your feelings before expressing them. I'll explain how to do this next.

Clarifying Your Feelings

A particular situation can cause a mix of anger, disappointment, sadness, and anxiety. But some of these feelings may have little to do with the other person.

So, in order to talk about your feelings, you first need to clarify and understand them by following these six steps.

Step 1: Identify what you're feeling. Think about the situation, and list the feelings that come up.

Step 2: Identify the underlying message. Often, it's not only the other person's actions but also the underlying message in those actions. For example, if your manager expects you to work late under short notice, you might interpret the underlying message as:

"I don't have to worry about inconveniencing you," or "You're not important."

So, identifying how you perceive the underlying message can help explain why you're having a strong reaction.

Step 3: Identify your personal history. Our personal histories influence our interpretation of another person's actions and the feelings that come with it. For example, you felt your parents often ignored you when you were young. As an adult, you might still be sensitive to any suggestion that another person doesn't think you're important. So, when your manager makes you stay late, their action may trigger your childhood sadness, linked to a feeling of not being valued.

Step 4: Clarify how much of your feelings are caused by the other person. Identify how much of your feelings are related to the situation, the underlying message, and your personal history. Going back to the example with your manager, you may identify your anger as coming from the following:

- 20% of your anger is because you don't like to work late
- 40% is because you feel your manager doesn't value you and takes you for granted, and
- 40% triggers childhood memories of your neglectful parents.

Step 5: Talk about your own feelings when you're ready to have the conversation. Never assume the other person's attitude or intention, and always respect that the other person is the expert on their own thoughts and feelings.

Step 6: Don't act out your feelings. For example, instead of glaring at your manager for keeping you late, you might calmly and clearly say, "I feel angry when you ask me to work late under short notice because it inconveniences me."

Before you enter any conversation about your feelings, always take the steps to identify and analyze them. When you do, you'll be able to manage these difficult conversations – and your feelings – a lot more successfully.

Summary:

In this course, you learned:

- The Empathic "No," the Preemptive "No," and the Broken Record are ways to effectively say "no."
- You learned it's important to prepare to express your feelings by identifying a clear objective and seeing the situation from the other person's perspective.
- And you learned to effectively clarify your feelings by involving the six-step process to identify your feelings, analyze their causes, and pinpoint the other person's role in contributing to your feelings.