# Communication & Self-Management

## Emotional Intelligence

## Difficult Conversations

### Executive Summary

*Emotional Intelligence*

Emotions are important in the workplace. Positive and negative emotional reactions are inevitable. Managing your emotions well is a key competency for any supervisor, since only by doing so will you be able to bring out the best in your staff.

1. Amygdala hijack
Our brains evolved to look for threats. In the past, the threats that we perceived were related to our immediate physical survival. Today, our brains also tell us about *symbolic threats*. Unfortunately, the same wiring that would be very appropriate to dealing with a physical threat can caused us to do counterproductive things in the workplace.

When our brains perceive threats, a portion of the brain called the amygdala is activated. This is called the “amygdala hijack”, because it takes over for the prefrontal cortex, which is the home to most of our higher order cognitive abilities. During an amygdala hijack, oxygen goes from our brain to our limbs. We don’t make good decisions when we’re angry because we literally do not have the same brain power. Furthermore, when we are undergoing an amygdala hijack, we may be even more likely to behave in a way that other people perceive as threatening. This can cause an escalation and cause those other people to experience their own amygdala hijack.

1. Symbolic threats
As mentioned above, we are very sensitive to *symbolic* threats. These are threats to things like our dignity, self-respect, sense of autonomy, etc. Concerns about being criticized, losing face, feeling dominated or controlled, or feeling that our “turf” is being intruded upon can all trigger a threat response. Furthermore, for most of us, our job is how we keep a roof over our head and keep food on the table, so that concerns about losing one’s job (however unrealistic they may be) also trigger a strong threat reaction.
2. Fight/flight/freeze
Our most instinctual reaction to threats is to fight, fly, or freeze. While this may be a rare occurrence, we have all heard stories of people who felt so threatened that they hit their boss or walked off the job. More often, people show less dramatic signs of fight or flight. Here are some examples of each. Notice how counterproductive acting out on flight and flight impulses can be in the workplace:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| FightShouting at someoneUsing aggressive gesturesSarcastic commentsTauntingThreats “If you do that one more time …”TeasingBackbiting  | FlightLooking for a new jobGoing around a difficult person to someone easier to deal with.Avoiding difficult conversations.ProcrastinationPerformance anxietyArtificial harmony “Whatever you say.”Calling in sick. |

1. Reactivating Your Prefrontal Cortex
The following techniques can help you to reactivate your prefrontal cortex so that you are in full possession of your faculties and can find constructive next steps:
	* Postpone speeches and emails – the mere act of postponing doing or saying anything starts to give you more control over what you do next
	* Emotional labeling – Say to yourself “I am feeling X.” This will immediately give you more distance from your emotion. If you can calmly express your feelings to others, this will also help to de-escalate and re-establish safety.
	* Moderate your gestures and tone – Again, choosing to do so gives you more control.
	* Notice your breath – Aside from being calming, paying attention to more neutral sensations calms down your nervous system.
	* Test for physical safety – Since the amygdala hijack occurs as a response to a threat response, ensuring that you are physically safe should help. Is there really any threat to your physical health in this situation? Probably you are responding to symbolic threats, not real ones.
	* Go from the Ballroom to Balcony – Use a simple image of seeing yourself on a balcony looking down at a dance to give yourself more neutrality and distance from the situation you are responding to.
	* Ask: “What do I want?” – Only by activating your pre-frontal cortex will you be able to answer this question.
2. Stress Management
	* High stress further heightens the threat response and makes it harder to recover.
	* Every supervisor should have a stress management plan.
	* Look for the “Take a break – stress management” Wellness Workshop on ahealthyme.com (available to Williams BCBS subscribers).
	* On the EAP website, go to: http://www.helloe4.com/personal-well-being/mental-health/stress/

*Difficult Conversations*

1. General Principles
	* Difficult conversations are those that include opposing opinions, strong emotions, and/or high stakes.
	* Avoiding difficult conversations tends to make things worse. Most people avoid difficult conversations because they don’t feel competent to handle them, or they fear jeopardizing their relationships with others.
	* Conducted properly, difficult conversations simultaneously solve problems and strengthen the relationship.
2. Goal Setting. Set a goal for your conversation that:
	* Is within your sphere of influence
	* Beyond winning and losing
	* Makes room for the other person’s perspective
	* Communicates support and respect
3. Contrasting Statements
	* Think about your reservations about having a certain conversation, and your goal for the conversation, and use them to create a contrasting statement.
	* Contrasting statements have the format: “I don’t want X. Instead, Y.”
	* Example: “I don’t want you to think this is all your fault. Instead, I’d like to find out what each of us may have done to contribute to the problem.”
4. Exploring Ladders of Inference
	* We all select data from the outside world and gradually add meanings and interpretations to them, then act on the basis of these.
	* Get to know your ladder of inference first. Especially be aware of what the facts are that you are noticing, and what meanings you are creating from them.
	* Create a conversation in which you share your ladder of inference, and start an inquiry into the other person’s ladder of inference.
	* Don’t take issue with their story – your goal at this phase is to get all the cards on the table.
5. Preferred Working relationship
Another useful frame for a conversation can be to describe:
	* Your current working relationship with the person, as you see it.
	* Your preferred working relationship with them.
	* Ask them how they see it.
	* Work towards a common vision for a preferred working relationship.
6. Communicating Support & Respect

Communicating support and respect is key to creating safety to navigate difficult topics. Try the following strategy.

* + Find out more about the other person’s “path to progress”. What do they need to feel fulfilled and satisfied in this situation?
	+ How can you demonstrate you’re interested in helping them achieve their goals?
	+ Eye contact, neutral tone, and open body language also communicate respect and create safety.
1. Solutions Focused conversations

Difficult conversations often fail because people try to rush to solutions too quickly, and don’t take time to fully understand each other’s point of view first. They also may try to create a final solution to a large complex problem with one marathon session. When you’re ready to move to solutions:

* + Focus on small steps that can make things a little bit better.
	+ Make sure both people are generating solutions.
	+ Make commitments clear and concrete.
	+ Schedule a time to check in about progress.

### Who to Call

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