

# What They Need Most

## 5 Steps to Empathy 'First Aid'



*The last few weeks have delivered, at an unrelenting pace, a never-ending list of challenges ranging from benign to deeply concerning. At the benign end are challenges like mastering the technology that allows us to work in our new environments. At the not so benign end are issues of racial inequality, job loss, uncertainty about the future, concerns about health, and for many, the stress of managing kids, spouses, and other new office mates.*

**We are facing a powerful cocktail of stress, uncertainty, and anxiety.** While these have certainly always been a part of the work experience, they have rarely been the broadly shared and collective experience of most, if not all, employees, at the same time. Indeed, uncertainty and anxiety are now the default.

*The ability to help employees cope has been elevated from useful skill to business-critical need.*

It's important to keep in mind that your organization's front-line managers are helping more of their reports navigate today's challenges, more frequently. Whereas these types of conversations may have been staggered and irregular in the past, they are now a daily or weekly occurrence for many leaders.

**Here, we offer 5 steps of how to provide emotional 'first aid' to employees who need support.** While not a full-bore emotional intelligence tutorial, these simple guidelines will make you and your leaders better responders to employees who 'present' with negative emotions.

Our advice comes from an unexpected place: Clinical Child Psychology. Child psychologists have made a science out of addressing severe and negative emotions, and we find the learnings from this discipline to be largely applicable to improving empathy in the workplace. If you're a parent, you may even recognize the themes, as we have adapted them from the basic processes Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlich outlined in their book: *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen* (Faber & Mazlich, 2012).

Happily, these guidelines work for and with anybody: your kids, spouse, friends, and anyone else who confides in you. Let's dig in to how they apply to the workplace.



### **Step #1: Invite them to talk about their emotions.**

When dealing with kids, few parents have ever complained that their kids are not coming to them for support. Your employees may be a different story. They may simply not know that they can approach you with a request for emotional support. In fact, they may not be comfortable displaying emotions at all, as many employees and managers still find it unprofessional to display emotions. A proactive invitation from you gives them the 'permission' they may need to help break that ice.



#### **Conversation Starters:**

- *How are you feeling these days?*
- *How are things for you outside of work?*
- *How is working from home going?*
- *What kind of challenges have you been facing lately?*

### **Step #2: Listen with full attention.**

When a person addresses you, pay attention to them. This is, objectively, the easiest part of this process and should be quite intuitive. Still, it's an important step to nail in your quest of creating a receptive environment. In personal conversations, turn your head and body toward them, and suggest that you both move to a room in which you have privacy and are not distracted. In a remote work environment, schedule a dedicated call with nothing else on the agenda. Turn on your video to show that you are not doing anything on the side.

### **Step #3: Acknowledge what is being said without adding to it.**

One recommendation from Faber and Mazlish is to acknowledge a child's recounting of a troubling event with neutral statements, e.g., "Oh...", "Mmmm...", "I see...", and not to rush to fill the silence that follows the end of the story. Although these aren't familiar responses for everyone, they allow you to confirm you are listening while reducing your risk of interrupting the speaker. Acknowledging what the other person said means first shutting up and letting the other person explain, 'get it out', and maybe even talk themselves into the solution without your goading.



#### **Step #4: Give a name to the emotion.**

This is the most critical step: labeling your employee's emotion. When done right, your employee will feel seen, heard, and validated.

It's important to understand that this action is not about sharing the emotion. If they are anxious, you don't have to pretend that you are anxious, too. Rather, the goal is for your employee to feel they have *permission* to have an emotion in the first place – that they're allowed to feel the way they do, even at work. By acknowledging their inner experience, you can provide a sense of comfort to the employee. It helps them feel that someone understands.

Some may argue that adults do not need to have their emotions labeled, or that labeling an emotion is condescending. However, we argue the opposite is true.

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*For someone who really is upset, anxious, or even fearful,  
a formal acknowledgement of their experience is very meaningful.*

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#### **Example 1**

Employee: *Things at home are rough. I have to manage my kids on top of work.*

Manager: *That sounds stressful. Not being able to rely on childcare really makes things difficult.*



#### **Example 2**

Employee: *This whole social distancing thing is really getting to me. I miss our team and being able to talk to everybody. My team, my friends...*

Manager: *It's really hard! Our team has a lot of fun together and that's kind of on hold right now.*



#### **Example 3**

Employee: *I'm concerned about going back to work because I have to commute by train. I'm worried about getting sick and making my family sick, too.*

Manager: *This disease is really frightening. I understand why you're worried about the commute.*



Note that the manager response simply validated and described what the employee was experiencing. It restated what they said and captured the emotional response.

Of course, the conversation does not stop here. The employee will likely want a solution, and both can now start developing how to approach this situation. But this important step needed to be taken first. The manager did not jump straight into problem-solving mode; instead, the manager allowed the other person to be seen first.

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*Labeling an emotion addresses the emotional need of the employee, which must be achieved before the leader and employee can begin the problem-solving process.*

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### **Step #5: Find a path forward.**

Where the leader can address the problem directly for the employee, they certainly should. For other occasions, Farber and Mazlish discuss a method of 'granting wishes'. For example, it may be helpful for the manager to express a wish that they *could* make something happen for their employee, even though they can't. Although it may seem a counter-intuitive approach, to the contrary it can be quite an honest and serious response.

Let's illustrate this idea by building off Example 3 from the previous page.



#### **Example 3, continued**

Employee: *Can't we just work from home permanently? Why do we even have to go into the office?*

Manager: *I've thought about that too and wish I could make it happen. In an ideal world, working in the office would be completely optional for everyone.*

Many times, there will be some compromises that directly address the employee's emotions, and you should share with them what this solution looks like. In our example, your company may have made plans to make the workplace safer, and those plans can be shared with your coworker. However, it may comfort the employee to simply know you are aligned with them, and that you share that their wish is desirable.

#### **Putting it all together**

These 5 steps take a little skill, and a lot of practice, to get right, but experience has proven the methods true. In the end, emotions are a powerful part of our lives, and we're living in times where, left unchecked, they can boil over and get everywhere. Having the people around us acknowledge these emotions allows us to feel seen and heard – a powerful source of meaning for us as humans. While everyone's interpersonal style is different and you may need time to develop yours, reacting in an emotionally responsive way is always the right thing to do.

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