

Handling Emotional Reactions

Anger

Angry behavior can be very complex – it may range intermittently from total silence and withdrawal to harassing and negative comments or questions. Angry employees tend to be angry “at the whole world” and are not necessarily angry with you.

Strategies for Handling...

- **Don't get defensive** or invite criticism.
- **Sidestep or ignore.** Change the topic and refocus the discussion on the underlying problem or issue.
- **Refuse to be punished.** Draw a boundary by asking the person what he or she wants from you.
- **Use your empathetic listening skills.** Actually listen as a way to recognize and defuse anger.
- **Use silence.** Sometimes people just need to blow off steam.



Bullying

People who use bullying behavior need to zero in on a defenseless target. Bullying behavior manifests itself in verbal attacks; or in using threats, demands, or other attempts to intimidate and push others around.

Strategies for Handling...

- **Draw boundaries.** Let the person know what behavior you will and will not tolerate (e.g., “I will be happy to talk about the situation, but I will not continue the conversation if you threaten me in any way”).
- **Create a negative consequence** that outweighs whatever benefit the person is getting from his/her current behavior.
- **Explicitly identify the bullying** behavior and invite the person to do something more constructive (e.g., “Your repeated verbal attacks aren't getting us any closer to an agreement. I suggest that we ...”).

Complaining

Complaining employees are not problem solvers, but problem magnifiers. They find fault, gripe, and share an endless list of things they do not like. They use words like “never” and “always” frequently in their complaints.

Strategies for Handling...

- **Ask for ideas** to cope with the complaint. This forces the employee into problem solving mode.
- **Encourage a search for the other side** of things (e.g., “You've told me how terrible things are in Department X. However, you are a fair person. Think of one positive thing about it.”).
- **Switch to more positive ground** early on (e.g., “Yes, there may be a problem with Department X, and the reason we're here is to find some answers. How can we accomplish this?”).

Avoiding

Avoiding behaviors include emotional withdrawing, hiding out, procrastinating, or refusing to interact. Employees who are avoiding are often unresponsive and not willing to listen, saying things like, “We don't have anything to talk about,” and, “That's not my problem.”

Strategies for Handling...

- **Identify their concerns** or fears and help them feel safer (e.g., “Would you be more comfortable if we met in your office?”). Actively listen so they feel understood.
- **Help them create safe conditions** by asking them what they need (e.g., “What do you need to be willing to stay here and talk this out?”).

Crying

When confronted with an employee who is crying; acknowledge the feelings he or she might be having. This will diffuse a lot of the emotion.

Strategies for Handling...

- **Give permission to express** their emotion.
- **Give time and space**, but don't end the conversation.
- **Proceed gradually.**

Tips for Managing Your Own Emotions

- **Be aware of and recognize your signs** of anger, annoyance, and frustration. Know your own “hot buttons” and recognize when they might be triggered.
- **Learn how to take time out** from a discussion if you need to cool off and get your emotions under control. Develop some techniques for skillfully ending a conversation if you feel yourself getting emotional.
- **Remind yourself of why it is important to solve the problem**, what your goal is, and what the consequences of not solving it might be.
- **Reframe what you are experiencing.** If you cannot change the outcome of the conversation, then you might need to alter your perception of the experience. Reframing might mean changing a negative assumption about the feedback you were given and transforming the interpretation into a positive one.
- **Let it go.** Talk to a trusted ally. Minimize the effects the challenging conversation had on you while talking it out.
- **Be reflective of the situation.** Spend structured time reflecting back on what you did in a difficult situation, why you did it, and what you could do in a similar situation in the future.

