


# Leaders pay a price when they mismanage employees' negative feelings

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Want to improve the quality of your relationships with your employees? Learn to manage their negative feelings. For example, what should you do when one of them wants to discuss an infuriating client interaction, a difficult co-worker, an anxiety-provoking deadline or even a distressing family situation?

In a [recent study](#), we studied how supervisors manage their subordinate's negative feelings (e.g., anger, fear, sadness) and how these leader behaviours, in turn, influenced those employees' perceptions about their relationship with their supervisor, job satisfaction, and helping behaviours.

First, we asked employees how their supervisors dealt with their negative emotions. We found that supervisors' responses could be organized into four types:

- 1) *situation modification* or addressing the issue causing the negative emotional reaction such as adding people to a team to help a subordinate meet a tight client deadline,
- 2) *cognitive change* or putting the subordinate's problem into perspective, such as helping subordinate reframe a failure as an important learning experience
- 3) *attentional deployment* or distracting subordinates from what is upsetting them (by telling jokes or changing the subject), and
- 4) *modulating the emotional response* or asking subordinates to suppress their negative emotions, to "suck it up" or "get over it."

Next, we asked employees about the quality of their relationships with their supervisor and about their satisfaction with their job. We also asked supervisors about the degree to which each employee engages in helping behaviour at work or behaviour aimed at helping others in the workplace.

We wanted to better understand if the supervisors' emotion management strategies influenced perceptions of high quality relationships, subordinates' job satisfaction and helping behaviour.

Our results indicated that fixing the underlying cause of the problem (situation modification) or putting the problem in perspective on a workplace hassle (cognitive change) related to higher relationship quality, job satisfaction and more helping behaviour while suggesting an employee suppress their emotion had the opposite effect. Attentional deployment did not influence relationship quality, job satisfaction or helping behaviour.

But why does this matter? Imagine you are leading a product development team. Your team has been working hard developing a new healthcare app. You think the app will really help people including one of your team members who suffers from the chronic condition in question. Then, your boss, the R&D manager, comes over and starts hammering questions at you and your team, concluding with "Why would doctors recommend this? Why is it any better than a pen and paper?" Your team is dejected and one member begins a long tirade against the boss. Our study suggest telling the team members to "suck it up and get back to work" isn't the right move. When you tell employees to "suck it up," they feel as if you don't care about their problems.

Here's what the team leader said, "It's o.k., (the manager) didn't understand our app. We weren't clear. Our app really does do the things he asked about. We just need to work out the details and be clearer next time."

The team leader used cognitive change. Not only did this statement stop the ranting team members in their tracks, they all turned back to their previously assigned tasks and started to discuss next steps within the smaller task groups. When leaders use cognitive change, subordinates feel that "they have their backs" and care about them. This builds high quality relationships, job satisfaction and helping behaviour.

Subordinates' emotions are important because they relate to their performance, attendance and intention to remain at an organization ([Dutton & Raigins, 2007](#)). Previous research has found that subordinates believe that part of their supervisor's job is to manage their emotions ([Toegel, Kilduff, & Anand, 2012](#)). Understanding what are the most effective strategies can be essential in the development of high quality relationships.

Managers in training could benefit from understanding the differences between strategies that demonstrate understanding and personal caring versus strategies that demonstrate a lack of these qualities.

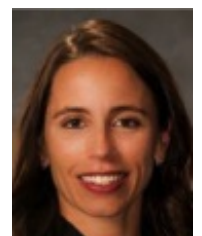
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Notes:

- *This article is based on the authors' paper [The role of leader emotion management in leader-member exchange and follower outcomes](#). *Leadership Quarterly*, 27(1), 85–97.*
- *The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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**Laura M. Little** is an Associate Professor of Management and the Director of the Institute for Leadership Advancement at the Terry College of Business at the University of Georgia. She received her Ph.D. from Oklahoma State University, her M.B.A. from University of Texas at Austin and her B.A. from Vanderbilt University. Little researches image management particularly in the work-life arena and emotion regulation of self and other. Her work has been published in several academic journals including *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Personnel Psychology*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, and other outlets. Her work on pregnancy in the workplace has been featured in Bloomberg



Business, The Washington Post, and HRM America, among others.

**Janaki Gooty** is an associate professor in the Management Department and Organizational Science PhD program at the Belk College of Business, UNC, Charlotte. Her research interests are in leadership, wellness in the workplace, emotions and multi-level methods. Her research has appeared in Journal of Management, Organizational Research Methods, The Leadership Quarterly and Journal of Organizational Behavior among others. Janaki has served in editorial roles in the past and currently serves on the editorial boards at four management journals.



**Michele Williams** (Ph.D., University of Michigan), Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurship and Organizational Behavior at the Tippie College of Business, University of Iowa, is a scholar at Cornell University's Scheinman Institute on Conflict Resolution and a Faculty Fellow at the Cornell Institute for Healthy Futures. Her research focuses on the development of cooperative, high-performance interpersonal relationships. Michele examines (1) trust and other relational foundations of sustainable collaboration and (2) gender and social categorization. Her work has been published in the Academy of Management Review, Organization Science, Journal of Business Venturing, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Leadership Quarterly and other outlets. . She is on the editorial board of Organization Science and an Associate Editor for The Journal of Trust Research. You can follow Michele on Twitter @MicheleWilliamz or on BeBee at <https://www.bee.com/@michele-williams> .



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