



Leaders, Don't Be Afraid to Talk About Your Fears and Anxieties

"I realize my boundaries are blurred, but I don't know how to handle everything on my plate. There is a lot to do and a lot to take care of ... The team looks for so much in terms of guidance, direction, energy, ideas, structure ... I feel like I am carrying the weight of it all."

We all struggle with stress, anxiety, and other difficult emotions. But it can be tough to figure out what to do with these feelings, especially if we're the ones who are supposed to be leading and supporting others. What's the best way for a leader to handle their own emotional struggles at work?

To explore this question, we [invited 30 leaders](#) from the US and UK to keep journals for four weeks in May and June of 2020. The leaders were from a variety of global corporations, national and international charities, and startups, and we asked them to write weekly entries in response to three different prompts: 1. *What is emerging for you?* 2. *What are you finding you need?* and 3. *What are you letting go of?* Without exception, every leader in our study described major emotional turmoil. One leader wrote, "Just the stress of lockdown has made me wonder if this is all worth it. I'm struggling to keep my emotions in check, and the people closest to me are getting the brunt of it." Another shared that on some days, they felt like they had lost their will to live and sense of purpose. Yet another described feeling "a sense of dread. I feel I have little grasp on how to navigate the future, much less to lead others."

Despite their common emotional experiences, however, the leaders diverged significantly in how they responded to these challenges. Specifically, our analysis identified three distinct types of leaders, each of whom took a different approach to managing their negative emotions:

1. **Heroes:** Leaders who focused on the positive, doing their best to convince their teams that they would get through the crisis no matter what.
2. **Technocrats:** Leaders who ignored emotions altogether and focused on tactical solutions.
3. **Sharers:** Leaders who openly acknowledged their fears, stresses, and other negative emotions.

While there are pros and cons to every leadership style, we found that Sharers were particularly successful in building cohesive, high-performing teams that were resilient in

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the face of the myriad challenges posed by the pandemic. Why might this be? Both our own work and a vast body of existing research suggests several reasons why Sharers are likely to outperform Heroes and Technocrats.

Technocrats and Heroes Aren't as Heroic as They Seem

First, while positivity can [improve performance](#), [research](#) suggests that trying to ignore a negative emotion actually makes you feel worse. As one leader put it, "I'm sick of reading, self-motivating, learning, staying upbeat, etc. when all I can feel is tiredness from overwork and fear." Another expressed a similar sentiment: "My positivity, resilience, and outwardly strong mindset ... are pillars for those around me — I find that people are gravitating around this, but I have to protect my space and keep looking after myself when I'm tired etc., because I can give others the impression it's all under control and 'in good hands' and that isn't always true."

In addition, a Hero leadership style can make team members feel more distant from their leader, since if the leader appears not to be struggling at all, it can put pressure on others to suppress their own challenges. A façade of positivity can [decrease the well-being](#) of both team members and leaders, [undermine](#) leaders' relationships with employees, and ultimately reduce self-confidence and performance at work.

Similarly, while there's certainly a time and a place for focusing on results, many of the Technocrats in our study found that ignoring emotions simply didn't work. For one, it undermined leaders' own mental health. As one leader noted, "At the start of the pandemic, I managed the stress and the uncertainty by looking after my own mental space a lot. Now, I am still locked in but I am a lot less kind to myself. My old 'business as usual' pushing has come back ... I am feeling more and more out of sync and not giving myself any more of the 'self-nurturing' space I had at the beginning of the pandemic."

This approach can also take a toll on leaders' relationships with their teams. One Technocrat wrote that they were "letting go of some of the niceties and 'fluff.' I just don't have enough time right now and it's the softer sides that are being sacrificed." And of course, letting negative emotions go unaddressed inevitably ends up impacting productivity. Another participant noted that despite (or perhaps because of) his results-focused leadership style, "there are people (and I include some senior people) who seem to be doing the very minimum that is required of them ... People are hitting walls, and there are lots of frustrations."

While emotions may seem frivolous to some, they in fact [drive everything leaders care about](#), from job performance to turnover to customer satisfaction. By ignoring emotions, Technocrats fail both to harness the positive emotions that spur performance and to address the [negative emotions](#) that undermine it.

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The Best Leaders Are Sharers

In contrast, sharing negative emotions can [lessen their impact](#) on the leader, build [empathy](#) between leaders and employees, [encourage others](#) to open up about their own negative emotions, and help others [recontextualize](#) and [overcome](#) those struggles — ultimately [boosting](#) morale and performance throughout the organization. For example, one leader found that when they opened up about emotions with their team, it allowed them “to get beyond small talk and connect more deeply... it opened up a different and richer conversation, a very ‘data rich’ discussion in a way that can be lacking from video calls.” These “more human conversations” helped teams to weather the days that still felt “very much like a roller coaster — exciting, energetic, and optimistic in one moment and deflated, down, and lethargic the next.”

Another leader wrote about how acknowledging their own emotional turbulence helped them to understand the mental state of their employees and to interact with them more effectively and empathetically. Throughout our study, we found that being open about their own inner turmoil helped Sharers’ teams to feel more comfortable doing the same, which in turn both helped everyone to cope more effectively with their negative emotions and created greater psychological closeness between teammates despite their physical separation.

Becoming a Sharer Is Difficult — But Not Impossible

Of course, becoming a Sharer is often easier said than done. In the journal entries, we found that many leaders had strong biases towards the Hero and Technocrat styles, driven by a widespread [assumption](#) that true leaders must always be aspirational and results-oriented, and that admitting negative emotions is a sign of weakness. One Hero-type leader described feeling like they “had to lead others with positivity while fighting fires on a daily basis,” and others even apologized for the negativity of their entries — as if they were ashamed not to focus on the positive, even in a private journaling exercise. Similarly, Technocrat leaders often prioritized “immediate challenges around how to work going forward,” writing that they needed “organization and focus so I don’t get distracted.”

Conversely, despite the well-documented advantages of sharing emotions, many leaders described a “fear of — and desire to shy away from — uncomfortable conversations,” worrying that sharing negative emotions would undermine team motivation and foster pessimism and anxiety. Others noted the lack of time and space for more emotional conversations at work: “None of the current structures and forms of communication seem to be encouraging open dialogue,” wrote one participant. “They are either too operationally-focused — ‘this is what we are doing’ — or too socially-focused — ‘let’s have fun in a light-hearted way.’ How can people talk about the emotional impact and personal relevance of something like Black Lives Matter?”

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Another offered a similar insight: “People need more than rational updates. We need to find different ways to allow people to express emotions and deeper feelings at work.”

That said, we did see some leaders transform from Heroes or Technocrats into Sharers over the course of the four-week exercise. One leader noticed themselves letting go of their “tendency to pretend things are okay when they’re not,” while another described overcoming their “fear of talking about my emotional state,” choosing instead to open up to their team.

So what does it take to embrace your inner Sharer? Many organizations don’t have a culture or structures in place that encourage openness, but there are a few strategies we’ve found that can help even the most reluctant leaders become more open about their negative emotions:

1. Self-reflect

When you’re working long hours full of back-to-back Zoom calls, it can be hard to find the time to check in with yourself. But you can’t effectively share your emotions with others until you begin to recognize them yourself. If you’re not sure where to start, try one of these techniques:

- [Track your emotions](#) with a daily “temperature check.”
- Set aside time to [write](#) or talk about your emotions. This could be through journals (like the leaders in our study), letters to a friend (whether you send them or not), or conversations with a loved one or mental health professional.
- Create a routine. [Research shows](#) that even fifteen minutes of intentional reflection at the end of the day or during your commute can boost performance and build your emotional awareness.

2. Start small

Building a more open and honest relationship with your coworkers doesn’t happen overnight. In fact, if you share too much too soon, it can [backfire](#). Especially if you have limited existing rapport with an employee or you’re feeling nervous about opening up, start by admitting a minor frustration rather than sharing a major challenge or extreme emotion.

3. Plan your disclosures in advance

It isn’t generally a great idea to share every dark thought that races through your head. Aimless venting can lead to [emotional contagion](#), a phenomenon in which excessive negative emotions end up rubbing off on others. For example, one leader in our research described a colleague whose negativity wasn’t helpful: “I was on a call

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with other agency leaders and we were asked how business had been. One leader spent most of their time recounting all the terrible things that happened. It is important to acknowledge the individual stories and challenges that people have faced, and the emotions that people have gone through. But as a message it was very flat and sucked energy from the conversation."

To ensure you're sharing emotions in a productive way, consider creating a rolodex of personal challenges you've faced that you can draw on when appropriate. This way, instead of randomly sharing your struggles whenever and however they come to mind (and running the risk of making yourself or others uncomfortable), you can ensure that you've thought through the best way to communicate these difficult emotions and are prepared to leverage them effectively.

4. Create dedicated time and space for sharing emotions

Just like oversharing can backfire, sharing emotions at the wrong time or place can also be [counterproductive](#) and worsen people's impression of you. To avoid awkward or irrelevant disclosures, leaders should set aside specific times for these potentially challenging conversations. For instance, consider creating a weekly check-in, or explicitly dedicating the last few minutes of a recurring meeting to sharing highs and lows.

5. Model effective emotion regulation

One of the biggest benefits of sharing your negative emotions is that other people can learn to better manage their own emotions based on how you handle yours. There are a few specific strategies for effective emotional regulation that you can model for your employees:

- **Lean on your support network.** Whether it's a trusted colleague, a spouse, or even a professional counselor, there's no shame in [asking for help](#). Show your employees that you reach out for help when you need it, and they'll be much more likely to do so as well.
- **Help yourself by helping others.** One of the leaders in our research reflected on the power of helping others, writing: "I've found new ways to support my wife and daughter through these difficult times, and I've spoken to friends properly for the first time in months, which has helped." Research has shown that supporting others can [improve your mood](#), your [confidence](#), and even your [physical health](#), but the best way to convince others of that is by example.
- **Change your perspective.** While it's important to acknowledge and embrace negative emotions, one of the [most effective](#) coping mechanisms to keep them from overwhelming you is to refocus on the positive elements of a situation. For example, if you're feeling frustrated about how the pandemic has disrupted normal working life, try pushing yourself to focus on how the last year has also

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created opportunities to improve the workplace going forward. Or if new office hygiene measures feel annoying or stressful, try to focus instead on how those policies represent an inspiring, collective effort to protect one another — and make sure to emphasize that shift in perspective when describing the negative emotion to your team.

- **Take time to recharge.** [Research shows](#) that disconnecting from work when you're off the clock reduces stress and promotes wellbeing. Don't be afraid to let people see you [taking breaks](#), keeping your evenings free, using your vacation days, and pursuing hobbies outside of work.

6. Share the good and the bad

No one is perfect. If you're not proud of how you handled a negative emotion or challenging situation, be open about that too. When your team sees you reflecting productively on a negative experience and thinking through what you would do differently next time, they'll be better prepared to keep trying if they face similar challenges coping with their own negative emotions.

Even when we're not in the midst of a global pandemic, negative emotions are a fact of life. The most effective leaders are those who don't push those emotions under the rug, but who instead openly and honestly acknowledge the challenges they face — and invite their employees to do the same.

<https://hbr.org/2021/08/leaders-dont-be-afraid-to-talk-about-your-fears-and-anxieties>