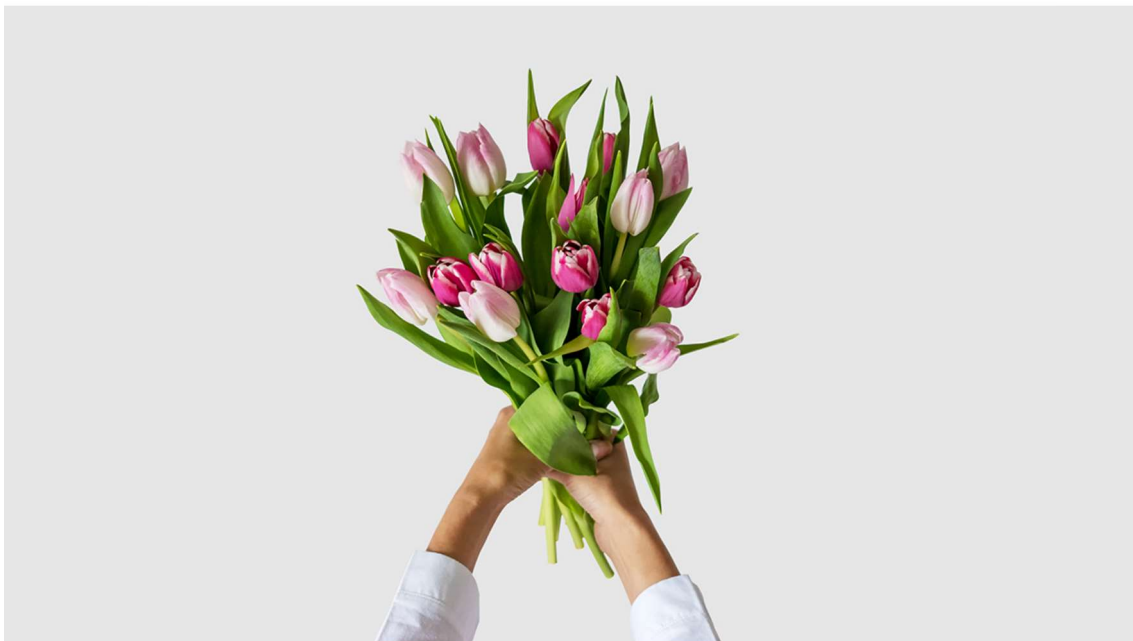


How Supportive Leaders Approach Emotional Conversations

by Sarah Noll Wilson

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Summary. Many leaders aren't aware when they're using emotionally dismissive and potentially harmful language with their employees. Most of the time, unintentionally dismissive language comes from a place of caring. Leaders want to support the person, to help them move... [more](#)

The past two years of compounding emotional strain have made it increasingly clear that managers need to shift their focus to meeting and supporting employees' emotional well-being. It's no

longer enough to simply provide the operational tools and resources for your team to function — you also need to create psychological safety for them to thrive. That means getting comfortable with having uncomfortable conversations.

It can be hard to know the right thing to say when someone discloses something painful or emotional to you. For example, one of our clients, Evie,* an IT manager, suffered through a miscarriage while working from home a few years ago. Her boss, Mike,* could tell something was off and called her to check in and see how she was feeling. When he called, she knew she couldn't lie, so she took a deep, courageous breath and shared, "You know, to be completely transparent with you, I want to let you know I am currently experiencing a miscarriage and really struggling with that ... mentally and physically." Mike was silent for an extended period before finally saying, "Well ... do what you need to do," and quickly ending the phone call. Mike's reaction has stuck with Evie to this day, years later. In a moment of loss and suffering, she felt entirely unsupported. Was this his intention? No, but it was his impact.

As leaders, it's imperative that we take the time to learn how to show up for our employees, no matter how uncomfortable the situations they face may be for us. In order for productivity and innovation to thrive, we need to create environments where the team members we serve can thrive. Kelly Greenwood and Julia Anas, who surveyed 1,500 U.S. adults in full-time jobs, outline the benefits of supporting employee mental health in their article "It's a New Era for Mental Health at Work." They write:

Respondents who felt supported by their employer also tended to be less likely to experience mental health symptoms, less likely to underperform and miss work, and more likely to feel comfortable talking about their mental health at work. In addition, they had higher job satisfaction and intentions to stay at their company. Lastly, they had more positive views of their company and its leaders, including trusting their company and being proud to work there.

We heard from a client shortly after the beginning of the shutdown in 2020 that their leaders were asking them how they were doing more often, but it was clear that they didn't know how to respond to the answers, which varied from "Okay" to "Struggling" to "Drowning" and beyond. Checking in is an important first step, but it's how you react to what's shared that creates the ultimate impact. Using emotionally supportive language is an important part of that.

What Emotionally Dismissive Language Sounds Like

Many leaders aren't aware when they're using emotionally dismissive and potentially harmful language with their employees. What we've seen in the hundreds of leaders we've served is that unintentionally dismissive language often comes from a place of caring. They want to support the person, to help them move through their issue, to minimize their pain. Sometimes in attempt to minimize the pain, they minimize the person as well.

On the other hand, some leaders believe that emotions don't belong in the workplace. This lack of empathy can prevent them from understanding who the person is and what they're going through. They ignore the reality that emotions inform decision-

making and problem-solving, and they fail to harness the opportunities for growth that emotions can create. Ignoring emotions doesn't make them go away.

Let's look at a few common scenarios that come up when people share mental and emotional struggles:

- **Dismissive phrasing**, such as, "What do you have to be sad about?" or "You shouldn't be sad, you have an excellent job/family/etc."
- **Minimization**, which can be anything from, "Everyone feels like that sometimes" to "There's nothing to worry about."
- **Negation**, which usually sounds like, "Hey, it could be worse!" or "That's just a 'first-world problem.'"
- **Prescribing solutions**, like saying, "You shouldn't worry" or "You just need to get more sleep."
- **Toxic positivity**, which may sound like, "Just look at the bright side!" or "Everything happens for a reason!" A positive perspective can be helpful but can become unproductive when it's the only perspective offered.

Using dismissive language in these ways can send a message to the recipient that their feelings and struggles aren't real or are unnecessary, and it can even amplify any shame that's already present. If someone is coming to you because they're struggling, the last thing you want is for them to leave feeling unseen, unheard, and unsupported.

What Emotionally Supportive Language Sounds Like

Becoming a more emotionally supportive leader requires emotional intelligence. Farah Harris, well-being expert and founder of WorkingWell Daily, described emotionally intelligent leaders to me as “comfortable with emotions, whether those that come up within them or come up in others. They create a sense of belonging, because their behaviors allow their team members to be seen and heard.”

Emotionally intelligent leaders don't hide behind a shield of detachment when someone presents them with a struggle. They can regulate their own emotions and support others in doing the same.

Here are six ways to be supportive when someone shares an emotional situation or challenge:

Validate their experience.

Validation can be as simple as acknowledgement — for example, “I can see why this is exhausting.” Especially when experiencing mental health challenges, people can feel alone and even broken. By validating someone's experience, you're not only saying “I see you,” you're also saying “I believe you,” which can bring comfort during a challenging time.



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Seek to understand.

Give your team member the opportunity to elaborate if they want to. Coming from a place of curiosity can be powerful — for example, “Tell me more about that.” When we seek to understand, we’re showing the other person that we care about them, want to support them, and want to learn more so we can do more.

Guide emotional and physical support.

When someone is struggling, you might ask, “How can I best support you right now?” or “What would be helpful right now?” In a heightened emotional moment, it can be hard for someone to think about or see what may be helpful to them. Asking this question can help them determine and name what they need.

Offer specific support.

Sometimes people don’t know what they need, may be afraid to ask, or are unsure of what options are available to them. You might ask, “Would X be helpful?” Offering a specific way to support them can make it easier for someone to say yes to accepting help.

Invite perspective instead of prescribing a solution.

If you’ve been through a similar experience as your team member, don’t assume you understand and that what worked for you will work for them. Knowing that someone else has been through a similar experience can be comforting, but everyone is on a different journey. Assuming you know what’s best can minimize the other person’s needs, centers the conversation on you, and can leave them feeling unsupported. Instead of saying, “I’ve been there, here’s what you should do,” try, “Would it be helpful to hear what helped me in a similar situation?”

Acknowledge and appreciate them.

Thank your team member for coming to you — for example: “I can see this has been hard. I am here for you. Thank you for trusting me with this information.” This signals to both you and them that conversations like this are important and reinforces a sense of a safety for future situations.

Emotional Supportiveness in Action

As leaders, we often want to help soothe and remove discomfort. If we’re honest, there are also times when we want to remove the discomfort not just for our team members, but for ourselves as well. It’s not our job to heal, but to make it safe for them to share and to provide whatever support we can. It’s okay if you don’t know what to say — in fact, simply acknowledging that can be powerful, too.

In 2013, I was diagnosed with panic disorder, which meant I was experiencing repeated episodes of panic attacks. I was new to my company at the time and desperately tried to hide this new challenge and quickly clean up any residual tears before meetings. My company’s CHRO pulled me aside and asked me how I was doing. After a pause, she then asked, “How are you really doing?” Standing at the edge of her door so I could escape if I needed, biting my lip and nervous to share, the tears flowed. She listened, validated how scary this must have been for me, and reassured me that the company would support me in whatever way I needed. Finally, she thanked me for sharing. At a time when everything felt heavy, work unexpectedly became a place where things were a little lighter.

As we continue into new chapters of navigating the pandemic, racial injustice, divisiveness, and constant uncertainty, do you want to be the leader who adds to the weight or the one who

makes it a little lighter? Learning how to have uncomfortable conversations can help ensure that you're setting up your team members to thrive.

** Real names have been changed.*

Sarah Noll Wilson, MS, is an executive coach, facilitator, and researcher who is on a mission to make the workplace work better for humans. She is the author of *Don't Feed the Elephants! Overcoming the Art of Avoidance to Build Powerful Partnerships* and host of the weekly podcast *Conversations on Conversations*.

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