

What to Do When a Team Member Breaks Down

Elena: If you've ever been in a conversation where someone starts crying, shuts down or lashes out. And you weren't sure what to do. This episode is for you. Hello friends, and welcome to the Bright Morning Podcast. I'm your host Elena Aguilar, and in each episode, you will learn how to lead conversations that build connection and spark real change.

Okay, so today we are diving into one of the most vulnerable, most human leadership moments, which is what to do when someone breaks down in front of you. So let's get into it. These moments are more common than you might think. You're in a coaching conversation or a team check-in. You ask a question and suddenly you are met with tears or silence or an outburst of frustration and you freeze.

You're not sure what to say or how to respond, and part of you might be wondering, did I do something wrong? So I wanna take you back to a moment. Early in my coaching career, when this happened to me, I was working with a teacher, I will call her Mina, who was navigating a lot. She had a challenging class, she was taking night courses, and she had just lost a family member.

And during a routine check-in, I asked, how are you holding up? She looked at me, her lip quivered, and then the tears came fast and heavy tears, and she covered her face with both hands and she just wept. I remember feeling panicky. My internal voice was racing and saying, should I hug her? Should I say something?

Should I leave? Should we keep going? I didn't know what to do. Here's what I have learned since then and what I wanna offer you today. When someone breaks down in front of you, it's not a problem to be solved. It can be a sign that something important is finally being felt. Something's cracked open, and while it might feel uncomfortable, it's also an opportunity to meet someone with deep care.

So what does that mean about what you do first? Ground yourself. You can do that by breathing. Feeling your feet on the floor. And then remind yourself, I don't need to fix this. And you can say something simple like, I'm here. Take



your time. Or even, you don't need to talk until you're ready. Your calm presence is more powerful than any polished response.

And then after that initial wave of emotion, you might offer gentle options. Like would it be helpful to sit in silence for a bit or would talking feel better? You could also say, do you wanna name what's coming up, or just let it be right now? Let them lead. Your job is to be a steady presence. Now, what do you do if the emotion isn't sadness, but maybe anger?

Maybe someone slams their hand on the table or their voice rises. Now that can feel destabilizing. But this core principle still holds ground yourself first, and then with calm and curiosity, you might say, I can tell that something big is coming up. I wanna understand, do you wanna talk about it? Or you could say, let's pause for a moment.

I wanna make sure you feel safe and supported. So remember, you are not responsible for someone else's emotions, but you are responsible for how you respond to them. And here's something I really want you to hear. If someone breaks down with you, it often means that they safe enough to let their guard down, and that is a sign of trust.

Even if it's messy, even if it surprises you, it does mean that you've created a space where someone can be real, and that is powerful. If you would like more structure around how to support someone in those moments, then I highly recommend our coaching for Retention and Resilience workshop. In that workshop, we walk you through exactly how to respond with care and skill.

And there is also a demonstration video in our coach learning library that shows this in action. But for today, here's your challenge. Reflect on a moment when someone showed strong emotion in your presence. How did you respond? How did it feel in your body? And what might you do differently next time?

And if you haven't had one of these moments yet, then just wait. They are a part of this work because we are working with people and people have feelings, and you don't have to fear these moments. You just have to meet them with presence, compassion, and a willingness to stay. If today's episode gave you something to think about or a tool that you wanna try, then please share it with someone who supports others.

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All right, friends, this show is produced by LesLee Bickford and Stacey Goodman does the sound engineering. Take care and be well, and I'll see you next time.

