



Emotional Intelligence



Handling Negative Emotions in a Way that's Good for Your Team

Instead of repressing or expressing, try reappraising. **by Emma Seppälä
and Christina Bradley**

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It's normal to experience emotions at work: frustration, anger, fear, excitement. But how leaders handle these feelings can go a long way toward building — or destroying — a strong workplace climate and motivating — or discouraging — employees. It's essential that leaders develop the ability to regulate their emotions, but perhaps not in the way you might think.

Take this scenario: A soccer team is playing in a critical game and is down by one goal. Just before half-time, a player gets fouled in the box and the team is given a penalty kick — a great opportunity to tie up the score. A leading player on the team steps up to take the shot. At first, it appears perfect as it soars to the corner of the net but instead it rebounds off the goalpost back towards the stunned player. Head in his hands, he walks off the field to meet his team for their half-time meeting.

The team is upset. The coach is too. The coach's goal is to get the players over this hump, ready to return to the field feeling pumped and motivated. Should he master his frustration, put on a fake smile, and not discuss the incident? Or should he be honest and fully express his feelings? Which one of these is going to help him meet his goal?

Neither, it turns out.

Leaders Who Regulate Well, Do Well

Research on emotional regulation suggests that the coach's ability to manage his emotions will determine team morale and motivation. Of all of the facets of [emotional intelligence](#), emotion *regulation* may be the “master skill,” explains Marc Brackett, director of the [Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence](#) and author of the book, [Permission to Feel](#).

But *how* a leader manages emotions is critical in determining whether the outcome for the team will be positive or negative. Research has found that people tend to regulate their emotions in one of two ways: [suppression or reappraisal](#).

Suppression is what most people do: hide their feelings and pretend not to feel upset. While this is a popular strategy, it actually leads to [a host of negative outcomes](#) for the person: fewer close relationships, more negative emotions, less social support, lower satisfaction with

life, poorer memory, and elevated blood pressure. In addition, research has shown that suppressing emotions elevates other people's stress response. If the coach hides his anger, for example, the blood pressure of those on his team is likely to rise. They may not consciously know that he is angry since he doesn't appear to be, but they are physiologically registering this inauthenticity and it is setting off an alarm.

Given the negative impacts of suppression, you might think that fully expressing our emotions may be a more effective strategy. Doing so, however, could also have destructive consequences. If the coach fully expressed the frustration he was feeling in the moment, he probably would have destroyed the confidence of his players. Instead of inspiring connection and motivation, he would likely leave the players feeling fearful and dejected.

Reappraisal, or reassessing an emotional situation, may be the most effective strategy in this situation. For example, the coach could remind himself that "the game is only over when it's over"; that this is just one game in the season. There will be other opportunities for his team to shine. Reappraisal helps him calm down. As a consequence, he might perceive that the players were already disappointed and that, instead of more dejection, they need encouragement. He may start the meeting acknowledging everyone's disappointment but emphasizing that the outcome of this setback depends on the players' determination to master this challenge and turn the game around for the next 45 minutes.

The results are better for the coach and his team members.

We recently conducted a study with 15 varsity coaches and their athletes. Coaches who tended to reappraise more often experienced less

negative emotions overall than coaches who tended to suppress their emotions. In addition, the reappraising coaches had more positive team climates, characterized by trust, communication, and motivation.

Leadership research supports these findings, showing that emotion regulation is a key competence demonstrated by successful leaders, not just athletic coaches. This is connected to the fact that one of the benchmarks of a strong leader is the ability to both manage and influence the emotional states of those they work with. Leaders must be able to inspire and instill confidence in their followers to help them maintain motivation and cope in the face of difficulty. To be effective at this complicated task, they must be able to regulate their own feelings effectively.

The potential benefits of reappraisal are supported by research on leader-follower interactions. One study found that leaders who used reappraisal rather than suppression when delivering bad news were better able to help their followers manage their anger responses. The followers of leaders who used suppression in this paradigm expressed more anger and reported negative attitudes towards their leaders.

Exercise Your Reappraisal Muscle

Reappraisal can seem difficult to do during times of crisis. Here's a quick research-backed technique that can help you do so: Think about the problem as a challenge rather than as a threat. Mounting evidence indicates that appraising problems as a challenge — rather than as a threat — helps people concentrate on the task at hand and consider the steps they have to take to succeed. A challenge frame builds resilience in the face of stress.

In contrast, perceiving a problem as a threat has been linked to decreased performance and motivation as well as to increased stress levels.

When your own stress levels are high, “a fast way to regain your cool so you can reappraise is through deep breathing,” explains Johann Berlin, CEO of [TLEX Institute](#). “By teaching executives how to manage themselves through something as easy as breathing, you can make an enormous difference to their teams.” [Research](#) shows that you can rapidly calm your emotions using just your breath. Inhales increase your heart rate and blood pressure while exhales slow them down. An easy exercise you can do even in the middle of a meeting is to breathe out for twice as long as you inhale. If you have a little more time, try [this exercise](#) which takes you through a specific breathing practice that can calm you down quickly.

So how can you be best prepared for high-stake situations when you'll most need to regulate? Practice these exercises in low-stake situations. Practice them daily. You'll be well versed when things get stressful.

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