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Harvard Business Review

Business Communication

What's the Best Way to Build Trust at Work?

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June 18, 2021

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Summary. The one thing that's been hit hardest because of the pandemic migh be our ability to trust. While some of us will be going back into the office soon, others will not be going back at all, and most of us will only be there for a few day a week.

- Trust is a conviction that is built slowly, over a long period of time, through repeated interactions. How can we build trust under these circumstances?
- Recent studies have shown how acknowledging the emotions of others can foster trust. The act of verbally recognizing someone else's feelings is perceive as an effortful act and can help form deeper connections with them.
- But not all acknowledgments work equally. When emotional acknowledgment seen as motivated by selfish reasons it is not as effective because people assume that the act is done for personal benefit, rather than to help others. It may also be less effective in competitive settings, where people might questio the intent of the acknowledger. **close**

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Recent research suggests that our mass shift to working from home during the pandemic has started to corrode our trust in our colleagues. Trust is a conviction that is built slowly, through repeated interactions that take place over a long period of time.

This past year, it has been particularly difficult to establish among team members who have never met one another before, and even more so for people who entered the workforce or switched jobs during the pandemic. Still, it is essential to doing our best work, being satisfied in our jobs, and having good relationships with our coworkers.

While some of us will be going back into the office soon, others will not be going back at all, and most of us will only be there for two or three days a week. How can we build trust under these circumstances? How can we form more meaningful connections in this new era of work?

As organizational behavior researchers, we have spent the majority of our careers trying to answer some version of these questions by studying how people interact in the workplace. This

year, we found an answer. In six recent studies, we looked at the role emotional acknowledgment, or the act of verbally recognizing someone else's feelings, plays in a wide variety of high- and low-stakes situations — from employee socializing in a break room to hospital workers navigating intensive care units. Drawing on the Costly Signaling theory, which states that small gestures can make a big impact, we aimed to discover how emotional acknowledgment influences interpersonal trust.

Here's what we learned.

Acknowledging other people's emotions can strengthen social relationships at work. The simple act of verbally acknowledging how your coworkers are feeling can help you form deeper connections with them. For example, saying to a coworker, "Hey, you seem upset," leads people to see you as more trustworthy — not only the person whose emotions you are acknowledging, but also any observers who witness the act.

Why? It turns out that emotional acknowledgment is perceived as an effortful act. Because it's so easy to feign ignorance when a colleague looks upset, most people avoid getting involved. But when someone proactively and voluntarily acknowledges the person in distress, they are communicating that they care enough to invest in that relationship.

Acknowledging negative emotions boosts trust more than acknowledging positive emotions. Try this quick thought experiment. First, imagine saying to a sad coworker, “You look upset about something.” Now, imagine saying to a happy coworker, “You look happy today.” Which of the two have the potential to become a more meaningful conversation?

If you said the conversation with the upset coworker, you’re right. Most people see acknowledging negative emotions as being more costly in terms of time, attention, and effort. But it turns out this additional cost is also rewarding. When you acknowledge negative emotions, people feel that you care more, and therefore are more willing to trust you.

Acknowledging emotions boosts trust more than acknowledging the situation. People give more credit to those who call out their emotions directly (“You seem upset”) than those who call out the situation (“Looks like your meeting went poorly”). Emotions are fundamental to our identities and inner experiences. When someone acknowledges our emotions, rather than the situation, we feel more validated and humanized.

Not all mistakes are created equal. We looked at what happens when people inaccurately acknowledge other people’s emotions. It turns out that if you mistakenly acknowledge a positive emotion (“You look calm”) when someone feels negatively, that

can really hurt trust. Yet conversely, when you erroneously acknowledge a negative emotion ("You look sad") to someone who feels positively, there is basically no trust penalty for this mistake.

When you're in a good mood, you might not need additional support, but by acknowledging a negative emotion, the acknowledger is still signaling a readiness to provide it if that becomes necessary.

When Acknowledgment Works (and When It Can Backfire)

We now understand that it's beneficial to acknowledge others' emotions at the workplace. But why aren't more people doing it?

Through our research, we found that even though people believe that acknowledging negative emotions leads to stronger social connections, they do it less often in their daily lives because (a) they think it is risky and (b) it requires an investment of time, energy, and effort. Further, because professionalism has long been associated with being stoic, rational, and unemotional, we can assume that most people are used to passing up opportunities to discuss emotions and build authentic connections at work.

That said, emotional acknowledgment is a tactic that should be used thoughtfully — not all the time. If your coworkers believe your actions are motivated by selfish reasons, it will be less effective, as people will assume that you are acknowledging them

only for personal benefit. For instance, asking your boss what's bothering them right before your performance review may be interpreted as manipulative. Emotional acknowledgment may also be less effective in competitive settings, where people might question the intent of the acknowledger.

Finally, we suspect that the language people use matters. Because emotions are personal and lie at the core of our identities, making assumptions about how other people feel can come off as imposing and presumptuous, and may even trigger defensiveness. As such, when the emotions you are observing seem ambiguous, it may be safer to use less direct language ("You *seem* anxious" rather than "You are *feeling* anxious") or ask a question ("How are you feeling right now?") rather than trying to impose a label ("Are you mad about something?"). This type of language leaves more room for the expresser to alter and correct the acknowledger's interpretation.

Know if You're Ready to Take on the Burden

Acknowledging someone else's feelings is its own form of emotional labor. Afterwards, you may feel responsible for the other person, and want to help them work through the difficulties they are experiencing.

Before you try this strategy out, weight the costs and benefits. Ask: Do I have the time? Am I willing to help if my colleague opens up about a problem? Is the trust I will gain worth the

emotional effort I will give?

Remember, how we respond to other people's emotions provides us important information about our social relationships. Does this person understand me? Does this person care about me? Do I have a high-quality relationship with this person? When we acknowledge emotions, we give people the safety and license to express themselves. And during this time of hardship, talking about and sharing how we feel is vital for strengthening bonds, building interpersonal trust, and expediting collective recovery at work.

Just make sure you are ready and willing to provide support to others before taking on the work.

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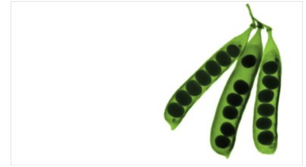

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