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by Liane Davey

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Great teams are adept at engaging in productive conflict as a means of improving ideas, sparking innovation, and mitigating risk. Unfortunately, your team might be one of many that foregoes the benefits of healthy conflict because they're unwilling or unable to deal with the emotions that conflict often elicits. I frequently see teams pull back from important discussions for fear of triggering an emotional outburst. If that's happening on your team, it's time to address it.

First, consider all the different reasons why it's rational to avoid emotional conflicts. On one hand, people who have been upset by conflict in the past might have been labeled as immature or

unprofessional. Given the hit to their credibility, it's natural that they now try to avoid potentially volatile conversations that might trigger their emotions again. On the other end of the spectrum, there are those whose direct approach to conflict earned them a reputation as brutal or harsh. It's just as logical for those folks to steer clear of contentious discussions for fear of saying something too direct. As a manager, you might have your own stories of unpleasant or unproductive emotional conflicts that cause you to steer your team away from contentious or confrontational discussions. Unfortunately, when you or your team members are not comfortable or adept at managing emotions, your team is likely to avoid issues and wind up in serious [conflict debt](#) — stifled by the sum of all the undiscussed and unresolved issues that stand in the way of progress.

If your team is being held back by conflict avoidance and you all need to get more comfortable handling emotions, there are several steps to take. The change will require you to embrace a new mindset, to build a new skill set, and to adopt different practices. These techniques will reduce the likelihood that a fear of emotionality will hijack your progress.

The first place to start is in developing a new mindset about emotions. Emotions aren't a liability for humans, they're an integral part of the system that helps us [capitalize on opportunities and protect ourselves from threats](#). For example, when you make a mistake, the emotional reaction makes that experience more salient and helps you remember not to do it again. When you say or do things that threaten your inclusion in your group, you [experience an emotional](#) reaction that's similar to when you experience physical pain. That unpleasant sensation reminds you of the importance of maintaining positive relationships. As humans, emotions are a primary biological response to our experiences of our surroundings and *not* something we can "leave at home" (as one executive suggested to me recently). Emotions aren't something to be avoided, but rather, something to pay attention to and learn from.

Once you understand that emotions play a role in decision-making, it's your job as a manager to understand the source of the emotions so you can learn from them. It's important to remember that — just like pain — emotions are symptomatic, but not diagnostic. If you're seeing an emotional outburst (whether that be crying, yelling, or table-pounding), it's likely that there is some injury being done to the person. It might be because the discussion is challenging a deeply-held belief, or providing new and disorienting information, or causing the person to question their abilities, character, or self-concept. In any of these cases, the person's brain is telling them that their world is being disrupted and alarm bells are going off. You need to identify what is being injured so you can help them relieve the pain.

When a team member reacts emotionally, simply say, "This is important. What do I need to understand?" The wording is significant because you don't want to make the person feel embarrassed or stigmatized as you might if you said, "You're crying. Why are you crying?" "This is important" also works because it doesn't presume that you know what the person is thinking or how they are feeling as in, "You're upset, tell me what's wrong." Instead, it just makes the space for you to get insight about what is going on.

As an aside, I am often asked whether it's best to continue with the conversation that's become emotional or to adjourn and return to the emotional subject later. I encourage you, wherever possible, to keep going in the moment. First, because it reinforces the idea that emotions are not toxic and are a natural part of life. Next, because returning to an emotional conversation that you've paused can be very awkward. Use your judgment. If the person is crying or screaming to the point that they can't catch their breath, you can say, "This is important. I want to understand what's going on. Take a few minutes to collect your thoughts and we'll regroup this afternoon."

Back to the conversation. As you listen to the person's response, reflect what you're hearing. Ask questions to help them shape their thoughts. You can try, "How are you imagining this playing out," or "What are we not paying enough attention to?" Paraphrase what you hear until you get a clear sign from the person that you have articulated the root of the issue. Then pivot your questions toward action, "What would a good path forward look like for you," or "What would need to be included in our plan to address that concern?" As you start to shift toward a plan, you'll notice that the emotion dissipates.

But what if you aren't in position to include their suggestion? What if it's not a good idea, or it's just not reasonable? If that's the case, be transparent. For example, if they raised an important issue but asked for a remedy that's not a viable, you might say, "I'm glad you raised that issue. We're not in a position to do that, but I feel like we're now taking that risk knowingly." In the majority of cases, when the person feels heard and understood, regardless of whether they get their way or not, the emotions will subside. If they don't, provide feedback about how the person's emotional reactions are impacting their performance, the team dynamic, and your perceptions. Emotions are fair game for feedback when they're getting in the way of the work.

When you have an opportunity, address the role of emotions as part of a broader team norms discussion. Share your perspective on emotions and ask for others to add their points of view. Consider having your own ground rules around addressing emotions in the team or including a behavioral statement about addressing emotions within an existing organizational value such as mutual respect or teamwork.

Ultimately, how *you* engage with emotions will be the most influential cue for how your team should. Don't punish someone for showing emotion. That includes not criticizing them, not responding to emotion with more emotion, and not avoiding them. At the same time, don't punish people for triggering emotions in others. Too often I see people ask a tough and probing question and then get reprimanded because that question elicited emotion from a colleague. Creating trepidation around what can and cannot be asked or explored on your team will stifle the quality of discussion and decision making. If the question was particularly blunt, you could reword it. Otherwise, create the space in the discussion to let the question or comment sink in and then guide the team through a rational discussion.

Your role as a manager is to guide your team into and through the most contentious discussions that your business faces. If you sense trepidation as you get close to a difficult topic, reassure the team that it's worth addressing the issue to get to a resolution. Set the tone that the discussion might get emotional and that's ok – you'll keep working on it until you come to the best answer. Gently ask the questions that will open the discussion up. Then, as the road gets bumpy, steer them through the best path. Too many teams avoid conflict for fear of creating “drama.” Teach your team how to channel emotions to improve your decision-making, increase trust and connection, and make everyone feel seen and understood.

Liane Davey is a [team effectiveness advisor and professional speaker](#). She is the author of *The Good Fight, You First*, and co-author of *Leadership Solutions*. Share your comments and questions with her on Twitter at [@LianeDavey](#).
