



EMOTIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

How Employees Feel at
work and why it matters

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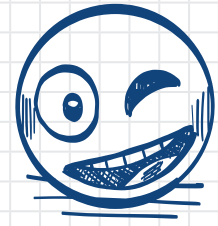
**“WHEN DEALING WITH
PEOPLE, REMEMBER
YOU ARE NOT DEALING
WITH CREATURES OF
LOGIC, BUT CREATURES
OF EMOTION.”**

DALE CARNEGIE

Author of How to Win Friends and Influence People

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DO EMOTIONS BELONG IN THE WORKPLACE?

It's a loaded question, but one every organization should be thinking about. No matter where your organization stands, the reality is that employees are people, and people are biologically programmed to experience emotions.

Even if our personal lives and their accompanying emotions could stay safely tucked away at home, that doesn't account for the numerous emotional triggers we face daily at work, such as:

Joy after laughing at a coworker's joke

Disappointment from rejection on a sales call

Frustration from dealing with a difficult coworker or customer

Boredom during a weekly team meeting

Excitement from crushing a big goal

This is just a tiny sample of the thousands of emotional moments that occur in the workplace each day. Whether or not you believe emotions *belong* in the workplace, they certainly exist. **What is your organization doing to manage and support all those emotions?**

In order to get to the bottom of emotions in the workplace, we surveyed more than 1,100 employees about their emotional experiences at work. Read on to learn more!

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YOUR EMOTIONAL CULTURE

CULTURE: The way of life of a particular people, especially as shown in their ordinary behavior and habits, their attitudes toward each other, and their beliefs.¹

Your workplace has a unique culture — a way of life, shared beliefs, acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, habits, and attitudes.

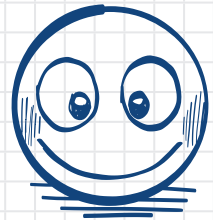
Your workplace also has a unique emotional culture. Some workplaces shy away from expressing or addressing emotions at all costs. Others let any and all emotions reign free, to the point of toxicity. Still others have found the perfect balance of offering support and drawing boundaries.

¹ Cambridge Dictionary

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STRONG EMOTIONAL CULTURES

Healthy emotional cultures don't just tolerate emotions — they welcome them! These cultures:

- > Understand that employees are humans and strive to offer a supportive work environment
- > Prioritize transparency, honesty, and employee wellbeing
- > Express optimism and recover from failure quickly

Leadership and managers know the importance of regularly connecting with employees to listen to their feedback, thoughts, and concerns. When something feels off or a stressful situation arises, employees at all levels feel equipped to cope with their emotions and confidently express their concerns.

These organizations also understand that work and personal lives are often difficult to separate, and they encourage employees to do what is needed to maximize their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. Work-life balance and flexibility are high priorities.

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STRUGGLING EMOTIONAL CULTURES

In an unhealthy emotional culture, employees often feel like they are walking on eggshells. Emotional expression may be discouraged, or, on the flipside, emotions run a little too wild. Employees don't feel cared for as people and bringing personal lives into the workplace is frowned upon.

There may be a lot of gossip and avoidance because employees feel like they can't have honest and direct conversations with each other. Leadership rarely loops in employees on important issues, resulting in a disconnect between employees, their work, and the organization.

In organizations where emotions are completely kept at bay, employees hide their true feelings the moment they walk through the door. This state of suppression is not only uncomfortable and unproductive — it's unhealthy. Studies have found that suppressing emotions can lead to heart disease, mental illness, intestinal problems, headaches, insomnia, and autoimmune disorders.²

In organizations where emotions run wild, things can get out of hand quickly. If negative emotions frequently override positive emotions or if individuals don't know how to express their emotions in a respectful, professional manner, employees are likely to feel uncomfortable and disengaged.

²Time Magazine — [Ignoring Your Emotions is Bad for Your Health. Here's What to Do About It.](#)

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WHERE DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION FALL?

It's important for the overall health and productivity of your organization (and everyone within it) to prioritize your emotional culture. Here are a few reflection questions you should ask yourself and your leaders to establish a baseline of where your emotional culture stands today.

	ALWAYS	USUALLY	RARELY	NEVER	UNSURE
Do individuals at all levels feel comfortable expressing themselves?					
Are your managers equipped to support employee emotions?					
Are employees skilled at managing their own emotions?					
Do employees feel they can have honest conversations with each other?					

- > In areas where you marked **Always** or **Usually** — great job! Keep up the good work.
- > In areas where you marked **Rarely** or **Never** — these are emotional culture red flags. Your organizational leaders should consider addressing these areas.
- > In areas where you marked **Unsure** — it's okay to be unsure, but it's not okay to remain in the dark. Start having conversations with employees and consider including relevant questions in your engagement and pulse surveys.

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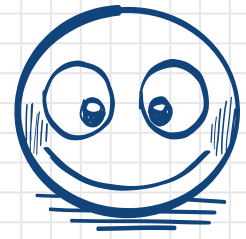
TYPES OF EMOTIONS AT WORK

To create awesome emotional cultures, organizations need to understand which emotions are prevalent in the workplace and how they affect employees.

We asked employees to select the emotions they feel most often at work. In the pages that follow, you'll see their responses, real comments from employees, and some actionable takeaways related to the data.

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POSITIVE EMOTIONS AT WORK

It's not exactly breaking news that positive employee emotions have a positive influence on the workplace. Research shows that positive emotions impact multiple areas at work³, such as:

- > Performance
- > Decision making
- > Turnover
- > Negotiation
- > Conflict resolution
- > Group dynamics
- > Leadership

The following pages describe the most common positive emotions identified by our survey participants.

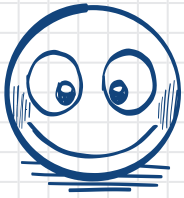
³International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health — Emotions at work and mental health: emerging directions

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MOST COMMON POSITIVE EMOTIONS



comfortable

What employees said:

"Speaking with my supervisor in one-on-one settings makes me feel **comfortable** and proud of my work. She offers supportive and constructive criticism and is very involved with her team."

"I felt **comfortable** because I was understood."

"Work demand was busy and coworkers were fun to be around. I felt engaged in my work and happy and **comfortable** around my coworkers."

Ways to increase comfort:

- > Provide regular opportunities for managers and employees to connect one-on-one
- > Train managers to act as coaches instead of bosses
- > Find ways to help employees feel heard and understood
- > Encourage team-building to promote positive relationships between employees





satisfied

What employees said:

“When a project that a partner and I had been working on tirelessly began producing positive outcomes, I was excited to see the product of my work and felt very **satisfied** when my efforts were recognized in team/department meetings.”

“Accomplishing a project that makes a big impact on the team makes me excited and **satisfied**.”

“I feel **satisfied** when I am challenged and performing up to my abilities.”

“I enjoy working with clients and being able to help them. I get **satisfaction** in making people happy.”

Ways to increase satisfaction:

- > Keep employees on their toes with work that challenges and fulfills them
- > Recognize good performance in a way that is meaningful to the employee
- > Help employees see the connection between their work and a greater purpose





Enthusiastic

What employees said:

"I felt proud and **enthusiastic** when I was given a lot of responsibility and trust by my manager and other senior leadership at a new job."

"I feel **enthusiastic** when my team asks me questions and I'm able to take the time to really explain things to them and help them work through issues."

"Getting people on the same page to work and collaborate together makes me **enthused**, excited, and energized."

Ways to increase enthusiasm:

- > Instill confidence in employees by giving them projects and opportunities that match their strengths and passions
- > Find ways to increase collaboration within and among teams
- > Create opportunities for people to connect and learn from one another

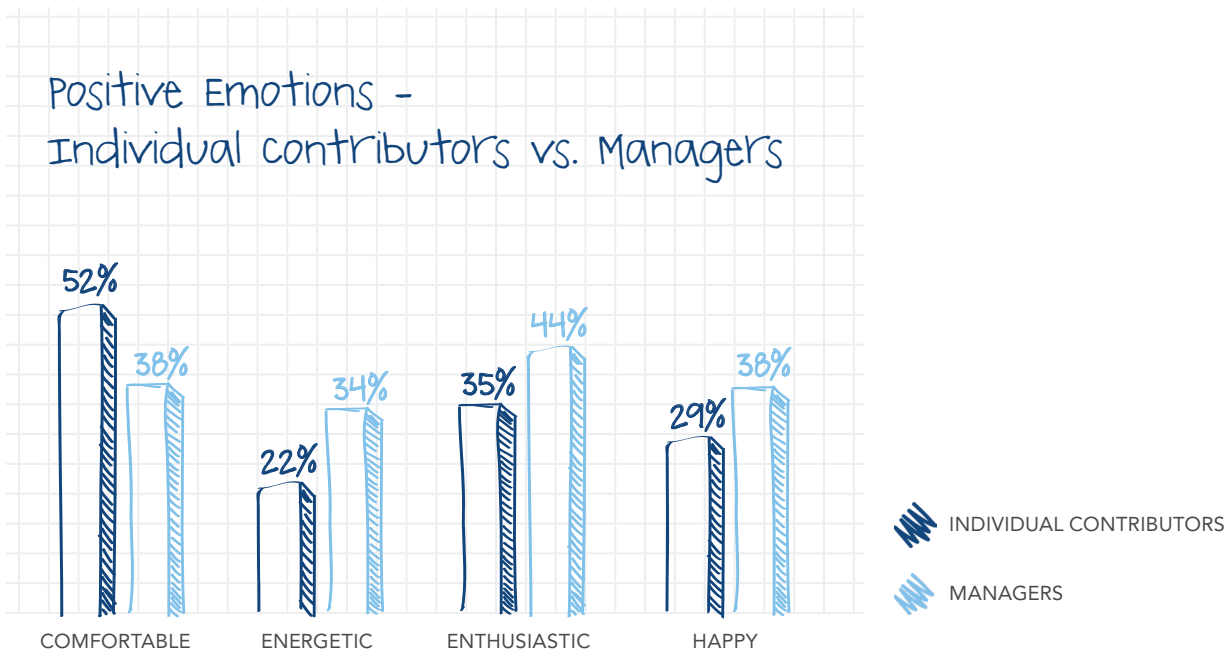
Other positive emotions to consider:

Calm, Energetic, Excited, Happy, Joyful, Peaceful, Relaxed



MANAGERS AND INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS DON'T FEEL THE SAME

Our research pointed to some noticeable differences between the most common positive emotions felt by individual contributors vs. managers.



Individual contributors tend to feel comfortable more often than managers. This might be a sign that managers are stressed or that they don't feel they have enough support at work.

On the other hand, managers tend to feel energetic, enthusiastic, and happy more often than individual contributors. This may be because managers often act as cheerleaders, facilitators, coaches, and conflict resolvers to their teams.

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NEGATIVE EMOTIONS AT WORK

Unaddressed and bottled-up negative emotions can wreak havoc on employees, teams, and organizations. They increase stress levels, create barriers between employees, and may impact other areas of the business, including productivity, innovation, and customer service.

The danger of negative emotions lies in their ability to multiply and spread like a virus. It's important for your organization to understand the most common types of negative emotions in the workplace, how to address them in a supportive manner, and how to proactively minimize their frequency.

The following pages describe the most common negative emotions identified by our survey participants.

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MOST COMMON NEGATIVE EMOTIONS



Frustrated

What employees said:

"I was upset and **frustrated** that the manager on call refused to come in and help in an extremely urgent time."

"I was **frustrated** because I wasn't successful at my role."

"I get most **frustrated** when people don't share information with me that I need to do my job correctly."

"I felt **frustrated** that I wasn't getting anywhere in my career."

Ways to decrease frustration:

- > Feeling stuck can lead to frustration — ongoing career and development conversations can help employees feel forward momentum at work
- > Make sure employees have the tools and resources they need to do their jobs effectively
- > Strive for open, timely, and transparent communication





stressed

What employees said:

“My manager was not communicating with me, cutting my projects and making me feel like I was not a valuable employee. I was **stressed**, miserable, and unhappy.”

“I felt **stressed** and overwhelmed due to the amount of work that needed to be done in such little time.”

“I felt a lot of anxiety and **stress** at my last job as a project manager. It was really overwhelming with a ton of work to do, and my client wasn’t helpful or understanding.”

“Customers **stressed** me out by being unreasonable and rude and not open to actual helpful information. They just wanted to complain and blame someone.”

Ways to decrease stress:

- > Too much work is not a good thing — try to keep employee workloads manageable
- > Solid manager-to-employee communication can make a big difference in stress levels
- > Employees who work with customers are susceptible to increased stress — try to give them the tools and strategies they need to cope with stressful customer situations and remind them that you care about their wellbeing just as much as you care about your bottom line





Anxious

What employees said:

"I felt **anxious** when I was instructed to do something that I did not know how to do. I was too **anxious** to ask for step-by-step directions."

"My **anxiety** stemmed from my company letting me know they were no longer profitable. This made me fearful for my job and my future."

"A client misunderstood what I was saying and thought I was purposely being rude to her. I was very worried and **anxious** about the situation, and how my boss would react."

Ways to decrease anxiety:

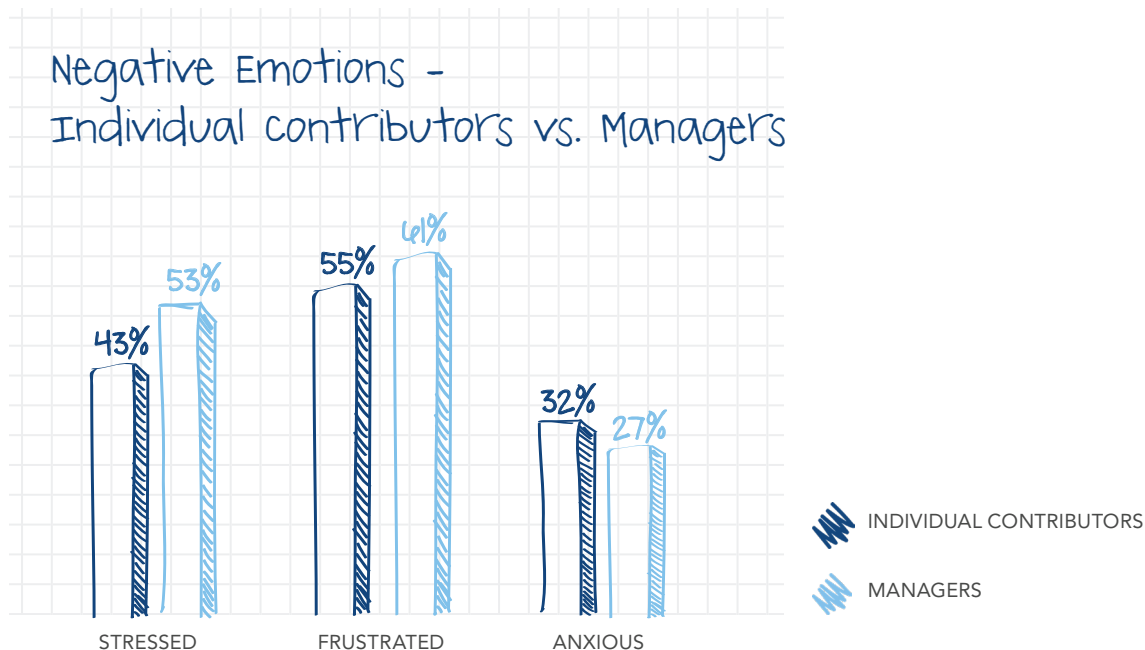
- > Let employees know it's okay to ask for help, and ensure they know how to access all the resources available to them
- > Anxiety often stems from the fear of the unknown — keep employees in the loop with frequent, timely, and transparent communication
- > Institute an open-door policy so employees can voice concerns and ask for advice when sticky situations arise

Other negative emotions to consider:

Annoyed, Bored, Disinterested, Dissatisfied, Gloomy, Miserable, Sad, Tired, Uncomfortable, Unhappy, Upset, Worried

STRESS AND FRUSTRATION MORE COMMON AMONG MANAGERS

We found some key differences between managers and individual contributors when it comes to common negative emotions at work.



Managers feel stressed and frustrated more often than individual contributors, but feel anxious less often. Increased stress is expected with the added responsibilities and demands of managers, but organizations should try to find ways to support managers through that stress.

The difference in anxiety levels between employees and managers might mean that managers need to communicate better or provide better tools and resources for employees to get work done.

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NEGATIVE MORAL EMOTIONS AT WORK

Basic emotions such as happiness and sadness are pretty straightforward and easy to understand. But many of the most important emotions that affect employees are much more complex.

Enter moral emotions. Morals are the principles that differentiate between good and bad behavior, and they vary from person to person. Individuals have unique moral compasses that provide immediate punishment or rewards for thoughts and behaviors.

Emotions that are influenced by our morals are called moral emotions. They include emotions like guilt, regret, and shame — and they carry much more weight than our primary emotions. When left unchecked, moral emotions can have a serious impact on the workplace. Organizations must find the right balance of supporting and preventing these emotions at work.

The following pages describe which moral emotions employees perceive as most negative.

MOST NEGATIVE MORAL EMOTIONS



Humiliation

What employees said:

“When my supervisor reprimanded me on the sales floor in front of customers and a coworker, I felt so **humiliated**. It was uncalled for and he could have taken me in the back.”

“I feel especially frustrated and betrayed when people escalate issues to my supervisor without bringing them to my attention first. When people do this it feels like I am being attacked personally, and their intent is to **humiliate** me rather than solve the problem at hand.”

“A co-worker showed my work to our entire team without telling me first and she proceeded to critique it in front of everyone. I felt **humiliated** and defensive.”

How to avoid humiliation:

- > Address mistakes and concerns in a private, one-on-one setting
- > Foster an environment where team members know how to give honest and professional feedback and can resolve their own conflicts





disgust

What employees said:

“When my manager wrongly criticized my work. I was **disgusted** and felt very underappreciated.”

“Metrics there were beyond our control quite often. I felt helpless and **disgusted** and anxious and just wanted to leave and not come back.”

“My employment was threatened due to missing work from an injury after a car accident. I was extremely **disgusted** and unmotivated to work there.”

How to avoid disgust:

- > Ensure everyone at your organization is trained to give and receive effective feedback
- > Let employees have a voice in individual and team goals — there’s nothing more discouraging than trying and failing to reach an impossible goal
- > Demonstrate care and concern for your employees and their personal lives, especially in times of crisis





Resentment

What employees said:

"We had one client make a minor complaint and my immediate manager acted like it was a huge travesty and we had done something terrible. It made me feel frustrated, **resentful**, and disregarded."

"Prior employment was too stressful, work overload and pressure caused anger and **resentment** toward company culture and immediate managers."

"I was overlooked for some recognition while my two teammates were rewarded. I felt ignored, **resentful**, and disgruntled."

How to avoid resentment:

- > When a problem arises, don't place blame on employees — try to attack the problem, rather than the person
- > Make sure employees have a reasonable workload and adequate resources — even employees who love their jobs can suffer from burnout
- > Be sure to recognize employees when it's deserved

Other negative moral emotions to consider:

Disappointment, Embarrassment, Envy, Guilt, Jealousy, Shame

EMOTIONS AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

We've covered the types of emotions that often occur in the workplace — but how do these emotions impact employee engagement?

Our research shows some clear connections between emotional culture and employee engagement, and the implications of these findings are serious. Engagement impacts a wide variety of important business outcomes (productivity, profitability, customer satisfaction, safety, sales, turnover, and more!) — which makes a solid case for addressing emotions at work.

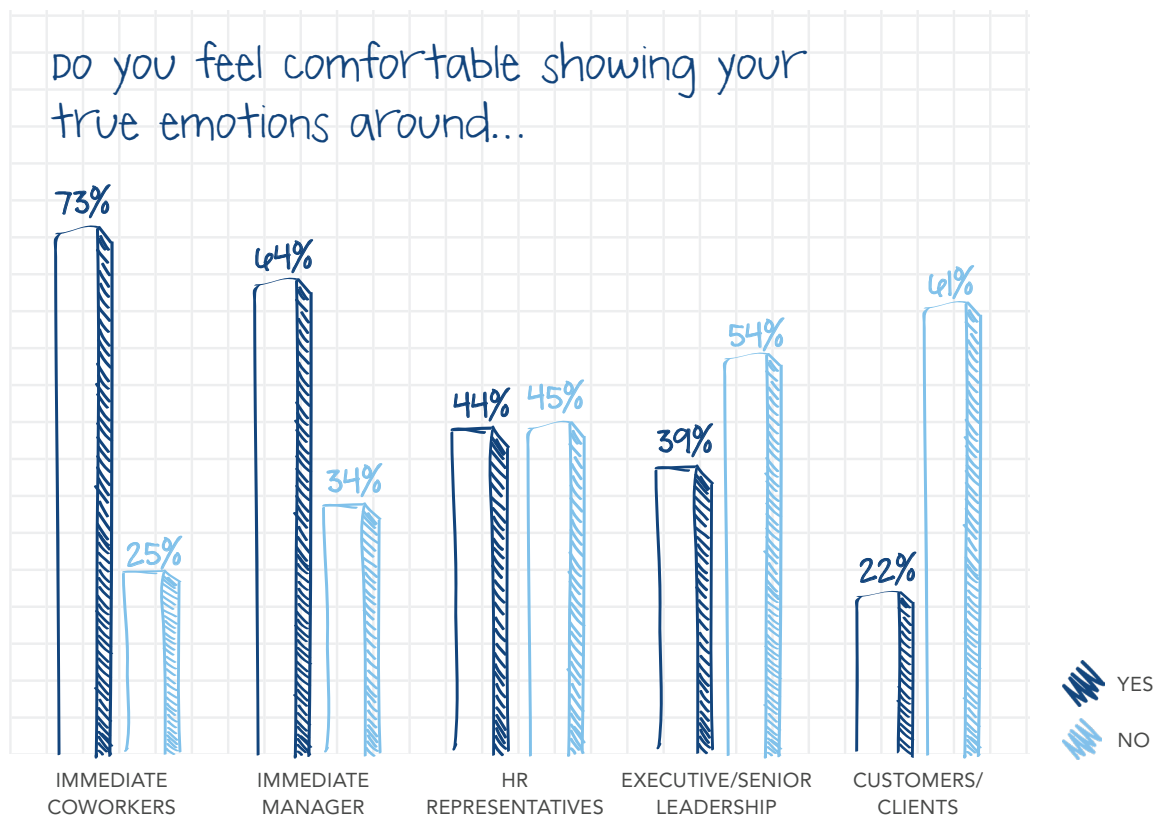
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DO EMPLOYEES FEEL COMFORTABLE SHOWING THEIR TRUE EMOTIONS AT WORK?

The answer is — yes and no. Our research says employees feel more comfortable showing their emotions at work around some groups more than others.



Note: Chart does not include data from small percentage of "Not Applicable" responses.

73 percent feel comfortable being emotionally transparent around their immediate coworkers, compared to 39 percent around leadership.

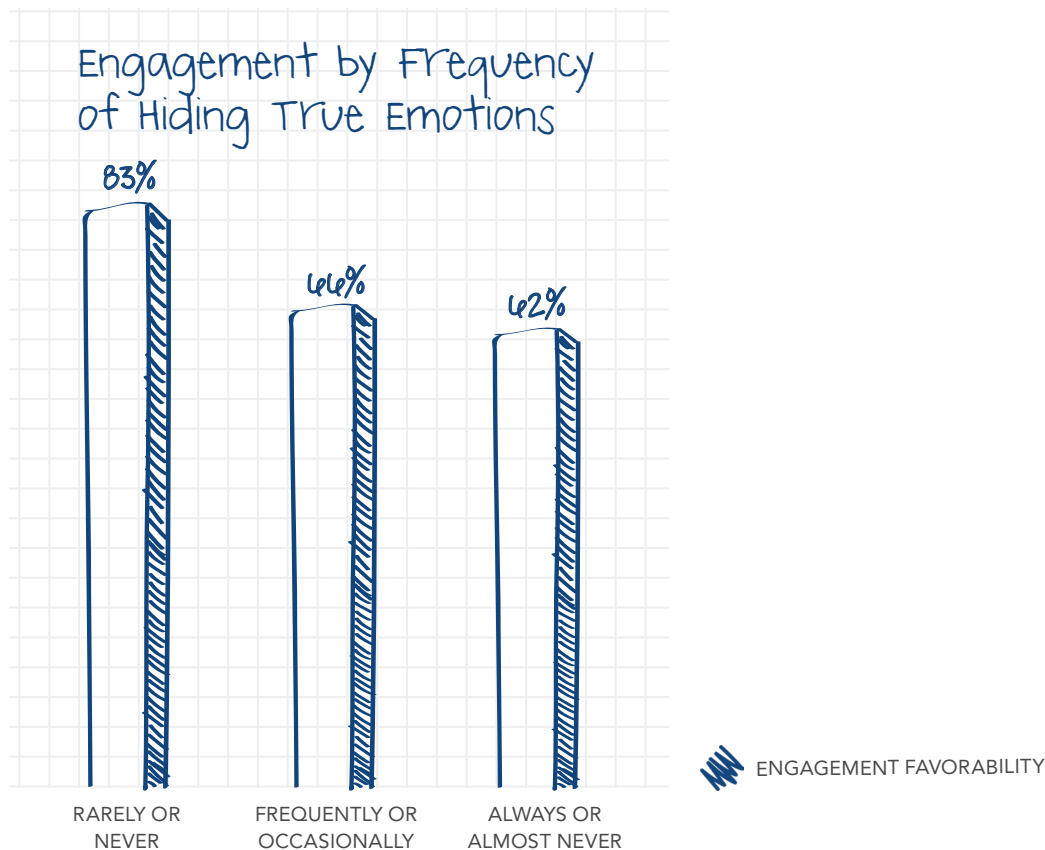
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EMPLOYEES ARE MORE ENGAGED WHEN THEY FEEL COMFORTABLE SHOWING THEIR TRUE EMOTIONS AT WORK.

The chart below shows that those who feel comfortable showing their true emotions at work have much higher engagement levels than those who don't.

This further adds to the story that feeling emotionally safe at work may enhance engagement. It could also be the case that higher levels of engagement may allow employees to feel increasingly comfortable being emotionally transparent — likely because they feel connected and valued at work.

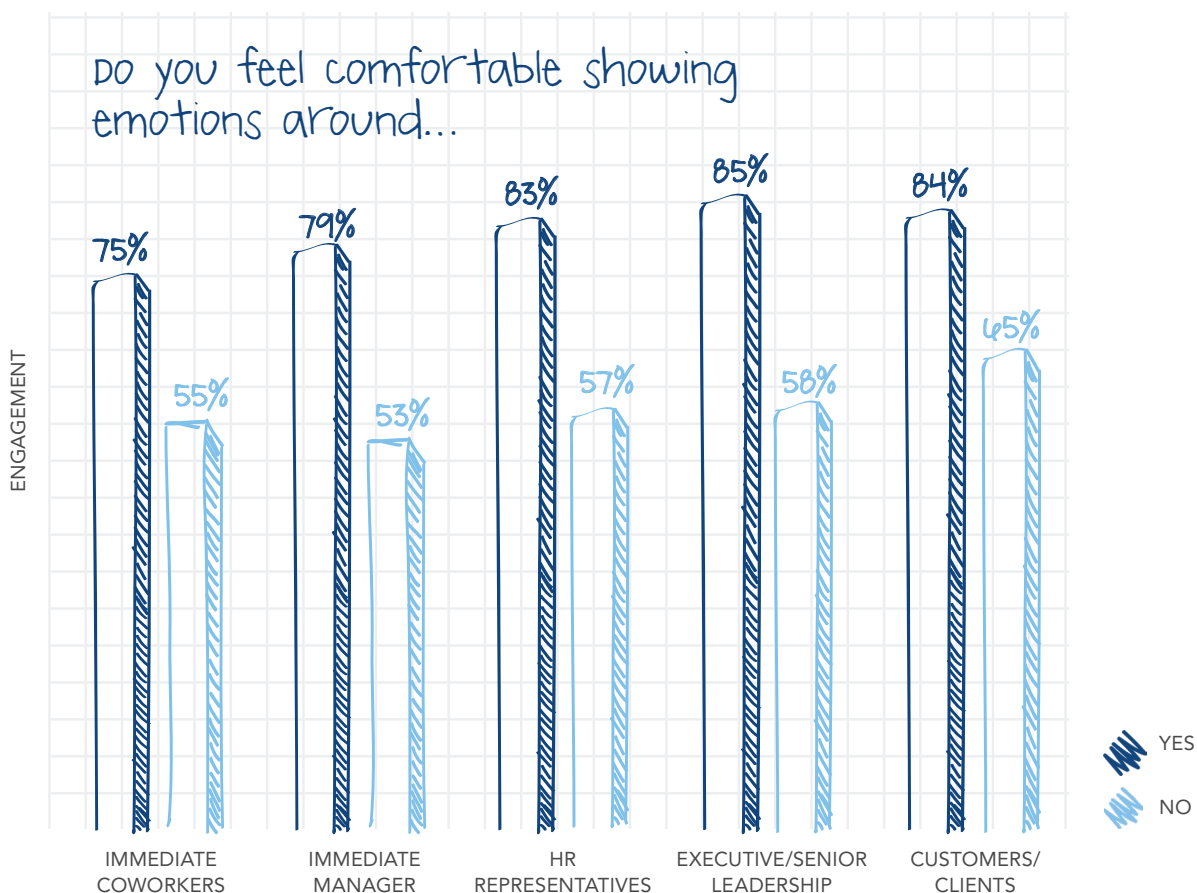


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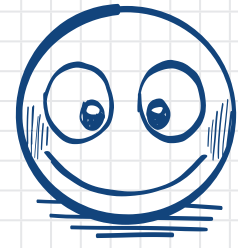
EMPLOYEES ARE MORE ENGAGED WHEN THEY FEEL COMFORTABLE SHOWING THEIR EMOTIONS AT ALL LEVELS OF THE ORGANIZATION.

So we already know that employees are more engaged when they feel comfortable showing their true emotions at work. But it's also true that employees who are comfortable showing their emotions at various levels of the organization (from coworkers to leaders to customers) are more engaged.



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ENCOURAGING EMOTIONAL TRANSPARENCY AT ALL LEVELS MAY UNLOCK ENGAGEMENT

It's natural that employees would feel more comfortable expressing emotions around the people they are closest with (their coworkers and managers) — but if organizations can figure out how to nurture the same dynamic between employees and leadership, they might unlock a new pathway to engagement.

It also makes sense that external stakeholders — like customers — are associated with very low levels of emotional transparency. This result taps into the idea of emotional labor, a form of outwardly displaying certain emotions to comply with organizational expectations.

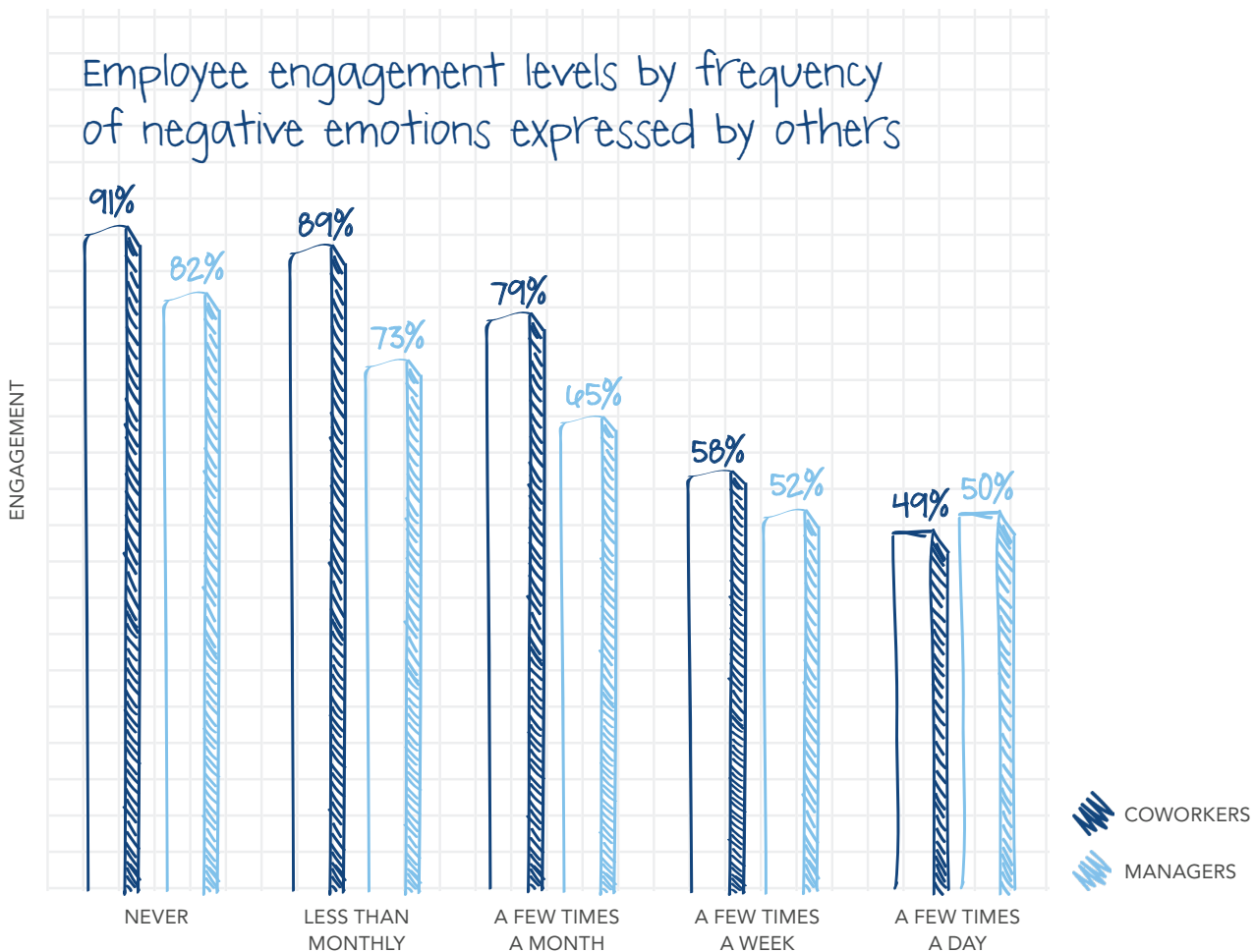
Research shows that employees who use “surface acting” (giving a response they feel they are expected to give) can suffer from increased stress and burnout. But employees who have mastered “deep acting” (training themselves to actually feel a certain way in response) are in a much better position to succeed.⁴

If organizations can help employees develop and strengthen relational emotions like sympathy and empathy, they may be able to decrease stress triggered by sticky customer situations.

⁴Knowledge @ Wharton — [Managing Emotions in the Workplace: Do Positive and Negative Attitudes Drive Performance?](#)

EMPLOYEES ARE LESS ENGAGED IN ENVIRONMENTS WHERE NEGATIVE EMOTIONS RUN WILD.

Burying emotions hurts engagement... but so does being in an emotionally toxic environment. When the people around you are frequently and openly expressing negative emotions, it can have a damaging effect on employee engagement.



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BE CAREFUL WITH NEGATIVE EMOTIONS...

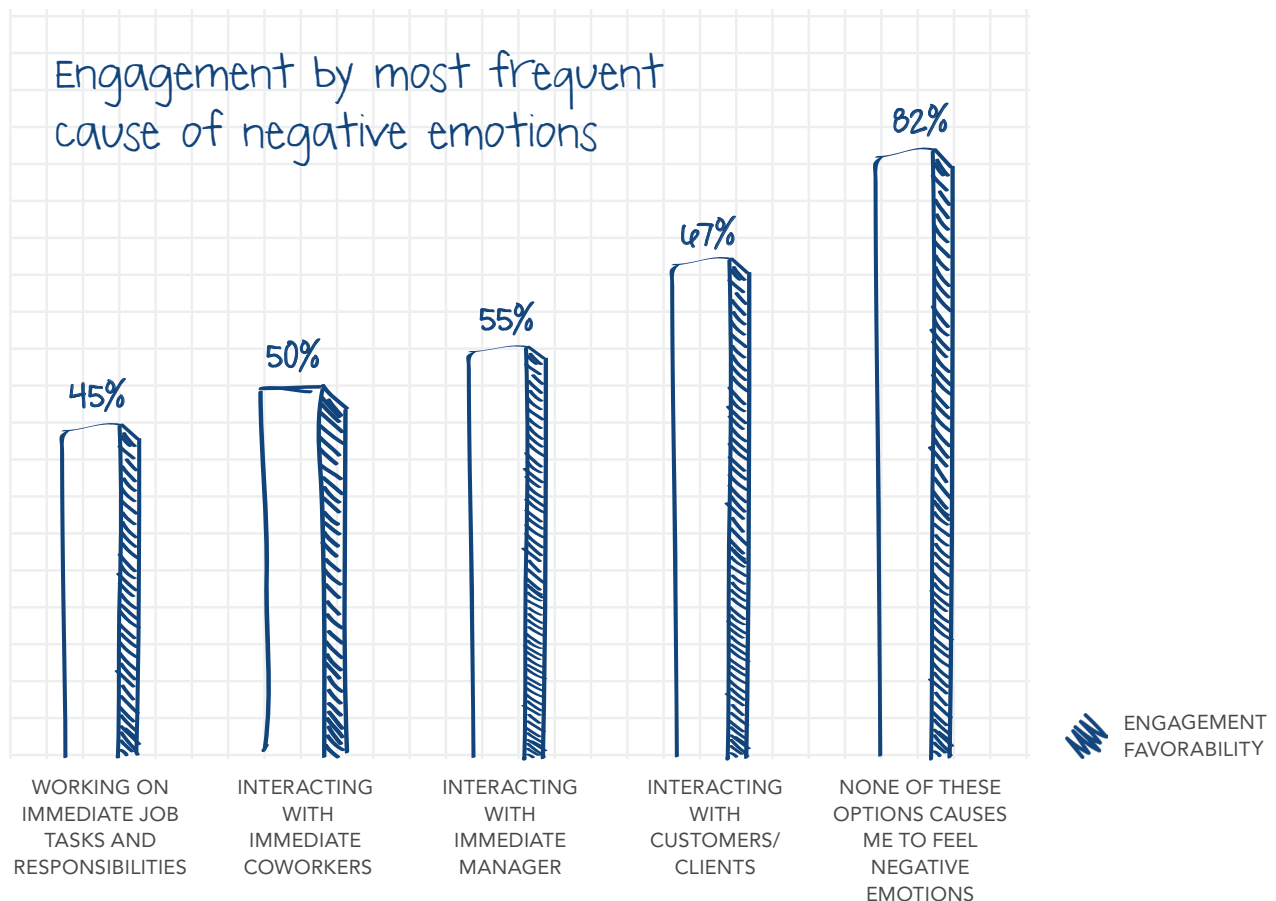
The more often employees express negative emotions, the more it affects the people around them. The chart on the previous page shows that employees whose managers and coworkers express negative emotions on a daily or weekly basis have much lower levels of engagement.

The data also shows employees may be more accepting of negative emotions that come from their coworkers versus their managers. Employees depend on their managers to act as leaders and coaches — so when managers can't get a handle on their negative emotions, there may be trouble brewing.

Organizations must find ways for employees to express themselves in constructive manners that don't negatively impact their coworkers. They should look for opportunities to assist employees in developing proper coping mechanisms and alleviating stress. And when an inappropriate or unprofessional outburst occurs, it should be immediately addressed and corrected.

HIGHLY ENGAGED EMPLOYEES ARE TRIGGERED BY DIFFERENT EVENTS THAN LESS ENGAGED EMPLOYEES.

We asked respondents "Which of the following options causes you to feel negative emotions most frequently?" Below are their responses, broken down by engagement levels.



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ENGAGEMENT MIGHT BE A COPING STRATEGY

Employees who believe that none of the above factors cause them to feel negative emotions had the highest levels of engagement. This suggests that higher levels of engagement may be associated with a denial or reframing of negativity or that engaged employees are more likely to show optimism. They may quickly forget about, overlook, or not frame these emotions as negative when asked about them.

The factors with the most direct impact on employees — their jobs and immediate coworkers — were the strongest sources associated with less engaged employees. This underscores the strong link between an employee's engagement and their immediate job tasks and responsibilities.



CREATING AN EMOTIONAL SAFE SPACE

We've thrown a lot of data about emotions your way, and we hope you understand the importance of creating an emotionally supportive work environment by now. But you don't have to do it alone! Let's uncover a few tips and tricks on how to foster a healthy emotional culture, such as:

- > Tips for managing your own emotions
- > Advice on dealing with the emotions of others
- > HR strategies and initiatives that can strengthen your emotional culture

MANAGING YOUR OWN EMOTIONS

Situations that cause you to feel negative emotions are... well, emotional. It's easy to react to emotional situations in ways we're not proud of. The best way to combat unhealthy emotional reactions is to recognize, understand, and manage them.

FIRST: RECOGNIZE

When your emotions start to bubble up, don't panic. Take a deep breath and recognize them for what they are. Don't react immediately — instead try to put a label on what it is you're feeling. If you feel upset, what is causing you to feel that way? Are you angry? Frustrated? A combination of both? When did you become aware of the feeling? What triggered it? Don't judge yourself for feeling any which way.

THEN: UNDERSTAND

After you've named your emotion(s), focus on the *why* behind them. Dig deep and try to discover their origin. Follow them down the pathway to where you are now. Are your emotions coming from something within you, or something external? If it's a familiar emotion, think about other times you've felt this emotion and how you previously responded. What went well in those moments? What didn't? How do you want to respond differently in *this* moment?

FINALLY: MANAGE

Now that you've taken some time to cool down and reflect, you need to figure out the best way to respond. There are no hard and fast rules for how to respond, but here are some things to consider:

- > Do you still feel the need to address the situation?
- > Is it possible you overreacted?
- > Are there things that need to be resolved before you can move forward?
- > What will you say when you do address the situation? What will the other person say?
- > What did you learn from this situation that you can apply to future situations like it?



DEALING WITH OTHERS' EMOTIONS

Regardless of how well you handle your own emotions, you can't control the emotions of others. But it is important to learn how to acknowledge them and respond appropriately. Unresolved issues can lead to decreased productivity, damaged relationships, and lowered engagement.

1. ALLOW FOR MISTAKES.

No one is perfect, plain and simple. Mistakes are inevitable and, although they shouldn't be simply accepted, they also shouldn't be grounds for a scolding. Berating or punishing employees, especially in front of their peers, can cause humiliation and hostility.

On the flip side, calmly correcting or excusing the rare mistake builds trust. But if mistakes continue to pile up, the manager and their employees should get together and create a performance improvement plan to make sure both parties are on the same page and have clear expectations.

2. BUILD A CULTURE OF TRUST.

Sharing emotions, especially uncomfortable ones, makes us vulnerable. And we can't be vulnerable if we don't trust the people we're sharing with. Everyone from senior leadership to interns and part-timers should feel comfortable being themselves and expressing emotions. When there is a culture of transparency and authenticity, employees can understand how others feel and adjust accordingly.

3. BE PRESENT.

When managers and leaders are consistently unavailable, employees tend to get anxious. Regularly making time to connect with your team provides opportunities for you to instill confidence in your employees, their work, and their performance. Set uninterrupted time apart for each employee at least once a month (we recommend once a week, even if it's a quick check-in) so employees can ask questions, provide updates, raise concerns, and provide feedback.

4. LISTEN MORE THAN YOU TALK.

Much of the time, someone experiencing negative emotions isn't searching for solutions. They simply want to express themselves and release all the pent-up emotions they feel. Listening to them allows them to get it all out there and makes them feel cared for and heard. It also establishes you as a trusted resource who can be depended on.



6 HR STRATEGIES FOR A STRONG EMOTIONAL CULTURE

1. OFFER FREE TRAINING ON TOPICS RELATED TO EMOTIONS.

If you want an employee to grow in a skill, you typically provide training and resources to help them. The same is true regarding emotions in the workplace — if you put a concerted effort into helping employees effectively manage their emotions, they'll be better equipped to respond when issues arise. Consider providing training on topics such as emotional intelligence, emotional regulation, anger management, stress reduction, conflict resolution, mindfulness, and other related topics.

2. ENCOURAGE MANAGERS TO UTILIZE FREQUENT EMPLOYEE CHECK-INS.

If your managers aren't already using one-on-one meetings to keep a pulse on what's happening within their teams, this is a quick-win strategy to help boost your emotional culture. When employees have designated one-on-one time with their manager, it gives them a chance to build positive relationships with their manager, voice important concerns, ask questions, and provide feedback.

3. BEEF UP YOUR EMPLOYEE WELLBEING PERKS.

There are many external factors that affect our emotions, how we handle them, and how they impact our physical and mental health. Offering perks and benefits related to employee wellbeing encourages employees to take better care of themselves and shows that you care about them too. Think gym memberships, mental health days, EAP programs, financial counseling, etc.



4. PROMOTE BENEFITS AND RESOURCES ALREADY AVAILABLE TO EMPLOYEES.

Chances are you already offer benefits and resources related to employee wellbeing that your employees don't know about or don't know how to take advantage of. Be sure to promote these offerings regularly while also making a case for why they matter.

5. OFFER ON-SITE ACTIVITIES THAT HELP RELIEVE STRESS.

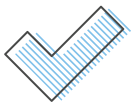
Give employees a break from the daily grind every now and then by offering on-site activities that help relieve stress. Bring in a yoga instructor or a massage therapist once a quarter and let employees relax, breathe, and feel pampered. They'll go back to their desks feeling refreshed, calm, and ready to tackle the rest of their week.

6. KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT DATA.

Prevention is key when it comes to emotional wellbeing at work. One of the best ways to stay ahead of the curve here is to keep a close eye on your engagement survey data. Keep an eye out for issues that are creeping up within the company — employee comments will serve as a gold mine of information and paint a more comprehensive picture. Commit to taking action and follow up with pulse surveys throughout the year to stay informed of any issues that arise.

STRENGTHEN YOUR EMOTIONAL CULTURE WITH QUANTUM WORKPLACE

- > Empower managers and their team members to stay connected and build positive relationships
- > Keep a pulse on engagement issues across your organization and the departments, teams, and individuals within it
- > Amplify and celebrate successes to increase positive emotions in the workplace
- > Help reduce negative emotions by enabling transparency, open communication, and authenticity with user-friendly, real-time tools



SURVEYS



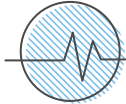
GOALS



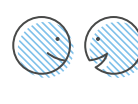
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