

MANAGING EMOTIONAL LABOUR

| Learning Guide

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A Leader's Guide to Managing Emotional Labour at Work in Good Times and During a Crisis

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this learning guide written for people leaders, we tell you what emotional labour is, where it comes from, how it affects people and what happens when it becomes too much. We talk about burnout and how to manage the three levels of burnout. Plus, we tell you the four steps that leaders can take to help employees manage their emotional labour, especially during a crisis that affects an entire team or workforce.



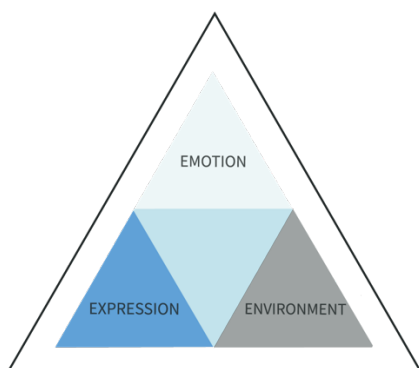
What is Emotional Labour?

Emotional labour is the effort it takes to push down an emotion—positive or negative—to avoid having a reaction that’s inappropriate for the environment. For example, if you’re driving with your kids and an orange Ferrari cuts you off, you may feel frustrated or angry. These feelings may give you the urge to dip into road rage. But you want to be safe and set a good example for your kids, so you don’t express those feelings as a negative reaction. In this situation, staying calm and driving respectfully can take a lot of effort, which is the emotional labour.

Emotional labour sounds bad, but it’s a totally normal part of the human experience. We experience emotional labour almost every day and usually multiple times per day.

Emotional labour keeps the wheels of society going. Without emotional labour, we’d have strong reactions all day long and wouldn’t be able to get anything done.

Emotional Labour and Our Three Emotional States



As a leader, your role often includes managing your team’s emotional labour (and your own). It’s essential that you understand our three emotional states and how much emotional labour is associated with each of them.

The three emotional states are emotional harmony, emotional dissonance and emotional discord.

Emotional harmony – This is when the emotion we have and the way we like to express that emotion are appropriate for the environment. Emotional harmony requires no emotional labour because you’re not holding back any reaction.

Emotional harmony examples:

- You’re at a comedy club and you laugh at a dicey joke.
- You scream your head off—while riding a rollercoaster.
- You cry at a funeral.

Emotional dissonance – This is when your environment and how you express your emotion are aligned but disconnected from the emotion you feel. The emotion you feel is not appropriate to express in the environment, so you adjust the expression of that emotion until it fits. This means either you don’t react at all, or you tone down the expression of that emotion until it’s appropriate for the environment.

Emotional dissonance requires emotional labour, sometimes a lot.

Though emotional dissonance sounds bad, it’s a completely normal space to be in—and we’re in emotional dissonance multiple times a day.

Emotional dissonance examples:

- You’re in a meeting with your manager who’s about to give you some feedback. You’re terrified but, unlike on the roller coaster, it wouldn’t be appropriate to express that emotion by screaming. Instead you put your calm face on.



- You're at work and are angry about something your colleague said. Instead of slamming your fist on the table, you take a deep breath and gather your thoughts before speaking.
- Someone farts during a meeting. Because you have kids, you know farts are hilarious, but you don't laugh or comment because that's not an appropriate reaction in a professional setting.

Emotional discord – This is when our emotion and expression are aligned but they're disconnected from the environment. With emotional discord, your expression is true to your emotion but expressing these feelings is inappropriate in your current environment.

Emotional discord requires no emotional labour because you're not holding anything back.

Emotional discord examples:

- A team member cries during every 1:1 meeting when you offer feedback.
- You yell during a meeting.
- You pound your fist on your desk when you're angry.
- You overshare personal details at work.

At work, emotional discord is acceptable occasionally, especially during high-stakes situations. But if you lead team members who are emotionally discordant more than occasionally, your job includes addressing these inappropriate expressions.

Quick Glance: Emotional Labour

Emotional situation	Aligned	Out of alignment	Emotional labour required?
Emotional harmony	Emotion Expression Environment	N/A	No
Emotional dissonance	Environment Expression	Emotion	Yes
Emotional discord	Emotion Expression	Environment	No

What Does Emotional Labour Mean for Leaders?

People are in a state of emotional dissonance frequently each day. If you've got some personal issues going on at home, you *can* spend a lot of your workday in emotional dissonance. But not always. For example, if Fred is in your meeting, thinking about his aging mother who had a fall—but trying not to—he'll spend a lot of emotional labour. On the other hand, if Fred is captivated by the meeting, he won't be thinking about his personal issue which means he's only using some—but not much—emotional labour.

As a leader, it's important for you to understand what this everyday emotional labour and dissonance means for your team.

Even during good times, you could have one or two people on your team wearing themselves out by using emotional labour all day long. In times of crisis, your entire team could be burning through their energy reserves by employing emotional dissonance day in and day out. And, when their energy reserves are running on empty, emotional discord leaks out.



As a leader, you must be able to help your team manage their emotional labour.

Emotional Labour Overload in the Best of Times

When we're at our best, we can still get overloaded because we're using too much emotional labour to deal with situations at work and at home. And when this happens, emotional discord is more likely to leak out. Imagine graciously dealing with traffic on the way to work and then handling multiple frustrating fiascos at work. You're all good, thanks to your emotional labour skills—until the orange Ferrari cuts you off on your drive home. You lapse into emotional discord with a few choice words and hand gestures because you hit your emotional labour max for the moment. But, because you're generally doing well, you can put a lid on your inappropriate expression in 30 seconds.

Even at the best of times, it's not unusual to pop in and out of emotional discord because we can get overloaded with emotional labour. But if popping in and out of emotional discord happens more often, that's something to pay attention to.

Ignoring the Cost of Emotional Labour: Burnout Risks and Solutions

Emotional labour can use a little or a lot of effort and there's a cost associated with that effort. Think of it as an accumulating balance sheet or tab. Emotional labour adds cost to the balance sheet and it's essential to bring those costs down, so it stays within a healthy amount.

The only two ways to deal with emotional labour are:

- Managing it.
- Paying for it.

Before we talk about how emotional labour is managed and paid, let's look at what happens when it's not managed or paid: burnout.

HOW BURNOUT RELATES TO EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Though emotional labour is normal, when we go through prolonged stages of emotional labour that isn't sufficiently managed or paid, we get into burnout. Prolonged periods of stress make it harder to manage and pay emotional labour.

What is Burnout?

Burnout is exhaustion—physical, mental and emotional—caused by too much stress that goes on for too long.

Burnout is largely unavoidable and it's a normal part of the human experience. But we tend to talk about burnout in the worst way possible—like all instances of burnout are at the furthest end of the burnout spectrum. That's not the best way to think about burnout because we can burn out on things we like, such as TV shows, food or podcasts.

Practically speaking, when we're in burnout, our ability to show up the same way as we would in good times is diminished. We have less and less ability to manage emotional labour and be in a state of emotional dissonance as required.



LEADER QUICK TIPS: MANAGING THE THREE LEVELS OF BURNOUT

Burnout can be mild, moderate and severe. Leaders can help their employees deal with burnout by knowing what each level of burnout looks like and the effective approach for managing each stage.

Managing Mild Burnout

With a good self-care regimen—exercise/physical activity, healthy eating and staying social—most people feel pretty good.

But leaders need to know this: your average employee is in a mild state of burnout one or more times each quarter! Though people are in and out of mild burnout all the time, most manage it without too much trouble.

In mild burnout, we feel *a little* burnt out, which means our current self-care program isn't enough. When this happens, we need to ramp up activities that we enjoy. This is nicely accomplished by taking a four-day weekend, totally un-plugging and engaging in something we like to do, including self-care activities.

Managing Moderate Burnout

In moderate burnout, we start becoming anxious and avoidant or hyper vigilant. Our ability to manage emotional labour is quite diminished.

As a leader, you can recognize moderate burnout when someone starts having mood swings and becomes more reactive, avoidant, vigilant, sensitive or aggressive than usual. Managing moderate burnout requires a more aggressive response. This includes continuing your self-care regimen, reducing your workload as soon as possible and taking multiple four-day weekends—quickly and in a cluster. Don't take a two-week vacation because that's not as effective for managing burnout as more frequent shorter breaks.

Managing Severe Burnout

In severe burnout, our mental health is drastically impacted. We can no longer use emotional labour effectively or our ability is significantly diminished. When we're in severe burnout, we become highly passive aggressive or aggressive, we fixate on internal false narratives, implied and motivated reasoning and confirmation bias. This creates a vicious cycle of negative self-fulfilling prophecies. We also let resentment—the poison of the soul—guide our behaviour. Once resentment is entrenched, it's difficult to come back from, which is one reason it's so important to deal with burnout before it becomes severe.

At this stage, we're not able to effectively remain in the workplace. Managing severe burnout requires a leave of absence or finding another job.

Burnout Level	Time-off Recommendations
Mild	Refresh yourself with a four-day weekend, once per month.
Moderate	Use your vacation time to take a four-day weekend twice per month for the next three months.
Severe	Take a leave of absence from your job for a month or more.



How Leaders Can Help Employees Take Care of Emotional Labour: Management and Payment

As a leader, you're aware of the emotional labour required daily at work. You can help your team reduce the cost of their emotional labour by adjusting your leadership style to make room for emotion.

Leaders can deal with their team's emotional labour in two ways:

- Managing it – This is when you make space for emotion in your leadership style.
- Paying it – This is when you help your employees achieve meaningful results (or recognize them) and/or drive positive change in relationships.

MANAGING EMOTIONAL LABOUR: MAKING SPACE FOR EMOTION IN YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE

First off, making space for emotion is different than being a therapist. You're a boss, not a therapist, so you don't wade into emotions and you don't offer advice. Instead, you ask people to share what's challenging for them in their workspace so they can express their emotion about it. This acts like a pressure relief valve and helps people reduce their emotional labour in the moment and reduce the likelihood of emotional discord seeping out later.

Making space for emotion isn't about asking people to tell you how terrible things are; it's about asking what's going on for them so they can let it out and move on. As the leader, you must not deliver a pep talk prematurely (before making space for emotion) or let this check-in deteriorate into trash talking.

Four Steps to a Meaningful Check-in With Your Team

The team check-in must be facilitated and have purpose. As a leader, it's up to you to set the tone for these meetings.

Check-in Elements	What to Say
Set the stage	It's important for me to create a space for emotions in difficult times and I'd love to hear about how you're feeling and the impact on your daily experience. What I want to avoid is talking about the situation itself and replaying events, problem-solving or getting advice. Instead, let's share the emotion and the experience of having that emotion.
Make space for emotion by starting first	I'll get us started by telling you what's going on for me.
Manage sharing by setting an example and asking the next person to share	<p>I felt freaked out when they told me to send everyone home to work remotely because I didn't know how we'd make that happen in such a short time. Plus, I felt unsure about how to keep our team feeling connected while we're apart.</p> <p>Jenny, how are you feeling since we last checked in?</p> <p>--</p> <p>Additional information for this step If you're not going through the same experience as your team or employee, you could make space for emotion by saying, "If I put myself in your shoes, I might be feeling worried about what's happening right now."</p>



	The leader must facilitate the conversation, instead of letting the least chatty person wait until the end. Guide the conversation by choosing who shares and when. Start with the chattiest person, then go to the person who speaks the least and continue this pattern until everyone has shared.
Inspire the team	One of the things I believe in is the people on this team. And I know that so long as we continue to meet with each other consistently and be open with each other, we'll have the ability to help each other through this.

Here's how to facilitate a meaningful check-in:

1. Set the stage.
2. Make space for emotion by starting first.
3. Manage the sharing by giving your experience which serves as an appropriate example. (If you don't do this, your check-in can spiral towards negativity quickly.)
4. Inspire people based on what's real for your team. Avoid advice giving and making ridiculous promises like, "Everything will be fine."

PAYING EMOTIONAL LABOUR: MEANINGFUL RESULTS AND CHANGED RELATIONSHIPS

There are two reliable ways emotional labour can be paid—and these payments reduce the balance on the emotional labour balance sheet.

Emotional labour can be paid by:

- Achieving meaningful results.
- Seeing a positive change in a relationship.

Paying Emotional Labour With Meaningful Results

In the workplace, people do their work but there's no line item on their pay cheque that indicates compensation for all their emotional labour. As a leader, you can help people see they're paying off this emotional labour by bringing attention to their meaningful achievements and creating opportunities for more. When you do this, people become more attuned to emotional labour payments, and start to seek it out for themselves. This might be as simple as reflecting on a recent assignment, such as, "Working on that writing project with marketing was fun and tapped into my creative side."

It's essential for leaders to understand what meaningful results are to each team member because it's highly personal. That starts with finding out more about your employees and learning their prime motivators.

Examples of prime motivators:

- Material items, such as cars, houses, watches and golf club memberships.
- Helping people.
- Doing the right thing.
- Wanting to be praised and/or appreciated.

When one of our prime motivators are met, it pays emotional labour costs, even if the emotional labour cost was accrued from an unrelated situation. For example, if you're having a tough time at home, achieving a meaningful result at work can reduce the emotional labour you're using because of the situation at home. This means you can go back into the fray—refreshed—and handle the home situation with more grace.



Examples of meaningful results that pay down the emotional labour tab:

- Your prime motivator is helping people. You help your colleague secure a promotion—and you feel great!
- You're a senior leader with a busy schedule but you're regularly involved in your favourite community organization—it makes you feel refreshed.
- You finish a marathon; you hurt all over and you're starving, but you're on top of the world.
- You start a company that provides meaningful employment—the payment is huge!
- Your employee is community driven and wants to be of service to people. You recognize this about your employee and direct them to areas of the business where they can be of service in this way. (This can pay emotional labour for you *and* your employee.)

Of course, we don't always get meaningful results. That's why it's essential for leaders to know how to manage emotional labour when paying for emotional labour isn't likely, such as during times of crisis.

Paying Emotional Labour With a Changed Relationship

For most of us, our work lives create emotional labour and that's often due to our relationships with other people. That includes our relationship with our boss, colleagues, direct reports and clients. Occasionally, we'll have a relationship that's really challenging—a 10 out of 10 on the difficulty scale—and causing a lot of emotional labour for us. In this situation, it's so exhausting restraining our reactions and staying calm!

One way to pay back that emotional labour is to change the relationship with that difficult person. Be warned: this is up to you and the other person will resist. But if you manage yourself well by showing up appropriately for the environment, it's amazing what kind of change you can affect.

For example, let's say your boss is a dismissive person who often acts like a jerk. The more you stick it out, work hard, figure out how to work with them and prove yourself, the more your boss will rely on you. Then, your boss will become more willing to work with you. As this relationship falls from a 10 out of 10 on the difficulty scale to a five, your emotional labour tab gets paid down. Even though your boss is still difficult, being the driving force behind this changed relationship makes you feel great and proud of yourself.

PRACTICAL WAYS FOR LEADERS TO HELP EMPLOYEES MANAGE EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Now that you know how emotional labour is managed and paid, let's look at what you can do as a leader to help your team manage their individual and collective emotional labour.

Step 1: Learn About Your Audience and Environment and Adapt to Their Needs

How we react to situations and people changes over time. It's essential to be attuned to your audience and the current needs of the business. As a leader, sometimes you need to be a bit more buttoned up and formal and sometimes you need to be more conversational and friendly.

Learning about your audience starts with gaining insight into their primary motivators.

Ask yourself these questions for each of your team members:

- What does a meaningful result look like for <team member>?
- What is <team member>'s primary motivator?
- How do I know these things?



In times of crisis—such as a global pandemic or an economic downturn—you must shape your internal work environment to align to your business needs. The alternative is letting your internal environment match the external environment. This is a bad idea because the external environment is heavily influenced by a 24-hour news cycle that doubles down on panic and negativity.

Emotional Labour Overload During a Crisis

During a crisis, especially one that affects your whole team at once, it's important to accept that it's unlikely for emotional labour to be paid sufficiently. This is because the outlets for meaningful results are fewer. Leaders must focus intensely on activities that manage emotional labour instead of activities that can pay emotional labour.

Adapting to what *is* instead of what you'd like it to be is hard, but your staff will appreciate your leadership, especially during difficult times.

Step 2: Make Space for Emotions With a Weekly All-hands Video Meeting

At the beginning of each week—on a Monday or Tuesday—have a video call with your entire team of direct reports. This meeting should be between 60 and 90 minutes so people can stay focused.

The rules of this meeting are:

- Everyone must attend.
- Everyone must be on video.
- The first 10-20 minutes are reserved for a check-in to activate the emotional labour release valve. (See page 6 or instructions on facilitating a meaningful check-in with your team.)
- The rest of the agenda is productive and guided by the needs of your business and team.
- You repeat this meeting next week and each week afterwards.

Step 3: Have an Additional 1:1 Check-in With Each Person on Your Team Every Week

Whether it's regular times or in the middle of a crisis, a weekly 1:1 with each of your employees is an essential part of a leader's duties. Your regular 1:1 check-in is to deal with business processes, and these should continue during times of crisis.

But during difficult times—such as when the entire team has gone remote because of a global pandemic—you must initiate an additional 1:1 check-in. In this call—which should be between five and 15 minutes—simply ask how the other person is doing. It's not about the business, it's about the person. You can do these check-ins on the fly or schedule them, whatever works best for you.

When the crisis passes, you can eliminate the additional 1:1 check-in.

Conclusion

Emotional labour is real, and it can either be easy or extremely difficult to manage. As a leader, you can ease the burden of emotional labour for your team by creating space for emotion in your weekly team meetings and 1:1 check-ins. Follow the tips in this guide to get started!



For more support and information about leading teams effectively during times of crisis, connect with your Trusted Advisors at Cadence Leadership + Communication.

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