Angie Morgan & Courtney Lynch, Lead Star’s Founders

Best-selling authors Angie Morgan & Courtney Lynch learned these leadership fundamentals during their combined 18 years as Marine Corps Officers. Now they share practical leadership instruction with thousands of professionals in key Fortune 500 companies, law firms, professional service firms, nonprofits, and other leading organizations.

Productive Emotions in the Workplace

by Marcia Layton Turner

Award-winning author Marcia Layton Turner writes frequently about business. Her work has been seen in BusinessWeek, Entrepreneur, Business 2.0, and Woman’s Day, among others.

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Emotions are a double-edged sword at work. Positive emotions and attitude can be extremely beneficial to a work environment, while negative emotions can be equally harmful and unproductive. Like it or not, emotions are contagious. Positive emotions, such as happiness, pride, and satisfaction, can lift people’s spirits. And negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, and frustration, have the opposite effect, reducing the productivity and dampening the morale of everyone within earshot of the person displaying them. Leaders know that emotions are powerful and they leverage them to improve the performance and outlook of everyone on their team. That is exactly what Dave*, the assistant principal of a school in the suburbs of Rochester, New York, did during a particularly trying school year.

Positive Equals Productive

Several years ago, when New York State required schools to totally revamp their English and Language Arts curriculum to better prepare students for the annual standardized tests, the teachers required to make such changes were frustrated. Redesigning the whole year’s teaching plan was a chore, and the pressure to ensure that 80% of the students met the new test standard weighed on the teachers’ minds.

There was so much stress, but Dave made it bearable, says Connie Moore, who taught for him before he retired. “He always had a smile on his face,” she says, and despite the upheaval and irritation everyone felt, “he never expressed any negativity.” His positive attitude, frequent morale-boosting notes, and friendly demeanor significantly reduced the teachers’ anxiety about the changes. And his frequent compliments and pats on the back helped the teachers stay focused on their work, rather than becoming consumed with concerns about test scores. They were able to stay positive and focused because they had the support and reassurance of their leader. That is the power of positive emotions—productivity and achievement.

Conversely, emotions of sadness and anger have a negative impact on the workplace. They can also damage the credibility and leadership potential of workers who display them in public.

* Last names omitted for privacy.
Dana*, who works in marketing at a consumer foods company in New Jersey, knows this first-hand. She readily admits that she wears her emotions on her sleeve, and is envious of women who are able to maintain control of their emotions at work, but she isn’t one of them. Her open displays of emotion — mainly crying — at work are now damaging her performance reviews, she admits. Even in her former position, she says, “It was affecting the way that others perceived my ability to perform my job.” And now she sees that, “the women that I have seen who advance or get recognized the fastest are those that have mastered keeping work and emotions separate.”

Becoming upset at work not only makes it difficult to complete your assignments, but the emotions expressed also impact your image and reputation. Leaders are expected to maintain control at all times — control of their projects, of their budget, of their team members, and of their emotions. Showing too much emotion suggests you’re out of control, which can hamper career growth.

Manage Your Emotions

We often say, “Don’t cry over something that won’t cry over you,” when trying to help leaders improve their skills. What we mean is that there is a time and place to be emotional — with family and friends, at home, or when you’ve been given bad news about something in your personal life. The people who care about you would cry if something were to happen to you, just as it is expected that you would cry about them. However, that massive report your boss now wants you to get done by tomorrow, or your irritating colleague who is gunning for the promotion you deserve — these aren’t situations or people who will ever feel any depth of emotion about you. So don’t waste your tears on them — they don’t deserve them.

When you feel tears welling up, or when your blood pressure starts to boil, excuse yourself if you are in front of colleagues. Then take a deep breath in private, splash water on your face, and regain your composure before you return to work.

Staying focused on the task at hand and what you can do to make progress should help to push aside any emotions you start to feel. Your work is just that — work — and work is surely not deserving of emotions. But it is deserving of your attention, which is what will help you to improve your own productivity and drown out any emotions that have interfered in the past. Save emotions for home and bring your game face to work.