

SIGMA

Leadership Series



**Great Leaders
Have Control**



GREAT LEADERS CONTROL THEIR EMOTIONS

“ When you react, you let others control you. When you respond, you are in control.

– Bohdi Sanders

Emotional control is a basic skill that most leaders need to be successful in managing their employees. Workers often look to leaders for examples of how to behave, especially during times of turmoil and change, therefore leaders need to be prepared to present a calm, rational front. When leaders are highly controlled in expressing emotions, they are seen as more likeable¹, ethical, and working in the interest of the organization².

To be in control of one's emotions means maintaining personal composure during times of stress, when things are uncertain, or when facing conflict or disagreement. This does not mean suppressing all emotions, but rather consciously choosing which emotions are appropriate in any given situation, and avoiding expressing extreme or negative emotions during times of pressure. Emotional control is important during times of organizational change or when dealing with difficult employee situations. Emotional regulation is also associated with long-term well-being³. While some people may have a natural ability to control their emotions, this is a characteristic that can be trained, developed, and improved over time.

To assess your ability to control your emotions, ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I considered how my response will influence my employees?
- Does showing emotion in this situation help me obtain my objectives?
- Am I equipped to deal with unexpected stress?
- Do I consider what I say or how I behave before responding to a situation?
- What strategies can I use to regulate my emotions?
- Am I using tools like mindful meditation to help my control my emotions long term?

Improve Your Skills in Emotional Control

Understand the value of emotions: Controlling emotions is not the same thing as suppressing them. Leaders should know that emotions can play an important role in the organization. You can use emotions to frame new events or situations in a positive way. Leaders can express confidence in an individual by showing positive affect toward them. Research shows that leaders who heavily suppress their emotions are less satisfied in their work, more likely to want

to leave their organization⁴, and can have a negative impact on the work of their direct reports⁵. However, in times of stress or pressure, the emotions a leader is likely to exhibit are less than positive, and might include things like anxiety, irritation, frustration, or anger. This is where leaders must be careful. Expressing high levels of worry, stress, and distraction during times of organizational change can cause alarm in employees. Expressing anger during conflict resolution reduces the likelihood that two fighting parties will listen. A leader who consistently “cracks” under pressure makes the environment uncomfortable and unproductive for all employees. Before expressing a negative emotion, try to think what message this will send to employees, and whether this will result in positive, productive outcomes.

Be prepared for events with high stress or tension: One of the most common suggestions for avoiding negative emotions is to either avoid stressful situations or spend less time around people who bring up negative feelings. For a leader, skipping meetings and avoiding employees may be impossible, and the perception of being forced to participate in or work with objects of frustration can increase negative emotions. More practical advice for leaders is to prepare before engaging in something that will likely cause a negative reaction. Take a few deep breaths, remember what you want to accomplish or get out of the situation, and go into the situation prepared for the possibility of stress or conflict. Leaders who embrace this ambiguity are often better prepared to deal with things as they come. A leader may be less likely to respond automatically with anger or frustration when they prepare themselves for the possibility of conflict.

Consider the implications: A short outburst of leader negativity can have a lasting impact on employees. While expressing negative emotions may provide a temporary feeling of relief, employees look to their leader for guidance during times of change. Therefore, employees can use any information from the leader, including their behavior, to make assumptions about their own future. In addition, leaders are important in shaping and maintaining the culture of the organization. A leader who vents their anger or frustration may create an environment of stress, where individuals are afraid to bring up their ideas for fear of reproach, or where employees treat each other with little patience and respect. Consider yourself a role model, and understand that your behaviors, in addition to your words, carry weight to employees.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Become Better at Controlling Your Emotions

The following steps can help you become better at emotional control:

1. **Take your time.** An effective strategy for avoiding emotional outbursts is to step back and give yourself a moment to consider your reaction before responding to a stressful event. Even a small buffer of breathing room can allow leaders to overcome their instinctive reaction, reflect on how their response will affect employees, and respond appropriately. This momentary pause allows a leader to consider all the information at their disposal before responding. This is especially important when handling conflict between employees. A leader who takes their time can consider all sides of the

argument and respond with a problem-solving mindset, rather than an emotional one. While it may be difficult to get into the practice of pausing, leaders can implement this behavior in areas outside of stress or conflict, such as in meetings or communications with employees. Over time, this behavior will become habitual and a natural response to all situations.

- 2. Be proactive.** There are many strategies suggested for emotional regulation and control. Some of the more passive approaches, such as avoiding conflicts, are unrealistic for leaders to implement in their daily activities. Consider putting some more active approaches to emotional control into practice. This includes behaviors such as distracting yourself from stressful tasks with other work until you are emotionally prepared to address the issue; seeking out quiet time alone to process emotions; or talking to other employees that make you feel better about yourself or your situation⁶. The strategy that works best for any individual leader will differ depending on their workplace, current situation, and personality. Try out a few approaches until you find one that consistently helps you maintain your emotional control at work.
- 3. Engage in mindfulness practice.** One of the most effective approaches to gaining emotional control, both in the workplace and in other areas of life, is to begin a mindfulness practice. Mindfulness practice, often a part of meditation sessions, involves being aware and attentive to one's self and environment, while letting thoughts pass by without judgement. Leaders under stress may especially benefit from mindfulness practice, in that they are "allowed" to experience negative thoughts, but then let these feelings pass by without judging or acting on them. This avoids the negative effect of suppressing emotions while still avoiding lashing out at employees. In addition, research shows that practicing strategies like non-judgemental thinking, deep breathing exercises, and acceptance is associated with an increase in emotional regulation^{3,7}. Research also links mindfulness to a host of emotional and physical well-being outcomes, over and above the impact of emotional control. Beginning a mindfulness practice is as easy as taking five minutes each day to focus on your breathing, allow thoughts to pass by, and collect yourself before finishing your day.

Resources



[Exercising Emotional Self-Control](#)



[How to Control Your Emotions During a Difficult Conversation](#)



Develop your ability to control your emotions by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

Contact SIGMA for coaching on developing your skills as a leader.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

Email: support@SigmaHR.com

Call: 800-265-1285

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