

SIGMA EI Series



**Great Leaders
Recognize Others' Emotions**



GREAT LEADERS RECOGNIZE OTHERS' EMOTIONS

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When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but with creatures of emotion.

– Dale Carnegie

How many times a day do you ask a coworker how they're doing, only to hear a standard "fine"? Do you tend to follow up their response with another question? Many leaders ask others at work about their emotions without really considering how important it is to be in touch with their moods. It may be a good idea to start paying more attention to how your coworkers feel, as leaders who pay close attention to others' emotions are less likely to experience career derailment and more likely to be viewed as transformational leaders.¹

Leaders who can accurately recognize others' emotions are closely attuned to the emotional environment of their workplace and can better sense changes in their direct reports' motivation or in clients' level of satisfaction. Those who have good emotional recognition closely attend to others' nonverbal emotional cues (e.g., facial expressions and body language) to identify others' feelings. Workers who are better at recognizing emotions in others have a heightened understanding of social dynamics at work, which may facilitate more cooperation with coworkers, and in turn, higher annual salary.²

In assessing your ability to recognize others' emotions effectively, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I comfortable talking about emotions at work?
- Do I regularly check in with my colleagues to see how they are feeling?
- When someone is talking to me, do I pay attention to their body language?
- Do I ask people what they are feeling when I'm unsure?

Improve Your Emotion Recognition Skills

Accept different comfort levels: Some leaders avoid talking about emotions at work, as emotions could seem too personal for a professional context. However, discussing emotions can help direct reports feel comfortable bringing their authentic selves to work, and can help leaders understand how to support their team (e.g., delegating work for a stressed direct report). Ongoing conversations about positive and negative feelings can increase motivation and improve working relationships. Just remember that not everyone feels comfortable sharing their emotions at work, especially with their leaders. It is important to be respectful of what others are willing to share, and to acknowledge that this may look different for everyone.

Build trust: Others will feel more comfortable opening up to you about how they feel if they trust you. One way of building trust is by noticing how you're feeling and sharing your own emotions with others. When you share more details about your own thoughts and feelings, your colleagues are more likely to feel compelled to share their own feelings. In addition, keeping these conversations confidential and having the other person's best interests at heart are essential for building trust.

Use communication tools thoughtfully: Remote work is becoming increasingly popular, and with it comes many new methods of communication (e.g., instant messages and video calls). Be sure to use communication tools that align with the purpose of your conversations. For difficult or sensitive conversations, where recognizing others' emotions is important, suggest a face-to-face or video call where you can read nuanced nonverbal expressions. However, for less formal conversations where there is little room for misunderstanding, audio- or text-only methods are likely to be sufficient.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Recognize Others' Emotions

The following steps can help you become better at recognizing the emotions of others:

- 1. Start with media and those closest to you.** It can be easier to identify emotions in the media you consume, as well as in people who you already feel close to. Make it a goal to pay more attention to the expressions of others in television shows or movies, and close coworkers or family members in conversations. Note their facial expressions, gestures, and posture. Using these clues, try to make guesses about how they are feeling. For example, if you notice your coworker is not participating in a meeting and has visibly slumped shoulders, you can guess at whether they may be feeling unsatisfied with their work or are tired from poor sleep.
- 2. Focus on tone.** In addition to watching someone's body language to identify their emotions, try to pay attention to the sound of their voice.³ Although people may try to conceal their emotions in the words they speak (e.g., saying "I'm fine with it"), their tone of voice can provide clues about how they are really feeling. In a face-to-face conversation, you can gaze briefly at a distant object and focus solely on the sound of your conversation partner's voice. See if you can describe their tone with words like "tight, high, calm, trembling, playful, or sarcastic."
- 3. Test your assumptions.** Our information about someone else's internal feelings is never perfect, so it's a good idea to double-check your initial guess about how someone is feeling with them. You can ask them a question, such as "How is it going for you?" or "How can I support you?". Try to leave your questions open-ended so that you are not making assumptions about how they feel, and they can fully share what is on their mind. If you cannot directly ask the person who spoke about how they felt, try to ask another observer for their impressions.

Resources



[5 Warning Signs Your Star Performer is Burned Out](#)



[All the Feels: Why It Pays to Acknowledge Emotions in the Workplace](#)



Develop your ability to recognize others' 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

References

¹ Rubin, R. S., Munz, D. C., & Bommer, W. H. (2005). Leading from within: The effects of emotion recognition and personality on transformational leadership behavior. *Academy of Management Journal*, 48, 845-858.

² Momm, T., Blickle, G., Liu, Y., Wihler, A., Kholin, M., & Menges, J. I. (2014). It pays to have an eye for emotions: Emotion recognition ability indirectly predicts annual income. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 36(1), 147-163.

³ Kraus, M. W. (2017). Voice-only communication enhances empathic accuracy. *American Psychologist*, 72(7), 644-654.