BEHAVIOR

Go Ahead—Cry at Work

Corporate culture has long ignored the fact that we can't check our feelings at the office door. Why it's high time to get rational about emotions in the workplace

BY ANNE KREAMER

I WAS A 37-YEAR-OLD SENIOR VICE president in charge of the consumer-products-and-publishing division at Nickelodeon, the children's cable channel, in my office celebrating with a few colleagues the announcement of a huge, groundbreaking deal with Sony to create and market home videos of our hit shows, such as *Rugrats* and *Ren & Stimpy*.

The phone rang.

My assistant shouted, "Oh, man—it's Sumner! On Line 1!" Sumner Redstone, that is, then as now the chairman and majority owner of Viacom Inc., the parent company of Nickelodeon. During my three years at the company, Redstone had rarely spoken to me and had never phoned. How generous of him, I thought, to take the time and make the effort to thank me personally. Now that's a good boss. This was it: my moment of glory.

I picked up the phone, anticipating a congratulatory exchange about what a great job my team had done. Instead, Redstone, then nine days shy of 70, started screaming at me. "Do you know what you've done?" he raged. I was absolutely blindsided. I hunched over the telephone and turned away from my colleagues.

In spite of healthy media coverage, including a positive article in the *Wall Street Journal*, the public announcement of the Sony deal had failed to move Viacom's stock price—and Redstone was livid about it. I could practically feel his spittle frothing out of my telephone receiver. I sat there, crushed at being so undervalued for my many months of hard work, mortified to feel tears welling up while co-workers were in my office and angry at the injustice of being singled out for abuse. But I couldn't express what I was feeling. I believed that to do so would have been professional suicide. Ninety seconds after I'd picked up the phone, Redstone, without a goodbye, hung up.

The tears that had welled up during the call began spilling out as I tried to process the information. Fearing a total meltdown, I avoided saying anything about what had just happened, managing, perhaps, to force out an uninspired "Great job, everyone! I am suddenly so tired I can hardly keep my head up. How about we call it a day and all go home?" I stayed in that job for another 2½ years, but almost two decades later, I still smart at the memory of that moment.

I have since learned from several former colleagues at Nickelodeon that I was not at all unique in being on the receiving end of the chairman's anger. Redstone got mad promiscuously—and almost indiscriminately. I have also recently learned that I too made a co-worker cry, when I shot down his presentation in a monthly strategy meeting. I'm not proud of that moment and wish I'd found a better way to get my criticism across. But the goal of organizations should not be to eliminate the expression of emotions at work, which is what our dominant management paradigm tries to do.

In the binary shorthand we use to compartmentalize modern life, we think of home as the realm of emotion and work as the place where rationality rules—a tidy distinction that crumbles in the face of experience. As management scholar Blake Ashforth has written, it is a "convenient fiction that organizations are cool arenas for dispassionate thought and action." In fact, in the workplace we are bombarded by emotions—our own and everyone else's. Neuroscientists have demonstrated over and over in empirical ways just how integral emotion is in all aspects of our lives, including our work. But since companies have generally avoided the subject, there are no clear protocols about emotional expression in the office.

The only instance in which we acknowledge emotion is when doing so is

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seen as obviously beneficial, both personally and professionally. In the late 1990s, psychologist Daniel Goleman identified four components of what he called emotional intelligence—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management—and presented a number of case studies showing how organizations that operate in emotionally intelligent ways can be more competitive. Over the past decade, a diffuse notion of emotional intelligence has been widely disseminated. "What I hear you saying is ..." has become a 21st century executive cliché.

But we're still largely clueless about how to display and react to more commonplace emotions such as anger, fear and anxiety, so we handicap ourselves, trying to check our human side at the office door. "Traditionally, organizational behavior has only examined things people could easily see or report," says Sigal Barsade, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. "But I think we've missed an entire level of analysis, which is unconscious. If I asked a man who gets cut off in traffic on his way to work and then has to make a strategic decision in a 9 a.m. meeting if the anger he felt in any way influenced his decision, he'd answer, 'Absolutely not,' when we have concrete evidence that it would. This lack of awareness can be insidious."

Instead of avoiding emotion, we need to become more rational about it. This is not to suggest that being embarrassed, frustrated or upset at work is inappropriate but rather that when colleagues show emotion, we should learn to interpret why those particular feelings were triggered and understand what happens on a social, psychological and even biological level as well as get to the bottom of our prejudices and reactions. Had I known, at the time of my Nickelodeon crying episode, the biochemical purpose of my tears (nature's reset button), I would have appreciated that they didn't necessarily signal unprofessionalism or weakness. And I would have grasped that emotionality at the workplace is not a female issue—men and women are equally driven by it; even if the emotions are sometimes expressed differently.

Emotions 101

PART OF THE REASON EMOTIONS AT WORK present such a challenge is that, evolutionarily speaking, our responses have not caught up with our environment. At its most basic, an emotion is an automatic

How emotions sneak into the workplace

IS IT O.K. TO CRY AT WORK? A higher percentage of men say yes—but also say it's "more true for women"

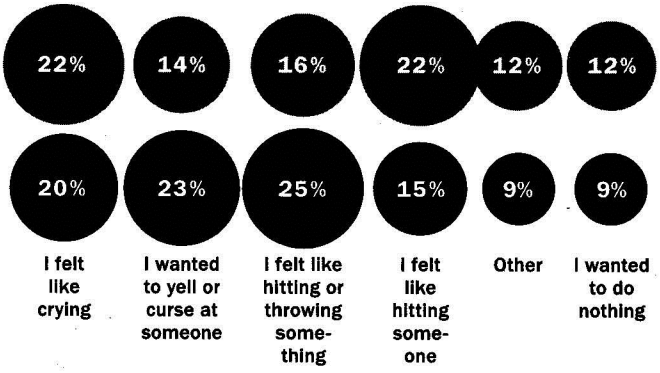
MEN **48%**

WOMEN **41%**

WHY I CRIED AT WORK Top 5 reasons for people who shed tears in a 12-month span

	MEN	WOMEN
1	Stress from home spilled over into work	Stress from home spilled over into work
2	A customer or client was rude	I was overwhelmed and cried to cope
3	I was unfairly blamed or criticized for something	Someone yelled or snapped at me
4	Someone I work with had a family crisis	My child/partner/parent/sibling was sick
5	I got a negative performance review	I was unfairly blamed or criticized for something

CHAIN REACTIONS 700 men and women were asked: When someone yelled or snapped at you at work, how did you want to respond?



To get a customized profile of your emotional style at work, go to annekreamer.com/its-always-personal/weep-survey

43% of women considered people who cry at work unstable, vs. **32%** of men

physiological response. We do not get angry and then have our blood pressure rise; rather, our blood pressure rises in response to some threatening stimulus. For our ancestors, it was essential to survival to go on high alert before assessing whether the stick in the road was really just a stick or a venomous snake.

At work, knowing what to make of our emotions is much more complicated. Real or perceived assaults on our egos, our social standing or our value to the organization are far more subjective threats. And yet we react to psychological threats with a hardwired biological response. It's this ancient-vs.-modern struggle—our inability to step back and see what's happening for what it is—that underlies our difficulty with handling emotion at work. Then there is the thick overlay of personal and social inhibitions, biases and stereotypes surrounding the expression of emotions.

To learn more about all these forces, I partnered with J. Walter Thompson, a major ad agency, to conduct two national surveys. In the first, the Emotional Incidents in the Workplace Survey, we asked nine questions of a random sample of more than 700 Americans, equally divided by gender, representing the full range of occupational levels and economic sectors. For instance, what did a respondent feel before, during and after crying, getting angry or feeling despondent at work? Were those emotions related to the job? We also tried to get a sense of how people regard co-workers who express emotion.

We found that frustration was the most commonly experienced emotion. Almost half of all respondents reported having become upset because they thought a co-worker wasn't doing his or her job. Sixty percent of all workers had seen their boss get angry at someone during the past year. And 41% of women had cried at work, compared with only 9% of men. Yet for both men and women, whether or not they had cried at work made no difference in how much they reported they *liked* their job.

Differences between the physiologies of men's and women's tears explain, in part, the greater number of female criers on the job. In general, women cry almost four times as often as men: an average of 5.3 times per month, compared with 1.4 times for men, according to biochemist William Frey II. Women's tear ducts are anatomically different from men's, resulting in a larger volume of tears. In fact, often when men cry, tears do not fall down their cheeks.

But for women, crying is far less disruptive at work than the shame and guilt that follow. Crying stimulates the production of the feel-good neurotransmitter dopamine and restores emotional equilibrium. But we found that in spite of the cathartic physiological benefits, women who cry at work feel rotten afterward, as if they've failed a feminism test. In contrast, the male criers in our survey tended to report that after their crying, their minds felt sharper, the future seemed brighter, and they felt more physically relaxed and in control. In short: according to our survey, women, who have a biological predisposition to cry more, feel worse after crying at work, while men feel better.

And women are harder on others who cry, especially other women: 43% of the women in our study, vs. 32% of the men, considered people who cry at work "unstable," which sounds like a serious character flaw or mental disorder. Rather than harshly judging themselves and others for something that's a biological fact—tears are, after all, similar to a hiccup, sneeze or burp—wouldn't it be far better for women to instead focus on what stressors our tears might be revealing?

Workplace weeping is far more likely to be triggered by anger and frustration than by sadness. Women reported feeling angry at work more than men did, especially younger women (ages 18-44). However, men were more likely to express their anger, which suggests that they feel safer in doing so; in our survey, 42% of young men felt that anger is an effective management tool (as Sumner Redstone clearly did), vs. only 23% of young women.

When women do cut loose, they then experience greater distress about having done so, which makes their anger backfire internally. (According to social psychologist Carol Tavris, your expression of anger must restore your sense of control over the situation in order for it to be effective.) But if women feel conflicted about expressing anger, it's with good reason—their anger is almost invariably perceived and interpreted differently than men's.

In 2007, two business-school researchers, Victoria Brescoll of Yale and Eric Uhlmann of Northwestern, conducted three studies in which participants watched videos of actors pretending to apply for jobs, sometimes showing anger or sadness and sometimes not, and then assigned jobs and salaries to the make-believe new hires. Not only were women judged to be worse employees when they expressed anger, but also, angry men were actually judged to be better hires than nonangry men.

Additionally, a woman's anger was attributed to her personality—"she is an angry person"; "she is out of control"—while men's emotional reactions tended to be seen as justifiable—"the work was shoddy" or "the report sucked." In this context, it's no wonder that more than 50% of women reported being angry at work during the past year—for the moment, there is simply no socially appropriate way for women to express legitimate anger in the workplace.

And there needs to be, because emotions have as much impact on our work performance as cognitive brain functions do. Studies by Antonio Damasio at the University of Southern California's Brain and Creativity Institute and others have demonstrated that without emotion, it is impossible to make decisions. Real emotional intelligence is more than being sensitive or nice, more than understanding how to read the mood of a conference room or having insight into whether a colleague is more analytical or expressive in her approach to problem solving. The workplace has never been more diverse than it is today, the boundaries between the personal and the professional never so blurry. The ability to not only envision alternative responses to a given situation but also understand that there are entire invisible galaxies of salient emotional facts behind almost every exchange on the job is not just more possible than ever; it's more urgent.

There are payoffs, personal and professional. In our study, 69% of respondents felt that when someone gets emotional in the workplace, it makes the person seem more human, and a whopping 88% of all workers (93% of women and 83% of men) felt that being sensitive to others' emotions at work is an asset. Emotions are who we are. As management consultant Erika Andersen (author of *Being Strategic* and also my sister-in-law) says: "No one wants to cry at work. But if you say to yourself, 'I know people will sometimes get overwhelmed, and if that happens one or two times a year, can I handle that?'—well, the answer is, 'Yes, of course I can handle that.' Crying at work is transformative and can open the door to change." ■

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