
Visibly Upset at Work? Blame It on Your Passion



By Elizabeth Baily Wolf , INSEAD

Attributing your emotional outbursts to passion will make you seem more competent than if you just apologise or say nothing.

Many of us have been advised to hide our negative emotions at work. However, this is not always desirable, let alone practical. Just ask Tesla CEO Elon Musk. At the beginning of Tesla's annual shareholder meeting earlier this month, he **choked up briefly** as he said, "Thank you for buying our product. We're doing everything we can to make it as good as possible, as fast as possible." He then added, "This is going to sound a little cheesy, but at Tesla we build our cars with love."

Notice that Musk did not apologise for choking up, nor did he explain that he was emotional. Instead, he mentioned that he and his team were passionate about their work. This may be the best way to handle such a situation, based on a **paper** I co-authored with Joa Julia Lee (University of Michigan), Sunita Sah (Cornell University) and Alison Wood Brooks (Harvard Business School).

More than half of full-time workers experience distress at work at least once a week, according to a survey we ran prior to undertaking our research.

Indeed, most people don't need a lot of prodding to describe recent events that have upset them at work – you probably have your own war stories. Research has established that expressing distress at work can have negative consequences. Most notably, observers tend to perceive visibly distressed colleagues as less competent.

In a series of five experiments, my co-authors and I examined how reframing a socially inappropriate emotion as “passion” can help mitigate this negative perception. We found that individuals who referred to their distress as passion were viewed as more competent than those who attributed distress to emotionality or didn't explain it. They were also more likely to be hired or chosen as collaborators.

Reframing works even well after the fact

In the first experiment, participants recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk read a short text describing a fictional employee who broke into tears during a project meeting. The narration ended with the employee either apologising for the outburst, saying nothing or clarifying that they were “just really passionate about this” or “just really emotional about this”. Overall, participants preferred the rationale of passion and, on average, rated the “passionate” employee's competency as 20 percent higher than that of the employee who offered no excuses. The next best answer was simply apologising. Even attributing the outburst to sheer emotion was better than giving no explanation.

Interestingly, when a woman's name was used in the vignette, the employee was viewed as significantly more competent than when a man's name was used. This suggests that men may be penalised more for expressing high-intensity distress (i.e. crying) than women. But both men and women benefitted similarly from labelling their outpouring as passion.

In the second experiment, we asked university students, organised in pairs, to recount an incident where they had felt distressed about their school work, describing their reactions as either passionate or emotional. Listeners whose partners had framed their distress as passion viewed them as significantly more competent than those who had emphasised their emotional state.

Our third experiment was a field study. We asked 415 employees, ranging from office assistants to CEOs, in various industries, to recall a recent event

in which a colleague was visibly upset at work. We then asked one group to think about all the ways the incident showed how passionate their colleague was. The other group focused on how emotional the person was. Even when participants reframed the incident themselves, they still rated their “passionate” colleagues as significantly more competent than their “emotional” ones. In addition, we found out that this reframing particularly improved the perception of colleagues working in environments in which employees reported it was normally inappropriate to express distress (permissiveness was assessed via a related questionnaire).

Personnel decisions

In our last two experiments, we evaluated how reframing influenced hiring and work partner selection. The fourth experiment involved 281 participants who read an interview transcript before indicating whether they would hire the job applicant. In the transcript, the applicant described a time when they had choked up upon learning a key sponsor had killed their meaningful initiative at the last minute. The transcript existed in two identical versions except for one word change: Applicants described themselves as either “really passionate” or “really emotional” about the project. Consistent with our other experiments, 61.5 percent of participants who heard the “passion” rationale chose to hire the applicant, as compared to only 47.4 percent of those evaluating the self-described “emotional” person.

The fifth experiment allowed us to examine the impact of reframing on a decision with real financial repercussions. We recruited 200 participants on Mechanical Turk and told them they could earn a bonus for successful work done in collaboration with a partner they would select out of three possible candidates. Participants read statements, describing (in random order) the candidates’ reaction to a distressing situation at work: One candidate had hidden his or her emotions, another expressed them and attributed them to passion, and the last one had expressed them but said nothing. Candidates who had suppressed their emotions were the most popular: 42 percent of participants picked them. Another 32.5 percent of participants chose the “passionate” candidate. Only 25.5 percent opted for the emotional candidate who had provided no explanation.

Why did passion work so well in the situations we studied? First, passion is widely accepted as an important value in organisations. Many firms, such as Starbucks and Bain & Company, refer to it in their core values or mission

statements. Second, when people witness an emotional outburst, they can usually label it correctly, but unless they are bona fide mind readers, they can never be certain of the emotion's true cause. For this reason, they are likely to be influenced by how the emotion is framed.

Negative emotions can be useful forms of communication

When we get upset at work, it typically signals a problem. Hiding your emotion may protect your image as a competent person, but it may also inhibit your ability to communicate and solve the underlying issue. Beyond the fate of individual careers, this is a concern for organisations. For instance, research by my colleague Professor Quy Huy showed how [**emotional sanitisation and excess positivity**](#) wrecked an M&A deal that might have otherwise thrived.

Therefore, if you simply cannot hide your negative emotions at work or think it may be important to communicate your distress to others, tying it to your passion may mitigate the associated risks in terms of your perceived competence. Despite the lack of [**emotional sophistication**](#) seen in today's workplaces, it is right to be emotionally invested in your work. After all, we only get emotional about the things we care about or, as Musk said, the things we do with love.

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