

LEADING TEAMS

# How Leaders Can Open Up to Their Teams Without Oversharing

by Liz Fosslien and Mollie West Duffy

FEBRUARY 08, 2019



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In the age of social sharing, people who work together know more and more about each other. In general, this is a good thing for peers and leaders. Research shows our brains respond positively to people when we feel a personal connection with them. We try harder, perform better, and are kinder to our colleagues. Command and control management is on its way out, and bosses who practice empathy and make an effort to connect with their subordinates are in.

This willingness in leaders to be open and honest, even if it makes them vulnerable, is important because it builds trust – people can easily sense inauthenticity. We tend to assume that leaders are marketing to us. If a leader never shows emotion, that conviction only becomes stronger. But when a leader reveals a more personal side to herself, and we sense that it is authentic, we feel a connection and are more likely to believe her words.

However, people who *overdo* this accomplish just the opposite and can end up completely undermining themselves. If leaders share information that suggests they are not up to the task – for example, “I’m scared, and I have no idea what to do right now” – there is a good chance their team will take on that same emotion, or worse, lose faith in their ability to lead. People in charge have to think longer and harder than the rest of us about when to be transparent because they have more eyes on them. Every time they are vulnerable (or are not vulnerable), their reports are watching and analyzing their words and actions for a deeper meaning. So, when does sharing become oversharing? We argue that the way to find a balance between the two is to be ***selectively vulnerable*** – or open up to your team while still prioritizing their boundaries, as well as your own.

This issue often presents itself when there are new initiatives or changes in an organization. We typically find leaders asking themselves how much of their own worries they should reveal when leading their team down a challenging or unfamiliar road. The best leaders are honest about how they feel while simultaneously presenting a clear path forward.

Below are some tips to help you do this:

- **Figure yourself out.** The best leaders are able to hit a pause button when they become emotional. Instead of immediately acting, ask yourself, “What exactly am I feeling? Why? What is the need behind this emotion?” For example, an average manager might say she feels irritable about a project because the workload is annoying, but a great manager will take the time to reflect on this emotion. In doing so, she might realize the root cause of her irritability is anxiety about meeting a deadline.
- **Regulate your emotions.** Once you identify your feelings, you need to know how to manage them. This is as important as managing your reports. What you consider a momentary bad mood can ruin someone’s day. Reactive, hot-tempered managers are hurtful, demoralizing, and the main reason people quit jobs. [Research shows](#) that employees confronted by an angry manager are less willing to work hard – especially if they don’t understand where the anger is coming from. But when managers [control their words and body language](#) during tense situations, their reports’ stress levels drop significantly. “An important part of being a leader is understanding how much weight the people around you can bear,” Laszlo Bock, founder and CEO of Humu, and former head of HR at Google, told us. “You can’t burden your employees with more than they can carry, or expect them to hold you up all the time.”
- **Address your feelings without becoming emotionally leaky.** We’re often worse at hiding our feelings than we think. If you’re frustrated or upset, your

employees will most likely pick up on your bad mood and might assume that they are responsible for it. “The idea that you’re never going to have a bad day as a boss is bullshit,” Kim Scott, author of *Radical Candor*, told us. “The best thing to do is to cop to it. Say to your team, ‘I’m having a bad day, and I’m trying my best not to take it out on you. But if it seems like I’m having a bad day, I am. But it’s not because of you that I’m having a bad day. The last thing I want is for my bad day make your day worse.’” You don’t have to go into more detail, but acknowledging your feelings helps you avoid creating unnecessary anxiety among your reports.

- **Provide a path forward.** When you’re tackling a challenging project, practice how you’re going to share your emotions with your team, and make sure you do so with intention. Dumping your feelings onto them in a reactive or unthoughtful way leaves a lot of room for misinterpretation. Aim to be realistic but optimistic. A good formula to follow is: “*Because of \_\_\_\_, I’m feeling \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. But here’s what I’m planning to do next to make it better: \_\_\_\_\_. And here’s what I need from you: \_\_\_\_\_. What do you need from me?*” This will help you address your anxiety without projecting negative emotions onto your team. “It’s a promise to work towards a solution *in spite of* emotions,” says Jerry Colonna, former venture capitalist and coach, also known as the “CEO Whisperer.”
- **Avoid oversharing.** A good rule of thumb for figuring out if you’re about to overshare is to ask yourself: “How would I feel if my manager said this to me?” If it’s something that you’d be thankful to hear, chances are your reports will feel similarly. If it’s something that would give you pause, err on the side of caution. Be curious about your own intentions. Are you sharing from a place of authenticity, or are you trying to fabricate a connection with others? Sometimes we overshare personal experiences just to feel close with someone else. But often, this is not useful or effective.
- **Read the room.** If you think members of your team might be feeling anxious about the project, it’s okay to surface those feelings to help them feel less isolated. For example, if everyone has been working long hours to meet an

impending deadline, you might say something like, “I’m feeling a little tired today, but I’m grateful for how well we’ve worked together and that we’re set to send the client a proposal we can all be proud of.” Again, always try to pair realism with optimism, and share when you sense it will be helpful to others.

Finding the right balance between sharing and oversharing is not easy. But with practice, it can be done. As a leader, it’s your job to understand the powerful role your emotions play, and to harness them in ways that will help your team succeed.

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**Liz Fosslien** will join Humu, a company that uses nudges to drive behavior change aimed at making work better, at the end of February, where she will be responsible for content. Most recently, she designed and facilitated organizational culture workshops for executives at LinkedIn, Facebook, Google, BlackRock, and Nike. Liz’s previous writing and data visualization has been featured by The Economist, CNN, Freakonomics, and NPR. *Liz and Mollie are the authors of the book, No Hard Feelings: The Secret Power of Embracing Emotions at Work. Follow them on Twitter or Instagram @lizandmollie.*

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**Mollie West Duffy** is an organizational designer at global innovation firm IDEO. Mollie formerly worked as a research associate for the Dean of Harvard Business School Nitin Nohria and renowned strategy professor Michael E. Porter. She’s written for Fast Company, Quartz, Stanford Social Innovation Review, Entrepreneur, Quiet Rev and other digital outlets. *Liz and Mollie are the authors of the book, No Hard Feelings: The Secret Power of Embracing Emotions at Work. Follow them on Twitter or Instagram @lizandmollie.*

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