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Don't Let Your Anxiety Stress Out Your Team

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HBR Staff; Zachary Scott/Getty Images

Summary. Our emotional state — such as feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and apprehension — can rub off on our team negatively impact their work performance and wellbeing. This is called emotional contagion, and it's not uncommon. Since many workplaces have transitioned... [more](#)

Imagine this: You've just landed your first management role, and you're eager to prove yourself a great leader. You and your team are preparing to give a presentation to an important client. If the meeting goes well, it will be a huge success and could even impact your professional growth.

As the date grows closer, you start to feel stressed and anxious. You're constantly messaging your team and checking in on the status of the final slides. You're sending them daily reminders counting and asking, "We can really do this, right?" You even posted a meme on LinkedIn and asked the community how they cope with stress.

Why are you behaving this way?

It's because you're experiencing state anxiety — a transitory emotional state that often involves intense feelings of nervousness or apprehension. You may think that you're the only one suffering, but unfortunately, anxiety can rub off on the people surrounding you and negatively impact their work performance and wellbeing. In this case, that's your team. If you keep it up, you may end up setting everyone up to fail.

Understanding Emotional Contagion

As a new leader, it is important to recognize that your own anxiety can spread to others, including colleagues, subordinates, and even senior managers. Recent research shows that while a certain amount of anxiety can help motivate people, too much of it can do the opposite. When employees experience chronic anxiety, it can lead to lower job satisfaction and reduced performance. When constantly feeling anxious is encouraged by the broader culture of an organization, it can also contribute to widespread burnout. When similar emotional responses quickly spread among a group of people it's known as emotional contagion. This phenomenon is not uncommon, and it can (and often does) start with one person.

Studies in behavioral science have shown that nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language, can trigger emotional contagion. While the majority of existing

leadership studies focus on emotional contagion in face-to-face interactions, this doesn't mean leaders working and communicating virtually are out of the woods. Our own research has found that it can also be triggered through the interactions we have online.

What Our Research Found

In two recent studies, we observed leaders and followers interacting through social media. Over a span of 316 days (both before and during the pandemic), we analyzed the tweets of 197 leaders across 79 organizations. We used machine learning algorithms to track the anxiety and personality traits displayed in the tweets of both the leaders and their 958 collective followers. We defined a leader as a top manager within an organization who had enough public status and authority to influence employees at every level. The other employees in our dataset were defined as followers.

Our anxiety detection algorithm was originally trained by 604 human raters who analyzed 3,020 tweets and rated each based on how likely the tweeter was to feel anxiety-related emotions — like intensity, sadness, and worry — at the time of publication. Our raters found that anxious tweets often contained negative words (afraid, worried, uncertain) and repetitive language. Another strong indicator of anxiety was excessive punctuation (overusing exclamation and question marks). Importantly, we analyzed all tweets that the leaders posted, not just the work-related ones.

In our first study, we looked at the effects a leader's anxiety can have on their followers. We found that all tweets, including those that were personal and unrelated to their organization, had the power to impact their followers. When leaders who were not typically anxious suddenly posted anxious tweets, the anxiety they expressed had the potential to increase their followers' anxiety right away and last for up to two days.

Some leaders expressed high trait anxiety, a tendency to feel anxious across many situations. These leaders were naturally inclined to perceive situations as more threatening and focus on

negative information. We found that their followers were accustomed to persistent heightened anxiety, and therefore, were sometimes less impacted when their leader displayed increased levels of stress.

Finally, in a second study, we found that followers also have the power to impact the level of anxiety their leaders experience. This effect was particularly relevant as the pandemic continued to develop and employees began to realize that online communication was here to stay. We also found that the hierarchical distance between the leader and the follower mattered. Anxious tweets from directors or heads of departments influenced leaders much more than similar tweets from entry-level employees.

Consider the Impact of your Words Online

Since most workplaces have transitioned to a hybrid model, it's imperative that, as a new manager, you pay attention to how you communicate with your teams in virtual settings. A hard lesson to learn as a leader is that your team is constantly observing you. They rely on you for guidance and reassurance. This means that what you say is as important as how you say it. Use the following tips to practice more mindful online communication — on social media accounts where you're followed by your team members, on messaging platforms like Slack, and in your email exchanges.

Be mindful of what you post online and how often you post.

Understand that your social media activity can impact your team anxiety, even when you are not physically present and even when you are not talking about work. Simply stating that your views are your own is not enough — regardless of your status and position within your organization. If your team members follow you, pay attention to the language you use and try to avoid some of the markers of anxiety mentioned above (negative words, excessive punctuation, and so on).

You should also pay attention to how often you post. Posting too much information at once may overwhelm your follows and significantly changing the frequency of when you regularly post may alarm them. For example, while the number of daily tweets went up overall during the pandemic, less anxious leaders started posting at an ever-increasing rate — sometimes more than 20 times per day. This, in turn, was likely to increase the anxiety their followers were experiencing.

On messaging platforms, consider the tone and content of your words.

Remember that written communication can be easily misinterpreted, so always aim for clarity and honesty. Consider this example: “Team, I’m really stressed about this upcoming presentation... I’m not sure if I’ve covered everything, and I can’t stop worrying about how it’ll go. What if we mess up!? Can anyone double-check my work or give me some feedback ASAP??” Note the anxiety shining through.

Now, consider this: “Hey team, I’ve been working on the presentation for tomorrow’s client meeting. I’d appreciate it if someone could review it and provide some feedback to ensure we’re on the right track. Let’s make sure we deliver a great presentation together!”

You can see how the second phrasing makes you feel collected and calm, even when you read that the leader is feeling frustrated. This is because it provides balance by highlighting what else could be done to ameliorate the situation.

Finally, like posting online, bombarding your team with multiple messages or emails is likely to increase their anxiety, and may even lead them to either ignore your emails or postpone replying. Wait for your team members to respond to your first message before sending two or three more.

Pay attention to the tone of your team member's messages.

Looking at their punctuation can be a telling indicator of anxiety. For example, when a colleague uncharacteristically starts finishing all their Slack messages with a period, it could signal that something is not quite right and that they are anxious or stressed. If you sense anxiety, address them calmly, and provide reassurance to the best of your ability.

Let's say, for instance, that a team member comments on your Slack group: "I wonder what's going to come out of this merger. Should we be worried?" Instead of staying silent or responding with, "Ah, well.... Time will tell," you could say: "I hear you, but let's continue to work as we always have. We've been delivering great results, and I'm really proud of this team. I'm not worried, but I'm happy to chat and clarify your concerns to the best of my knowledge."

Clear, concise, and honest information can help reduce uncertainty and alleviate anxiety. By encouraging an open and respectful dialogue, you'll promote a more positive and supportive work culture.

Be vulnerable.

As a leader, your responsibility doesn't just include making strategic decisions or managing your employees' workload. You are also tasked with providing safe workspaces in which your employees can thrive. Displaying vulnerability is one way to foster greater trust and collaboration within your team.

It is crucial, however, to share your vulnerability in a thoughtful and measured manner, so as not to alarm employees or undermine your leadership. For example, instead of saying: "I'm struggling a lot as a leader, and I often feel overwhelmed and lost. It's tough to make decisions and face challenges. I need your support and guidance to keep moving forward," you could say: "As a leader, I recognize that I don't have all the answers and face challenges too. But I'm committed to embracing learning from our team's collective wisdom. Your support and collaboration

make us stronger. Let's continue grow together." In the second instance, you are sharing how you feel but also reiterating your confidence in your team and the positive direction you are headed. You've just opened the floor for honest dialogue while simultaneously creating an environment that encourages mutual understanding and a strong sense of unity.

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By taking these steps to address anxiety in professional communications, you can foster a more productive and healthy work environment in your new leadership role. Set the example your employees need, and you will be one step closer to being a truly great leader.

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