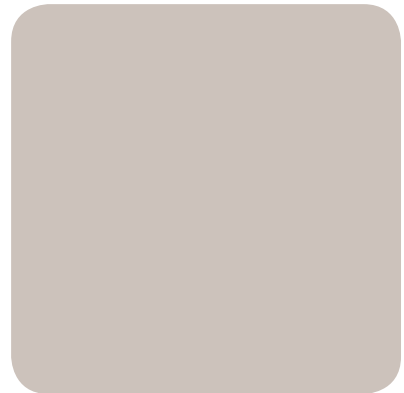


# Building Stronger Teams

## Supporting Effective Team Leaders



A leader's guide and activities for developing resilience for you and your team



# Supporting Effective Team Leaders



# Chapter 1

## It's Not Always Easy

A strong team leader is self-aware, an effective communicator, and able to inspire people to reach their potential. Most of us are not born leaders. We develop these skills over time and are required to renew and update them as we and our teams evolve.

We also need to be able to adapt to changing demands in the economy, our organizations, and our personal lives. Our health, finances, family situations, working relationships, work tasks and stress levels also have an impact on our ability to be effective leaders.

Teams are not all the same. If we are leading a team of experienced and independent people, our leadership style may be to provide a vision and then get out of their way. At another point we may inherit a team that is made up of hard workers who are concrete, linear thinkers. This group may need more structured and detailed planning time to succeed.

The approach used with the first team, which may have been wildly successful, could be disastrous with the second team. With this in mind, effective leadership is a process of continual improvement. We need to be able to adapt to a wide variety of situations.

Dealing with team members who are distressed for any reason can be especially challenging. It may cause us to feel angry, upset or somehow guilty or responsible. These types of reactions are natural, but it is possible to manage our response more effectively when we look beyond the behaviour or words and consider what may be going on with the individual. This can help us respond from a place of empathy instead of anger, anxiety, negativity, or hostility.

On the other hand, we respond to positive emotions by being drawn to people who are happy and upbeat. This can be challenging for a team leader who also needs to work with and support those who are struggling with emotional distress.

How can understanding this help you as a team leader? Sometimes simply being aware of how other people's emotions affect you can improve your ability to respond appropriately.

What follows are ideas, strategies, and exercises to help you develop these skills:

- Understanding your own perceptions
- Communicating more effectively
- Engaging team members.

**60 per cent of managers/  
supervisors say dealing with  
conflict is one of the most  
stressful parts of their job.**

*(Ipsos Reid 2012. Psychological  
health and safety at work.)*

**Additional activities are available at:  
[www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com](http://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com)**

## Chapter 2

### Understanding Your Own Perceptions

Understanding your own perceptions is a first step toward being comfortable and effective when dealing with emotionally charged situations in the workplace.

The activities in this chapter can help you develop greater awareness and strategies for addressing your response to negative emotions:

#### **Dealing with Negative Emotions**

*Becoming more comfortable and effective when dealing with negative emotions such as anger or hopelessness in the workplace*

#### **How Would Others Describe You?**

*Looking at how others react to or perceive you*

#### **Envision Your Ideal Self**

*Thinking about how you would you like others to describe you*



**When we look at the characteristics of [an effective leader], we see a lot of what we look for in an effective mentor. We see strong communication and listening skills, realizing that communication is two-way. We see empathy in the understanding of feelings and perspectives.**

*(Wythe, J.M., 2014 Servant and Transformational Leadership, PennState, <https://sites.psu.edu/leadership/2014/04/01/servant-transformational-leadership/>)*

## Dealing with Negative Emotions

Dealing with negative emotions among team members can be one of the most challenging aspects of being a leader. Think of personal barriers that commonly arise for you when called upon to address team members' negative emotions. What parts of dealing with different emotions are difficult for you? What can or have you done to overcome these barriers? Also think of times you were successful.

**In the chart below, share your own personal barriers related to dealing with the following emotions that may arise in the workplace: anger, fear and sadness.**

ANGER		
Dealing with other people's anger is hard for me because...	Example of a situation in which I dealt effectively with someone else's anger...	Specific things I can do to overcome my personal barriers...
<i>I'm scared I'm going to say something wrong and the situation could turn violent.</i>	<i>When John was upset about his vacation schedule and broke the printer.</i>	<i>Don't imagine worst-case scenarios. Just focus on the moment and stay calm.</i>
FEAR		
Dealing with other people's fear is hard for me because...	Example of a situation in which I dealt effectively with someone else's fear...	Specific things I can do to overcome my personal barriers...
SADNESS		
Dealing with other people's sadness is hard for me because...	Example of a situation in which I dealt effectively with someone else's sadness...	Specific things I can do to overcome my personal barriers...

## How Would Others Describe You?

The next exercise asks you to think about how others may react to or perceive you.

Think of a current team member who you MOST enjoy managing. How would he/she describe you?  
What specific words and descriptors would this person use?

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Think of a current team member who you LEAST enjoy managing. How would he/she describe you?  
What specific words and descriptors would this person use?

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Place a  next to those descriptors with which you agree and/or which you believe to be understandable perceptions of you.

Place an  next to those with which you disagree.

Your behaviours may not always reflect the type of individual you perceive yourself to be. Think about why you might be perceived differently from how you would ultimately describe yourself. What factors might contribute to any discrepancies?

_____
_____
_____
_____

What are some specific things you could do to begin narrowing the gap between how you would describe yourself and how you might be coming across to others? Pick three specific things you could do. Be realistic.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## Envision Your Ideal Self

Now that you've considered how others might describe you, let's think about how you would prefer to be seen.

Imagine a staff meeting that includes all of the key individuals you work with: team members, colleagues and your own leader(s). You are not at this meeting, and those attending are asked to write a biography describing you as a team leader. Be as honest as you can, and write what you think they might realistically say.

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Now imagine that you could rewrite/edit this biography to read exactly as you would ideally like it to. How would this revised version read?

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Most of us will find some discrepancies between the realistic and ideal versions of our biographies. Think about the main differences. How could you make changes in these areas, and what specifically can you commit to doing differently? Be realistic.

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**Additional activities are available at:**  
***[www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com](http://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com)***



## Chapter 3

### Communicating More Effectively

Part of our self-perception is the way we *believe* we communicate. Understanding how different communication styles impact others is important for leaders. Our interaction styles when under stress can be quite different than our usual responses. Even though our intentions may be honourable, the actual message may be perceived as harsh or insensitive.

The activities in this chapter can help you develop awareness and competency in communicating more effectively:

#### Communication Styles

Understanding some common communication styles

#### Identifying Your Interaction Style

Thinking about the communication styles you use in various circumstances

#### Communicating Without Judgment

Developing non-judgmental listening to help describe situations more objectively

#### Attribution Error

Learning not to automatically assume the worst in others' behaviour

#### Effective Listening

An effective communication method that involves listening, demonstrating understanding, reflecting and paraphrasing

#### Acknowledge, Even if you Disagree

Acknowledging that someone's feelings are valid, to allow them to feel heard and therefore better able to listen to alternate perspectives.



**Acts of hostility by supervisors, such as ridiculing, giving the silent treatment, blaming, taking undue credit, and breaking promises, can result in negative consequences, including absenteeism, turnover and reduced productivity that can result in significant costs to organizations.**

*(Tepper, B. J., Duffy, M. K., Henle, C. A., & Lambert, L. S., 2006. Procedural injustice, victim precipitation, and abusive supervision. Personnel Psychology, 101-123.)*

## Communication Styles

There are four primary communication styles:

- Assertive
- Aggressive
- Passive
- Passive-aggressive

**Assertive communication** is open, straightforward and earnest. You communicate your message as clearly as possible without embedding any other underlying or hidden messages. Assertive communication can help strengthen relationships, solve problems more effectively, and reduce negative emotions such as anger, frustration, guilt and fear.

One key to communicating assertively is to take ownership of your feelings and behaviours and not blame others, i.e., *"I feel frustrated when you are late for our weekly progress meetings. I don't like starting over again and repeating myself."* This can make your directives and feedback easier to accept.

- Speak in a calm, clear and steady voice
- Show interest and sincerity by keeping eye contact, smiling and nodding as appropriate
- Maintain an open and relaxed posture
- Communicate your feelings and needs appropriately
- Communicate respect for others
- Ask for what you need rather than demanding it
- Ask questions to understand other people's perspectives
- Listen without interrupting
- Before you say no, respectfully ask why the request is being made to determine if you can meet the underlying need.

**Aggressive communication** means you express your own needs, desires, ideas and feelings without considering and respecting the needs or viewpoints of others. This often involves *"you" statements* and attacks on a team member, rather than effective expressions of needs. For example, rather than stating, *"you are never on time"* try, *"I need you to be on time"*.

Other characteristics of aggressive communication may include:

- Speaking in a loud, bossy and demanding voice
- Having piercing eye contact
- Maintaining an overbearing posture
- Dominating/controlling others by blaming, intimidating, criticizing, threatening or attacking
- Acting impulsively, intensely or rudely
- Demanding what you need instead of requesting it
- Focusing on your own needs and rarely asking questions
- Not listening well to the other person
- Interrupting the other person frequently
- Being unwilling to accept "no" or to make compromises.

*(continued on the next page)*

**Passive communication** occurs when you do not express your own needs, desires, ideas and feelings.

This may include:

- Speaking in an overly apologetic or submissive manner
- Avoiding eye contact
- Having a slumped body posture
- Holding back on stating your feelings and needs
- Giving in to other people, and ignoring your own needs
- Doing what you are asked regardless of how you feel about it
- Being unable to say “no” when asked for a favour
- Rarely asking other people for help.

**Passive-aggressive communication** involves being passive in the manner in which you express your needs, desires, ideas and feelings, but being aggressive in your underlying intent. Communicating passive-aggressively often involves not speaking your truth, but rather trying to convey it through challenging, sarcastic or ambiguous comments and actions. Team members are behaving passive-aggressively, for example, when they avoid speaking directly about their concerns, and express their dissatisfaction through other behaviours that may seem manipulative. This may include:

- Speaking in a sarcastic voice
- Using non-verbal behaviours such as sighing and eye-rolling
- Using facial expressions and body language that are inconsistent with how you feel, such as smiling when you’re upset
- Avoiding dealing directly with a disruptive issue
- Appearing cooperative but acting uncooperatively
- Sabotaging another person to get even.

Aggressive, passive, and passive-aggressive communication each risk eliciting negative reactions from others. While assertive communication techniques cannot guarantee positive reactions, they are usually more effective. Communication is affected in part by the level of trust that team members have in your ability to lead.

This trust includes faith in your character and integrity, as well as in your competence to fulfill your role and lead your team.

Where trust is built up, small errors in communication may be overlooked or forgiven. Where trust is absent, even an innocent comment may be taken out of context and seen as threatening or disrespectful.

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## Identifying Your Interaction Style

Now that you understand the different communication styles, let's think about how and when you use them. Although you may have a style that you use most of the time, it is common to use all of the styles at some time or another.

**Think about your default style when under stress. What types of workplace situations may trigger each of the following styles for you?**

**Passive behaviour** (not standing up for your rights; not expressing your ideas/feelings)

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**Aggressive behaviour** (expressing your ideas/feelings without allowing others to do the same; getting your way at the unfair expense of others)

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**Passive-aggressive behaviour** (communicating a hostile/unkind message through non-verbal behaviours such as eye-rolling, gesturing or ignoring others; giving deliberately frustrating verbal responses)

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Think about what you can do in stressful situations to actively remind yourself to engage in an assertive communication style where you express your needs in a clear, open, non-defensive and respectful manner, while allowing others to express their needs. This can help you interact more positively with your team members and set the stage for more open and less judgmental conversations

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## Communicating Without Judgment

We need to be aware of our own perceptions around every workplace interaction or situation. Being judgmental might involve being suspicious of what is being said, focusing too strongly on the literal meaning of words, jumping to conclusions, or responding in a way that fuels mistrust and conflict. By listening and asking questions in a non-judgmental way, you have the opportunity to gain understanding of what someone is trying to convey before you respond. Here are some tips to help:

- Turn down your internal dialogue and stay focused on what is being said, rather than thinking ahead and speculating on unspoken meanings.
- Breathe, stay calm, and neutralize your emotions.
- Listen carefully and acknowledge the value of different perspectives.
- Move from judgment to curiosity by asking questions to gain better understanding.
- State what you see, hear or experience rather than commenting on someone’s personality or character traits.
- Clearly state your perspectives and desired outcomes.
- Restate the issue objectively, recognizing where there’s already agreement.

While this might all seem simple, these are actually challenging techniques that can take time to master.

***Keep this list handy, and read through it quickly before any emotionally charged interactions where you want to keep an open mind.***

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## Attribution Error

We are much more likely to blame external factors, such as high demands on our time, for our own negative behaviour. When we have positive accomplishments, we're more likely to attribute it to internal strengths, such as our intelligence.

On the other hand, negative behaviour in others is often attributed to internal factors, such as lack of motivation, while we look at their positive accomplishments as attributed to external factors, such as favouritism. This concept is called the "attribution error". For example:

### External Attribution

*If I trip while walking across the office, I say, "the carpet was wrinkled."*

### Internal Attribution

*If I see someone else trip on the office floor, I say, "they are clumsy."*

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### Internal Attribution

*If I win an award, I assume it's because I worked hard.*

### External Attribution

*If someone else wins an award, I assume it's because they were lucky.*

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### External Attribution

*If I raise my voice in a meeting, I believe it's because of the ineptitude of others.*

### Internal Attribution

*If someone else raises their voice in a meeting, I believe it's because they can't handle pressure.*

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When you're aware of the attribution error, you can step back and consider internal or external factors that may be influencing the behaviour before rushing to judgment.

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## Effective Listening

Part of being non-judgmental is listening to really understand what the other person is trying to communicate, rather than making quick assumptions or jumping to conclusions. This skill set may seem counter-intuitive to quick and decisive problem-solving. The skills that may be useful for tactical issues are often ineffective for interpersonal issues.

Effective listening is particularly important when team members are emotionally distressed. Slow down and try to accurately reflect on what you are hearing. This will help to demonstrate that you have heard and understood and will put you in a better position to address the actual issue.

The following strategies can help.

### Pay Attention

- **Minimize distractions such as your phone, computer, people walking by or other interruptions.** Try to manage distracting thoughts by repeating the words that the individual says silently to yourself. This may sound odd, but it actually helps you really focus on the words that are being said. Be aware also of non-verbal communication such as the tone of voice, eye contact, facial expressions and body language.
- **Show that you're listening and understanding.** By letting a team member know you are listening and understanding, you may encourage them to keep talking and also give them an opportunity to clarify their thoughts and feelings if you seem to be off track. Make eye contact, smile, nod your head, and make comments such as *yes, OK, aha, ah, oh, go on.*

### Seek to Understand

- **Listen not only to the words someone is saying but consider the underlying feelings, thoughts or opinions.** For example, if a team member *appears* angry after a performance review, but says, *"I understand, and I'll work harder on those things"*, a perceptive leader will note that they may disagree but for some reason do not want to speak up.
- **Try to view the situation from the team member's perspective.** Remind yourself that the team member has had different life experiences and may not see things the way you do.

### Show You Were Listening

- **When a team member is upset, angry, frustrated or anxious, acknowledge the emotion using phrases such as:**
  - *"It seems that he really upset you"*
  - *"I get the impression that you're pretty frustrated about that"*
  - *"I'm sensing that you're quite discouraged"*
  - *"I feel that you're unhappy with your situation"*.
  - Example: If a team member says, *"I'm finally finished with that stupid project!"*, you could reflect back: *"It sounds like you had a hard time with it"* or *"I get the impression that you're frustrated and don't feel like doing anything like that again."*
- Use your own words to rephrase what you heard. Use phrases such as:
  - *"So you are saying..."*
  - *"It sounds like..."*
  - *"What I'm hearing is..."*
  - *"In other words..."*
  - *"I get the impression that..."*
  - *"You mean..."*
  - *"You feel that..."*
  - *"I'm sensing..."*
  - *"I wonder if..."*.
  - Example: A team member approaches you wondering why another team member is leading the new project who is less experienced and hasn't been with the company as long. You could reflect back: *"It sounds like you feel the project leader decision is unfair."*

• **Ask clarifying questions if you don't completely understand the team member's message. For example:**

- o *"What I thought you just said is... Is that what you meant?"*
- o *"Sorry, I didn't follow that. What are you saying?"*
- o *"What do you mean when you say...?"*
- o *"Could you give me an example?"*
- o *"Can you tell me more about...?"*
- o *"How was that for you? What are you feeling about that?"*
- o *"It sounds like you're pretty upset. Did something happen?"*
- o *"So how will you deal with that?"*
- o *"What do you think should be done about this situation?"*

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## Acknowledge, Even if you Disagree

Effective listening can help leaders better problem-solve and generate solutions that come closer to meeting everyone's needs. Listen first, and acknowledge and validate what you hear – even if you don't agree with it – before expressing your point of view. When you acknowledge a team member's perspective, it can send a strong signal that while you may or may not agree, and may or may not take the action they're requesting, you have heard the viewpoint and are taking it into consideration.

Acknowledging that someone else's feelings are valid for them, even when you do not feel the same way, can allow the other person to feel heard and therefore better able to listen. Some leaders may be apprehensive about doing this, thinking that actually acknowledging a perspective ties their hands by creating a responsibility to respond in a certain way. This is not generally true. Acknowledging another person's thoughts and feelings still leaves you with the following options:

- Agreeing or disagreeing with the person's point of view or actions
- Informing them that a request cannot be granted, but that you are willing to explore other ways to meet the same need
- Further exploring and discussing the matter under consideration.

***Acknowledge your team members' ideas and requests by showing that you have heard and understood what they have said. Make sure to do so in a way that cannot be confused for agreement unless you do, in fact, agree.***

**Additional activities are available at:  
[www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com](http://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com)**

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## Chapter 4

### Engaging Team Members

Effective leaders leverage every member of their team to brainstorm ideas and address challenges. Some of the potential concerns when opening up discussions with team members can include:

- Emotional outbursts
- Negative reactions
- Unreasonable demands
- Impractical solutions
- Conflict
- Accusations

These concerns are valid and being an effective leader does not mean avoiding them, but rather learning to address them in a way that balances the well-being of those involved with your responsibilities as a leader.

The activities in this chapter can help you engage in a variety of circumstances:

#### Different Responses

Approach the same situation in multiple ways, all working toward the same goal.

#### Get to Know Your Team Members

Take time to connect, which can help create strong relationships and reduce the impact of negative emotions in the workplace.

#### Ask, Don't Tell

Ask questions that recognize an employee's positive strengths by affirming their past and present achievements, abilities and potential.

#### Invite Solutions

Convey a strong sense of trust and respect, which can make employees feel valued and more energized at work.

#### Seek Feedback

Offer and accept feedback, which can help create strong relationships in the workplace.

#### Provide Feedback

Become adept at tolerating conflict, and have the ability to respond appropriately when necessary.

#### Positive Feedback

Evoke positive emotions through brief conversations.



**Over 25 per cent of team members in a 2012 survey reported feeling that no matter what they did, it would never be enough to please their manager/ employer.**

*(Ipsos Reid, 2012. Psychological health and safety at work.)*

## Different Responses

In the workplace setting, we often have very clear goals we are working toward. When team members are distressed or distracted, our own stress level may increase if we fear our goal may be threatened. If we respond from a place of frustration or stress, it is even less likely we will have the outcomes we desire.

**Write out at least three different ways – when you are calm, when you are under pressure, and when you are frustrated – you might approach a team member in the following situations:**

*You overhear a team member speaking disrespectfully to a customer on the telephone.*

Calm response: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Response while under pressure: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Frustrated response: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*You see a team member – who should be working on an urgent deadline – repeatedly checking their Facebook account throughout the day.*

Calm response: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Response while under pressure: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Frustrated response: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*You observe a team member who is leaving the staff lunchroom teary-eyed.*

Calm response: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Response while under pressure: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Frustrated response: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Get to Know Your Team Members

Make a point of touching base regularly with each person who is a member of your team.

Ask if there is anything you could do that could change to help them be more effective at their job.

Take careful note of the suggestions and patterns of responses, as doing this exercise routinely can help you recognize what supports each person’s success.

Building this base of knowledge in advance should make it much easier to understand and communicate with individual team members when you do encounter a challenging or emotionally charged situation.

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## Ask, Don't Tell

When a team member is distressed, you may be tempted to ask a lot of questions to help you understand the situation, but it is important to take a balanced approach. Being asked too many questions may feel like an interrogation or overwhelming for the team member.

*Appreciative inquiry* is an approach that involves asking questions that recognize positive strengths by affirming past and present achievements, abilities and potentials.

### Try asking the following types of questions, when opportunities arise:

*"You seem to have a positive attitude. What do you enjoy most about your role?"*

*"You do many things well. What do you feel are your greatest skills?"*

*"You have been quite successful in your career so far. What tips and strategies have you learned over time for doing your job well?"*

*"How did you get that job/task done so well/quickly/efficiently?"*

### When a team member is distressed, try some of the following questions:

*"Can you help me understand what works best for you when you are feeling upset/distressed/overwhelmed?"*

*"What can I do to help you do what you need to take care of yourself?"*

*"When you have experienced these work issues in the past, what helped you?"*

*"Are there ways I could help you to best make use of your strengths and skills in this situation?"*

Open-ended, strength-oriented questions can convey that you value and respect the team member's experience. Appreciative inquiries like these may elicit valuable information that can help you determine how to better respond to a distressed team member. It also supports the beginning of a conversation that can focus on potential solutions.

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## Invite Solutions

When there are urgent deadlines or other work pressures, the impact on leaders can often be as great, or even greater, than the impact on other team members. In times of stress, some leaders take on more of the work themselves, rather than involving the team. Or if they do involve the team, it's in a more directive way.

In times of stress, however, involving team members in problem-solving can enhance team productivity, innovation and engagement. By inviting solutions from your team, you are also conveying a sense of trust and respect, which can make team members feel valued and work harder.

**Think of a situation where you invited solutions from your team. Describe the situation:**

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**What approaches did you take that worked well? What questions did you ask? How did you communicate trust in team members? How did you delegate responsibility to others?**

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**How did this approach positively impact team members? What did they communicate verbally? Non-verbally? What was the impact on productivity? On engagement?**

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**How did this approach affect you, your stress levels, and your effectiveness?**

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**Think about upcoming situations where you could actively invite solutions from your team.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

By planning ahead to engage your team when your own stress levels are rising, you are more likely to be successful in reaching positive outcomes.