

Member's Quarterly

Spring 2021 Edition

Ask the Expert

Leading Through Crisis

It's also a catalyst for tremendous growth



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Q One of my team members has just been found guilty of workplace harassment and is now off on leave. This employee is one of the senior members of the team and took on a great deal of responsibility and workload. The rest of the team is quite concerned with the effect this will have on the remaining members. How do you suggest we handle this?

A This situation is incredibly difficult for everyone involved. Perspectives on recent events will vary greatly and interpersonal dynamics can become highly strained. Then there is the impact of workload and responsibility shifts — everyone is deeply affected.

To navigate this, the manager needs to play a significant role in leading the team's dynamics to a healthier place. This means paying just as much attention to the team's emotional health as to its results.

Prepare for discomfort. Yes, you do need to talk about it. No, it won't be fun.

As a leader, you need to be able to sit in uncomfortable emotions without having knee jerk reactions. Anger, frustration, resentment and fear are some emotions to be expected. Breathe through any personal discomfort and try to see the perspective of each person you speak with. You can't fake good listening — you have to truly care.

Get help. As the manager, you will be supporting others through this process. You need support too. Find someone who is not involved, preferably outside of the organization who you can lean on and generate ideas. If your organization has access to an Employee and Family Assistance Program, consider briefing a counsellor privately and asking for their advice to support you and the team.

Set up individual meetings. Before inviting a conversation with the team as a whole, set up one-on-one confidential conversations to give everyone the time and space to be heard. Take thorough notes.

Pay close attention to factions that may be forming and don't wait too long to intervene. Make every effort to reinforce that this is now a whole team problem requiring a whole team solution.

Approach the team as a whole with a goal. Start off by summarizing what you've learned through the individual meetings (without betraying anything said in confidence), while addressing the concerns to the best of your ability. Open the discussion to the group. Ask questions like: what's our team vision for the future, specifically the way we want to behave toward each other? What is the ideal way we can move forward? What else needs to be included here? What do we need to do so that this plan can be successful? What are the potential pitfalls? How can we move past them?

When addressing impacts of change, we don't want an unrelenting venting session without a productive ending. Guide the discussion with the goal of making an action plan.

Consensus is likely impossible. However, everyone needs to be able to express what they think before they can truly commit to a new direction. All voices in.

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Tap into strengths. There is an enormous amount of extra responsibility to be re-distributed. Keep an open mind — strengths don't necessarily translate to job title. It's time to look at all the tasks at hand with fresh lenses and see the big picture.

Don't be afraid to shift what is normal to accommodate the new workload. Assess what responsibilities could be moved around, at least temporarily, to make room for the most qualified people to take on new work.

Model and encourage congruence. Without going into great detail about our personal experiences, we can still have enormous stress-relieving impact on our team by acknowledging what we are going through. In the book *Social Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman cites studies that prove emotions are contagious. What's more, when we attempt to wear a mask of "all is fine" while hiding our true emotion underneath, our blood pressure rises as does everyone else's in the room. Going from this mask-wearing incongruent state, to becoming congruent with a statement such as "this brings up a lot for me, but I am working on it and I'm committed to the team", immediately reduces the blood pressure of everyone involved.

Regularly Check In. Keep checking in even after a new direction is set. Regularly create space to ensure both behavioural and work norms are on track.

Nothing about this situation is easy, but it can be a catalyst for incredible growth. Take the opportunity to lead wholeheartedly with courage.

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