Taking Responsibility for Your Reactions and Feelings

It is inevitable that at times we will react emotionally to people we work with. The pressures, events and personalities at work can make us angry, frustrated, disappointed, hurt, anxious or sad. We can’t avoid feeling emotions in those situations nor can we always hide them, despite our best efforts.

It’s a fact of life that we will experience a range of negative reactions and feelings. Having a feeling – even an intense or unpleasant one – is never wrong. It just happens. What is important is how we outwardly manifest our reaction, and the impact our behaviours and actions have on ourselves or others. If we demonstrate inappropriate or harmful responses, we are likely to suffer negative consequences.

It is important to take responsibility for your reactions and related behaviours in situations that evoke a strong emotional reaction.

- **Be aware of your feelings:** Recognize which emotions you are feeling and why. Keep in mind that other people’s behaviours or comments may be the stimulus for your feelings, but are never the cause. **YOU** are the origin of your feelings. Someone else may react completely differently to the same stimulus. For example, while one person may feel hurt after being criticized, another person may feel stimulated to improve his or her behaviour.

- **Label your feelings:** When discussing your reactions, describe them as accurately as you can and specify their intensity, to avoid misunderstanding. If you stay too general and, for example, say only “I’m angry”, some people may think you are “extremely angry” while others believe you are only a “little irritated”. If you experience mixed feelings, label and explain them all.

  - **Example 1:**
    “I’m glad you’re checking in with me when you’re not sure about what needs to be done, but I feel very distracted when I’m interrupted multiple times throughout the day, and it’s making me a little frustrated.”

  - **Example 2:**
    “On one hand, I’m glad you’re starting to take your allocated vacation time, since you rarely do; but on the other hand, I’m annoyed that you didn’t check out whether the timing of your vacation worked with the team schedule since that is our usual protocol.”

- **Verbally convey responsibility:** Acknowledge the fact that it is YOUR feeling that you are experiencing. Use *I*-messages and verbally take responsibility for your own feelings (e.g., “I feel frustrated when you…”), rather than attacking and accusing the other person with *You*-messages (e.g., “You made me feel…”). With reference to the examples above, the following two examples
demonstrate how you could respond instead and confront a worker respectfully and productively, even when bothered by their behaviour:

- **Example 1:**
  
  "I find I lose my concentration easily when I have multiple interruptions through the day. Would it be OK if you saved up the questions and we checked in at the end of the day?"

- **Example 2:**
  
  "I get stressed when staff members take vacation without checking the workload of our division first. Next time, I would prefer if you check in with me first, to make sure that we have the capacity to finish the current workload without you."

- **Apologize** (if appropriate): Sometimes we can’t help but express our feelings in a harmful manner. You can’t take back what you said or did, but you can apologize afterward and try to clarify why you acted that way.

  - **Example 1:**
    
    “I’m sorry that I yelled at you before. If I’m stressed, it bothers me when I get interrupted by other people, because I lose my concentration easily. My reaction had nothing to do with you and was totally inappropriate. I’ll work on ensuring this doesn’t happen again.”

  - **Example 2:**
    
    “I’m sorry that I spoke harshly to you in front of the team. That was not fair. I should have talked to you about the vacation time issue in private.”

Taking responsibility for our feelings and reactions can help prevent us from making statements that get us into trouble or cause unnecessary conflict. If we take responsibility for our feelings even when bothered by another person’s behaviour, the other person may be less likely to become defensive and more likely to listen to what we say and want. Effective communication is not always about just being nice: it is about being direct and honest, saying things in a respectful and productive way, and not attempting to blame others for our feelings.