



When Employees Disappoint: How Effective Leaders Respond

**Don't let disappointment derail your employee relationships.
Instead, use it as an opportunity.**

By Alesia Latson

Disappointment is inevitable for leaders. At times your people will disappoint you, and sometimes you'll disappoint others. So the fact that disappointment occurs isn't the challenge. The real issue is how you respond to the disappointment.

Unfortunately, far too many leaders react to disappointment with anger and punishment. Such an attitude is a missed opportunity for the leader to shine. How you handle disappointment speaks volumes of your leadership style and your credibility in your organization.

It's human nature to lash out during disappointing times. Because leaders can, they often do. But remember these points:

How you handle disappointment reflects on you as a leader more than on the person who caused the situation.

The majority of disappointing moments are actually coaching moments in disguise.

To make the most of a disappointing situation and use it as the coaching opportunity it is, consider the following suggestions.

Manage yourself first.

Before talking with the employee about the disappointing situation, you first have to manage yourself. In other words, you must be clear on your intention for the conversation. Because you're in a position of authority, what you say during these moments will have a ripple effect.

Of course, this isn't to say that you aren't justified in your feelings of disappointment. You most certainly are. However, your expression of those emotions has an impact on how others view you and on what the employee will do in the future.

So before talking to the person involved, step back and get clear about what you want to have happen as a result of the conversation. Are you simply looking to vent your anger?

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Is the focus on finding a solution to rectify the current circumstances? Or do you really want to help the employee learn and grow from the situation?

Assess your role.

Take time to reflect on your role in the disappointment. Before you declare, “I did nothing. It was entirely the other person’s fault,” realize that as a leader, you’re ultimately responsible for your people.

So ask yourself, “What role did I play?” and “How did I contribute to this disappointment?” Perhaps you didn’t give employees enough training. Maybe you threw them into a situation that they were too “green” to handle. Whatever the disappointing outcome was, chances are you had some role in it – even a small one. Acknowledge that prior to your conversation.

Assume good intent.

When you take the stance that the employee didn’t intentionally cause the disappointment, it takes the edge off any frustration you may have. And in the majority of cases, that stance is absolutely accurate: The employee didn’t set out to cause harm. It was simply a mistake or a bad judgment call, which resulted in a less than ideal situation.

Additionally, realize that employees know when they mess up. Therefore, any anger you display will be mild compared to what they’re already dishing out to themselves.

Of course, if there’s been an intentional violation of an important principle, value, or standard that compromises the organization’s integrity, then anger is understandable.



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However, true anger should be reserved for the most egregious acts.

Focus on the outcome.

When talking to the employee, focus on the disappointment in terms of the outcome, not the person. Successful school teachers know that when you discipline a student, you concentrate on the behavior, not the child. The same is true for leaders. Even if the disappointment occurred because the employee was negligent in some way, you need to separate what happened from the employee personally.

State your disappointment in terms of the outcome, and then explore the cause with the employee in an inquisitive and coaching way rather than a punitive way. Why? Because when employees feel punished or scolded, they become fearful, which decreases creativity and initiative on the job – the exact things you need to rectify a disappointing situation. 

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Lead to Inspire, Not to Discipline

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