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EMPATHY AT WORK
Katharine Manning

5 Tips for Keeping Your Cool When the Conversation Gets Hot

From deep breathing to active listening — many strategies can help when difficult conversations get heated at work.

Medically reviewed by [Bethany Juby, PsyD](#) — Written by [Katharine Manning](#) on May 11, 2022

[Why it's difficult](#) [Why it's important](#) [Helpful tips](#) [Wrap up](#)

Empathy at Work is a column about how we work together and how we can do it with compassion for ourselves and each other to build stronger relationships, better organizations, and healthier selves.



Design by Alexis Lira

Many have noted Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson’s incredible calm throughout an intense and sometimes challenging confirmation hearing. This is a calm that she has, undoubtedly, honed over decades — and it’s not easy.

For many people, stress may cause a flood of adrenaline that makes it hard to remain still and poised. It can also affect our complex thinking and rational decision making — which, in turn, may cause us to say and do things we later regret.

Learning to manage your emotions throughout tough conversations can help you remain professional no matter what you face and allow you to gain important information that can be gleaned in hard conversations.



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Why it's hard to maintain your cool

When you experience [stress](#), a few things happen automatically.

First, you get a flood of adrenaline. This makes your heart race and can cause you to feel anxious and jittery.

Second, the parts of your brain that are less helpful to immediate physical protection get a little muted. Most relevant, the part associated with complex thinking and rational decision making gets [dialed down](#) a bit.

These responses are designed to protect you from physical danger. They give you the energy and focus to protect yourself.

This may be very helpful if you need to run away from a predator but less helpful in a conversation with your boss or a co-worker.

In addition, [research shows](#) that humans are usually hard-wired for [empathy](#). We tend to experience the feelings of those we're interacting with or even just seeing.

For me, if I'm watching a football game and see someone get tackled, I'll wince. If I see someone across the room laughing really hard, I'll likely smile or laugh, even if I have no idea what they're laughing about.

Thus, even if I'm not upset or feeling stressed myself when a person walks into my office who is furious or distraught, I will likely begin to feel some of that stress response. It will affect me in the same way it's affecting them: I'll get a surge of adrenaline and a suppression of my complex thinking and decision making.

What that means is that in a tough conversation, many people find it difficult to control their bodies. They may fidget, tap their pen, or keep looking at the door for a quick escape. Plus, they may have trouble thinking of what to say or may blurt out things that aren't well thought-out or appropriate.

Why it's important to maintain your cool

For many folks, losing their cool gives them a sense of embarrassment. Most of us don't want to lose our temper at work or say ill-considered or unprofessional things. The inability to maintain our emotional equilibrium may also affect our success at work. Plus, it can hurt others who may be coming to us for help.

If someone is upset about something that I did, and I can't stop playing with my pen or glancing at my watch, I may leave them feeling that I don't care about what they're saying.

Imagine an employee coming to a co-worker to say that they were offended by the other referring to a neighbor as "crazy."

They explain that they've been living with [depression](#) for many years and have family members with [schizophrenia](#) and [obsessive-compulsive disorder](#). "Referring to people as 'crazy' is hurtful and makes me feel like I can't trust you to be respectful of me and the people I love," they say.

That can be a stressful conversation. The person being confronted may experience many emotions.

For example, they may feel embarrassed, defensive, angry, ashamed, misunderstood, or frustrated — or maybe all of those in rapid succession. Their hands may start shaking, or they may start tapping their foot to manage their increased energy. "That's not what I meant at all!" they might blurt. "You weren't even listening to me!"

Though many may relate to this reaction, it's not the most professional response. Plus, it may seem as if injury is being added to insult. The person who came to their co-worker in pain may leave feeling worse.

In this scenario, the co-worker who was being confronted also missed important information from their peer. What might be a better term to use? Are there other things they've said that may have been seen as problematic?

Reacting impulsively and defensively may also make it less likely for the co-worker to come to their peer if further concerns arise.

To maintain an empathetic and [positive work environment](#), it's important that everyone feels comfortable voicing their concerns and that everyone knows that concerns will be addressed in a respectful manner.



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Managing your own response

Keeping your cool may allow you to navigate tough conversations with greater poise and also get key information you need. Here are some ideas of things to try when conversations get heated.

Breathe

When things are heating up, a simple first step is to remember to breathe.

Taking a deep, slow breath through the nose and out through the mouth [has been shown](#) to increase brain function and calm your nervous system.

You can try many [breathing techniques](#), but one that I particularly like is box breathing. If you want to give it a try, these are the steps you can follow:

1. Picture a square in front of you.
2. Breathe in for a count of four as you imagine traveling up one side of the square.
3. Hold for a count of four as you travel across.
4. Breathe out for four counts as you travel down the other side.
5. Hold for four as you complete the square.
6. Repeat for about 5 minutes or as long as you're comfortable.

It can also be helpful to write the word "Breathe" on the top of your notebook if you know you'll be having a tough conversation.

Name your feeling

Simply checking in with yourself to identify and acknowledge the emotion you feel can help you feel more in control of your emotions.

Some people remember this as, "[Name it to tame it.](#)"

It's best to do this even before things get heated. For example, if you notice that you're starting to breathe a bit more rapidly, try thinking about why that is. For instance, you may say:

- "Hmm, my breathing is getting a bit faster. I'm probably feeling stressed right now because this is a hard conversation."
- "I'm getting sad about everything she's going through."

Engage your senses

Consciously engaging your sight, smell, touch, taste, or hearing helps pull you into the present moment and calm you.

When you're faced with a difficult or heated conversation, try taking a second to notice things around you like:

- the colors in the picture on the wall
- the smell of coffee from the next room
- the feel of the desk in front of you

Some people use [grounding techniques](#) like the 5-4-3-2-1 technique, which asks you to name:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 you can touch
- 3 you can hear
- 2 you can smell
- 1 you can taste

Practice active listening ('be a reporter')

Sometimes what the person is saying can feel upsetting or attacking. You may feel an urge to defend yourself or stop them from saying things that you know aren't true or are distorted.

This usually backfires. People find it difficult to listen if they don't feel heard themselves.

What's often more helpful is to let them talk and actively listen, trying to understand what they're saying.

One idea I've used is to pretend to be a reporter whose job it is to write a story later about what the person said. For me, this strategy helps pull me out of the stress of the moment and forces me to think about what the person is sharing.

Maybe this technique can work for you, too. If not, Psych Central put together a [guide on becoming a better listener](#) that you may be interested in.

Take a break

It's good to remember that sometimes it's necessary and absolutely OK to walk away.

It's best to do it before you're feeling really frustrated or upset or when you start to notice that the above techniques aren't working to slow your heart rate.

In this situation, it's OK to simply say, "Thanks for sharing this. I want to hear more about it, but give me just a minute to digest it first. I'll come talk with you later this afternoon."

In doing so, you acknowledge the importance of what your co-worker has brought up with you, but give yourself the time and space to think about it and return to the conversation in a calm, empathetic, and likely more productive manner.

Wrap up



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professional, support those who've come to us with challenges, and ensure that we receive the information we need to be successful.

[If you'd like help remembering these steps, you can download an infographic here.](#)

Katharine Manning is the president of [Blackbird](#), which provides training and consultation on responding to trauma and victimization at work, and the author of "[The Empathetic Workplace: Five Steps to a Compassionate, Calm, and Confident Response to Trauma on the Job.](#)" She has been an advocate, counselor, and legal advisor for victims for more than 25 years, including 15 years at the Justice Department where she advised on



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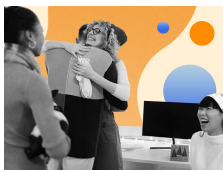
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Want to Improve Employee Well-Being? Resource and Interest Groups May Help

When led well, employee resource or interest groups can be a powerful source of support.

Medically reviewed by [Debra Rose Wilson, Ph.D., MSN, R.N., IBCLC, AHN-BC, CHT](#) — Written by [Katharine Manning](#) on March 1, 2022

[About ERGs](#) [Getting started](#) [Meeting start](#) [Facilitation](#) [Meeting end](#) [Wrap up](#)



Empathy at Work is a column about how we work together and how we can do it with compassion for ourselves and each other to build stronger relationships, better organizations, and healthier selves.



Design by Issiah Davis

A woman reached out to me recently for some advice. She has achieved success in a male-dominated industry, is in a senior position, enjoys her work, and her employer supports her development.

Still, she said that she felt lonely. She wished there were more women around her and also wanted to support more junior women in their success.

Her solution? She started an employee resource group for [women leaders](#), using the [Lean In Circle](#) model.

She reached out to me because she wanted advice on how to facilitate the group in a way that would encourage participation and support all members.

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What are ERGs?

Many organizations have employee resource groups (ERGs), employee interest groups, or affinity groups, to [build connections](#) and professional development.

[Great Place to Work](#) defines ERGs as “voluntary, employee-led groups whose aim is to foster a diverse, inclusive workplace aligned with the organizations they serve.” They also credit ERGs with:

- improving working conditions for marginalized and remote workers
- surfacing challenges
- [building leaders](#)

- creating a safe space for employees to discuss their experiences

ERGs are often organized around identity, such as:

- racial groups
- ages
- genders or [gender identities](#)
- sexual orientations
- ability status

Other groups — usually referred to as interest or affinity groups — may be organized around a particular interest, like environmentalism or crafting, or experiences, like those caring for elders or long-haul COVID-19 survivors.

One woman I spoke with had experienced infertility for years and kept her experience private. Still, it was difficult for her to hide the reasons for her many doctors' appointments and the heartache she experienced at work.

Finally, she decided to open up about what she was going through and started an infertility support group at her office. To her surprise, the group was well-attended from the start and tight bonds formed quickly. Some of the group members became her closest friends at work and the information and resources they shared were helpful and empowering.

Instead of her pain being a source of shame and isolation, because of the group, she was able to build strong ties of friendship and support among co-workers.

Forming the ERG

If you would like to start an ERG, be sure that your organization's leadership is aware and supportive of the idea.

It's a good idea to present them with research, like this [2013 research](#) by the Center for Effective Organizations, which shows that employee energy is higher among those who participate in ERGs and that

participation in ERGs may lead to a more engaging and fulfilling work experience.

It may also be helpful to have a general sense of the legal issues surrounding ERGs, some of which are summarized by [Practical Law Labor & Employment](#).

Once you have the support from your company's leadership, you can advertise the group's purpose widely — for example, through a company-wide email distribution list or messaging systems like Slack.

It's important to include details on how to join. Though you may not know all those who might be interested, consider reaching out to co-workers you know may have interest and see if you can recruit a few members, to make sure that the first meetings have attendees.

In your initial meetup, it's a good idea to:

- clearly define the goals of the group
- decide when and how it will meet
- go over how long meetings will last

Where possible, try to share topics and discussion questions ahead of time, so group members can think about them prior to the meeting. This can aid in the quality of the discussion (though we should also be open to allowing the conversation to go where it needs to go).



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Start the meeting

At the start of each meeting, it's a good idea to remind people of the purpose of the group, the topic of the specific meeting, and go over any ground rules you may have established.

A few rules that can be helpful are:

- One person talks at a time.
- We respect the confidentiality of the information shared here, except for information that indicates harm of self or another.
- If discussing a specific experience, speak from the “I” perspective and avoid using the names of others.
- We critique ideas, not people.
- [We listen](#) to understand.
- We respect our own needs and take care of our mental health. It's always OK to take a break. Turn off your camera or step outside the room anytime.

Facilitating meetings

When facilitating a group, it's important — especially in the beginning — to communicate that all voices are welcome and that while everyone is encouraged to participate, no one is forced to respond. Here are a few ways to do that:

Icebreakers

It's always nice to have an introductory question or icebreaker that everyone answers.

The goal is to get everyone comfortable speaking in the setting.

The question can be a simple, "Please introduce yourself and tell us what division you work in."

Or it can be an easy question for which everyone will have an answer and for which there can be overlaps that create bonds. Such questions may be:

- "Where is someplace you've always wanted to go?"
- "What's the best TV show you've watched this year?"

Still, it's important to keep in mind that some questions that seem suitable for most people may be triggering or problematic for others. For instance, a question like "What's your earliest childhood memory?" may bring back negative memories for someone who has experienced [childhood trauma](#).

Ask specific questions

As you ask questions, it's important to be clear about what you're asking. It's a good idea to avoid vague questions like, "What does everyone think about [impostor syndrome](#)?"

Instead, it may be more helpful to be specific and ask: "Can someone describe a time when they've experienced impostor syndrome?"

Still, not everyone may feel comfortable sharing their personal experience, so it can help to give people a choice of things on which to comment. For instance, you could say, "Can someone describe what impostor syndrome is, or tell about a time when they've experienced it?"

Give time for responses

Keep in mind that it's OK to allow time for silence.

Particularly when meetings are held online, it can be uncomfortable to let silence linger, but people need time to think and then either unmute themselves (which always seems to take forever!) or type in the chat.

One thing to try is to get in the habit of counting to 30 after you ask a question. I often take a drink of water after I ask a question to force myself to stay quiet.

Acknowledge those who share

It's important to acknowledge people who comment, as people need to feel seen when they participate.

As the leader of the group, it's a good idea to:

- thank people for commenting (“Thanks for that, Megan.”)
- underscore their comments (“Such a great point about self-care, Riley.”)
- acknowledge their feelings (“What a frustrating situation. I’m so sorry.”)

To the extent possible, I try to acknowledge the comments of each person who speaks or participates in the chat. By doing this, you're encouraging participation and also modeling listening and respect for one another's comments.

Invite participation (without being pushy)

You may need to encourage participation, in particular by inviting in those who may be less forthcoming.

Some people — myself included — are unlikely to jump into a group conversation. Maybe they're more introverted or take longer to formulate and express their thoughts. Whatever their reason: It's OK.

Of course, we don't want anyone to feel put on the spot, but it's important to make space for those who may be less likely to dive in because they likely still have things to say.

I handle this by inviting participation. For instance, I might say, “I know we haven’t heard from Carol or James yet. Would either of you like to chime in?” Sometimes if it’s only one person, I’ll also say, “No pressure at all, but I wanted to create room for you if you’d like to add anything.”

Again, try to remember to give time for them to respond and respect if they decline your offer.

You could also suggest that people can follow up via chat or email if they think of something later on.

Control the flow

As a meeting facilitator, it’s also important to manage the conversation.

Try to be flexible to allow the discussion to flow, but if it seems that the conversation has meandered far from the purpose of the group and the topics at hand, you may need to rein it in with a gentle reminder about the topic or a pushback to the subject of the group.

For example, you may wish to say something like: “These shows are so good! Thanks for the recommendations. To get back to the topic of impostor syndrome...”

Sometimes there’s a particular person who tends to bring the conversation off-topic. I’ve generally found that those who do this are quite amenable to clear direction.

For instance, you could break in with, “Sorry to interrupt. I appreciate what you’re saying, but I do want to stay on the topic of impostor syndrome for this conversation. Do you have something you want to add on that?”

It’s also important to notice if one person is dominating the discussion. Ideally, you want to encourage people to share their thoughts, but also want to make sure that *everyone* is getting an opportunity to contribute.

For instance, you could say something like, “Nina, I see your hand, but want to make sure we’re getting comments from everyone. David? Jelahn? Anything you’d like to add?”

Address hierarchy

It's possible that your group may include people who are in a direct chain of supervision. The fact that they have the affiliation around which the group is organized in common can be a source of bonding for them, but their working relationship may also make it difficult for each of them to open up completely in the group.

Consider breaking the group into smaller groups or pairs for discussion and separating those who work closely with one another.

It may be worthwhile to have an explicit ground rule that those who work in the same group or in a direct line of supervision are generally in different breakout groups, to set expectations and ease any concerns.

Closing the meeting

Where possible, try to end the meeting on a high note. Thank people for coming and participating, and remind them of why the group is coming together.

You can ask people to share a takeaway from the meeting or something they would like to do before the next meeting, or something they're grateful for or excited about.

When people leave the meeting feeling good, they may feel more inclined to come back, participate, and support one another.

Wrap up

With thoughtful planning and management, ERGs can be a powerful way to:

- build bonds among co-workers
- share resources and support
- improve employee well-being

That's what the woman who started a Lean In Circle at her office found as well. She reports that the first two meetings went well.

"All members are pretty talkative and forward-leaning, so the conversation moves very quickly," she adds. "Overall, everyone wants to keep the circle going and we've agreed to meetings every 2 weeks."

I'd say that's a smashing success.

Katharine Manning is the president of [Blackbird](#), which provides training and consultation on responding to trauma and victimization at work, and the author of "[The Empathetic Workplace: Five Steps to a Compassionate, Calm, and Confident Response to Trauma on the Job.](#)" She has been an advocate, counselor, and legal advisor for victims for more than 25 years, including 15 years at the Justice Department where she advised on cases like Madoff, Charlottesville, and the Boston Marathon bombing.



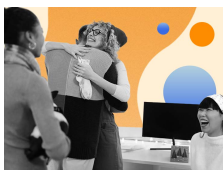
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