

# Don't ignore your emotions at work, professor says

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(PhysOrg.com) -- “There’s no crying in baseball!” So said Jimmy Dugan, the manager portrayed by Tom Hanks in the movie “A League of Their Own.” Not so fast, says Vince Waldron, an Arizona State University professor of communication studies who has spent years examining how people express emotions in the workplace.

Not that Waldron advocates bursting into tears at work on a regular basis. But he believes that when employees have the ability to constructively express emotions, it’s a sign of a healthy work environment - whether the workplace is an office or a baseball dugout.

“Organizations typically don’t do a very good job of addressing the emotional dimension of workplace communication,” says Waldron, a professor in the New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences on ASU’s West campus.

Waldron sees emotion at work, properly expressed, as helping to make one’s job enjoyable. “A sense of camaraderie can be the glue that keeps a workforce cohesive and productive,” he says.

When employees are encouraged or taught to ignore important emotional signals, bad things can happen, according to Waldron. He cites the recent packaging and repackaging of mortgages and other financial instruments as a glaring example. “We should experience feelings like fear, guilt and anxiety when engaging in risky behavior. But the people engaged in these deals were disconnected from the risk because they were passing

the investments on to others, and so it was easier for them to be emotionally disconnected as well.

“Emotions are a kind of moral barometer in the workplace,” Waldron says. “Their suppression can sometimes dull the moral sensibilities of leaders and subordinates alike. At the same time, employees must show discernment in expressing intense emotions. Co-workers don’t want to be the targets for emotional tirades.”

The ways in which employees do or do not express emotions is usually part of an organizational culture that comes from the top, Waldron says. “Powerful people within organizations have a special responsibility to engage in responsible emotional behavior,” says Waldron, who authored the chapter “Emotional Tyranny at Work: Suppressing the Moral Emotions” in a newly published book, “The Destructive Side of Organizational Communication.”

In the chapter, Waldron defines the term “emotional tyranny” as the use of emotion by powerful members of an organization in a manner that is perceived to be destructive, controlling, unjust or even cruel. He discusses tactics used by emotional tyrants, including intimidation, ridicule, emotional blackmail, grinding (the use of emotion to wear down resistance), reframing (redefining the emotional experience of others), and simply vanquishing emotions from the workplace.

For an employee who is feeling the wrath of an emotional tyrant, Waldron suggests looking for support mechanisms through family, friends, and/or counselors. But he cautions against simply redirecting workplace emotions toward one’s loved ones, which can adversely affect relationships outside of work.

“Many people are so work-identified that negative feelings at work spill over and can consume their whole lives,” Waldron says. “If you feel

you're being overrun with negativity, it's time to find ways to have more positive emotional experiences and regain the emotional balance in your life.”

For many reasons, it's in the best interest of employers to cultivate a healthy emotional environment, according to Waldron. Aside from productivity issues, workers who feel emotionally abused may engage in sabotage against their employer or, in extreme cases, commit acts of violence in the workplace.

Waldron recently completed a book with New College colleague Jeff Kassing that examines risky workplace communication situations. Kassing and Waldron explored how people deal with issues relating to expressing dissent, emotion and negative feedback as well as difficult teammates, organizational romance and workplace bullying. The book, “Managing Risk in Communication Encounters,” will be published by Sage in February 2010. Waldron will publish another book, “Communicating Emotion at Work” (Polity Press), in August 2010.

Waldron, who earned his Ph.D. at Ohio State University, has taught at ASU's West campus since 1993. He is chair of the Interpersonal Communication Division of the National Communication Association (NCA) and serves on the editorial board of several major academic journals, including the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*.

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