Help! My boss keeps putting me down.

Dear Annie: I was hired about three months ago as part of a 12-person training team, and I really like the job and my colleagues, with one exception. Our team leader can't seem to stop picking people apart and tearing down everything we do, even when we have followed his requests to the letter. He’s an incredibly negative person – the glass is always more than half empty – which unfortunately is contagious. Morale here is in the dumps, with everyone just going through the motions.

At first I lost sleep over his snide comments and went out of my way to try harder to please him, to no avail. So lately I find myself just trying to stay out of his way and avoid him altogether, but it’s not always practical. (This is also the approach several of my teammates take.) I’m looking for a job in a different part of the company, but if I don’t manage to escape for a while, is there anything I can do about his constant carping?

Color Me Blue

As “Color Me Blue” reveals in this post to a work advice website (Fisher, 2010), relationships with other people are often the source of positive and negative workplace emotions. For many employees, leader–member relationships are the source of intense feelings. These can spread across the larger network of employees. In this case, the relentlessly negative boss, with his penchant for “picking people apart,” is apparently the source of pervasive feelings of low
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morale. As often happens in workgroups, these feelings have coalesced into a mood, an atmosphere of dispiritedness. Admirably, Color Me Blue has tried to rectify the situation using a variety of emotion-management strategies. First, she tried conscientious compliance with her boss's wishes in an effort to keep him happy. Then she tried to avoid him. Now, having already lost some sleep over these relational stresses, she is looking for a more positive boss, or at least one that is less emotionally toxic. In essence, Color Me Blue has been forced to detach herself emotionally from her supervisor, even as she must remain engaged in her work.

As was suggested in chapter 3, many workers perform emotionally demanding tasks. Think about the work of emergency-room nurses, police officers, or nursery school teachers. But in my own analyses of emotional narratives I have noticed that relationships with co-workers, not tasks, are the most commonly cited source of intense feelings. Participants in one of the earliest studies were probation officers (Waldron and Krone, 1991). They interacted every day with hardened criminals who had recently been released from prison. The officers monitored their charges closely, sometimes tracking them down in rough neighborhoods and enforcing compliance with parole requirements. Although their tasks exposed them to potentially dangerous people and tense confrontations, it was not the work itself that the probation officers found to be emotional. Instead, they described intense encounters with supervisors and co-workers. In anonymous surveys, they detailed painful episodes of public embarrassment at the hands of highly critical bosses; powerful rage directed at "backstabbing" peers; and deep disgust at what they considered to be abusive managers.

For this reason, chapter 4 explores work relationships as important sites of emotional interaction. I discuss the unique qualities of work relationships and then consider the role of emotional communication in maintaining, building, damaging, and repairing relationships between members and leaders. I look at the special emotional freedoms and responsibilities enjoyed by powerful people. Peer relationships are considered next— the difficult ones and the rewarding ones. The special emotional challenges of workplace romances and "blended" (co-worker/friend relationships)
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are also explored, and I examine how emotion travels across the boundaries of work and family relationships, considering, for example, how family life can buffer or exacerbate the emotional stresses of the workplace.

Work Relationships are Emotionally Unique

All interpersonal relationships are sites for emotional communication. Whenever people are connected by bonds of caring, whenever they closely coordinate their efforts to achieve important goals, their interactions have the potential to become emotional. However, workplace bonds are “emotionally unique” in at least five ways. The first of these involves risk; these are often high-stakes relationships. Their success or failure affects our incomes, careers, and the degree to which our daily experiences at work are rewarding, mundane, or miserable. For that reason, employees may feel increased pressure to strike the right emotional key in their interactions with clients, peers, or supervisors. After all, many relationships are involuntary. We have to maintain them. The process starts with the selection interview, where emotional effervescence is required. Was your previous employer beastly? Your job search exasperating? No matter. All traces of bitterness must be banished in an effort to make an emotional connection with the interviewer, in the hope of making a long-term connection with the organization. Once hired, the stakes are high in other key conversations with workplace partners, all of whom will be forming impressions based on emotional displays. How will the rookie employee hold up during her first encounter with an angry client? How will he react to negative feedback during that first performance review? When asked to make an important presentation on behalf of her work team, will she reveal feelings of confidence or trepidation? In short, employees’ emotional performances with clients, supervisors, and peers can enhance their chances for career advancement or put them at risk.

A second unique factor in work relationships is status inequality. Employees often find themselves in interactions with people
who are more or less powerful. Given this reality, it is no surprise that certain kinds of work interaction are tinged with the emotion of fear. For fear of the consequences, employees are sometimes reluctant to be the bearers of bad news (Rosen and Tesser, 1970; Wagoner and Waldron, 1999). In some cases, this wariness is quite justified. As I have noted previously, “fear, frustration, and rage often appear in narratives about supervisory abuses of power. Hopeless despair or burning indignation may be the emotional reaction to repeated and persistent misuses of power” (Waldron, 2009: 13). But trepidation is also felt by some supervisors, who hesitate to deliver corrective feedback for fear that it will cause an emotional blow-up or harm valued relationships (Larson, 1989).

Emotional communication plays an integral role in efforts to gain, keep, or undermine power. Members may decide to humble an arrogant team leader by playing a practical joke or staging a coordinated work delay (Waldron, 2000). In some organizations, workers are cautious not to appear excessively proud after promotions for fear that less successful peers will interpret their behavior as gloating (Waldron and Krone, 1991). In contrast, others may flatter powerful people in an effort to cultivate good feelings. These efforts at emotional manipulation are sometimes belittled by peers who describe it with terms like “ass kissing,” “self pimping,” or “slobbering.”

Workplace encounters are often conducted in public. Co-workers and clients may serve as witnesses to some of our more emotional moments, and it may be their presence that makes them emotional in the first place. This is the third way that work relationships are emotionally unique. The audience heightens our chances of feeling such emotions as pride, embarrassment, or shame. Indeed, in workplace narratives that I collect for my research, employees indicate that the public nature of some interaction is what makes them emotionally intense. That was certainly the case with Louis, who worked as a short-order cook in a busy restaurant.

One evening, right in the middle of the dinner rush, the floor manager stormed through the doors of the kitchen. His face was red and his eyes were all bulging out and he was waving a plate of food in the
air, which he brought right up to my face. He was yelling and looking at me. "Who let a hair fall on to this plate!" A customer had been grossed out by the hair and left the restaurant. My boss thought it was my hair, but that was impossible. I wore a hair net and it wasn’t even my color. The other cooks all stood back and looked at me and the waitresses were all gawking at me through the pick-up window. It was pretty much the most humiliating experience of my life.

Louis’ feelings may be compounded as he realizes that his encounter with the angry boss is being re-enacted as various informal accounts are passed through along the informal communication network. Employees who were absent on the day of the original event will hear about it when they return to work. They in turn will bring the story home and pass it on to family and friends, some of whom know Louis. The boss’s emotional outburst, perhaps even more than the errant hair, will be the “juiciest” part of the story. Astonishment. Horror. Sympathy. Glee. These and other emotional responses will be attached to the account as it passes through the ranks. It may circle back to Louis, as employees seek him out to verify the facts or express their sympathy. In this way, he will be reminded of the emotional event even as the experience is recolored by the sentiment of his peers and the passing of time. In these ways, employees experience second-order emotions. These feelings are echoes of those felt during the original encounter, filtered through a rippling series of conversations. In this sense, organizational emotion is not only attributable to the presence of an audience; it is also reproduced through the interactions of the audience.

A fourth unique feature of organizational relationships is their connection to task performance. In many kinds of labor, co-workers must work interdependently. Successful experiences of cooperation can forge emotional bonds among workers. These are strongest when workers depend on each other for safety and survival. For example, soldiers develop intense emotional commitments to comrades who “watch their backs.” Similar feelings can develop among other workers who labor collectively to ward off danger - firefighters, crews on deep-sea fishing boats, and con-
construction workers who scale the heights to build skyscrapers or dams. In these professions, emotional communication among co-workers serves such functions as managing fear, building feelings of camaraderie, and, sometimes, expressing feelings of grief.

Of course, most workers perform less harrowing tasks. But even mundane forms of task interdependence yield emotional responses. Who has not experienced the pride that comes from successful teamwork or intense frustration at members who failed to carry their weight? In addition to triggering emotional reactions, task-related interactions provide guidance about appropriate forms of emotional expression. For example, if workers’ facial expressions reveal disgust for an unpleasant task, they may be reminded of their emotional responsibilities with comments such as “Hey, it’s show time,” or “Get your game face on,” or “Don’t let it get you down.”

The production of emotion is the object of some collective forms of work. I noticed this when observing the behaviors of courtroom judges, defense attorneys, and prosecutors (Waldron, 2000). They appeared to work collaboratively to create feelings of dread in the juvenile delinquents who often appeared before the court, perhaps in the hope of “scaring them straight.” The defense and prosecuting attorneys cooperated in a “good cop/bad cop” routine, apparently designed to make the defendants feel relief and gratitude when they received probation rather than jail time. Similarly collaborative forms of emotional labor are observed when pilots and crew work together to calm frightened airline passengers after a bout of turbulence, or a troupe of street performers works to surprise and then delight their audience.

A final emotionally unique feature of work relationships is, interestingly enough, their tendency to affect our lives outside of work. Employees often can’t help but bring home with them the joys and disappointments they experience at work. However, recognizing that any type of communal arrangement requires some degree of emotional constraint, workers strive to “keep things under control,” to “put a lid on it,” even on the most trying of days. Unedited venting and emotional exhaustion may be the unattractive alternatives
to this collective attempt at emotional censorship. Emotions repressed at work, however, are sometimes displaced. At home, family members may become the unwitting targets of suppressed anger ... Family members are usually safer audiences for expressions of envy at co-workers, fear of abusive supervisors, and indignation over unjust practices. However, habitual displacement may lead to emotional fatigue among family members and supportive friends. They may learn to carefully edit work-related discussions, so as to avoid another round of emotional dumping. (Waldron, 2009: 14)

It is not just emotion that flows across the permeable boundaries of organizations. In some cases, the relationship itself is a kind of bridge between the professional and personal realms. This happens when co-workers are also friends, an arrangement that researchers call a “blended” relationship (Bridge and Baxter, 1992). Workplace romance is another example. And, complicating things even further, are those examples of family businesses in which co-workers may also be spouses, children, or relatives. These unique cases make the larger point — emotional communication can’t be easily compartmentalized “within” workplace relationships.

Workplace varieties of relational emotion

In a general sense, most emotions are “relational” because they arise from interactions with other people or systems created by people. But in the stories I have collected over the years, a relatively small set of emotions are invoked to characterize relationships with co-workers. Table 4.1 presents some of these. Those with positive connotations include admiration, pride, and affection. However, encounters with co-workers also yield envy, guilt, and shame.

Types of Work Relationships

Although many of the emotional requirements of work are dictated by the norms of organizational culture and the larger society,
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Table 4.1 Emotional descriptions of work relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion/feeling</th>
<th>Discourse example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admiration</td>
<td>She would do anything for us employees. I felt admiration for her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camaraderie</td>
<td>&quot;We were comrades in arms. The feeling of connection was intense.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>&quot;Kindness. We were like a work family that cared for each other.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Envy</td>
<td>&quot;I wanted, she got the promotion that I really deserved.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt</td>
<td>&quot;I felt guilty leaving my co-workers; we went through so much together.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jealousy</td>
<td>&quot;Basically, the boss and I got along great, which made my peers jealous.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy/happiness</td>
<td>&quot;... delightful place to work; I couldn't have been happier with the people.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love/affection</td>
<td>&quot;I liked my &quot;cube mate&quot; so much that I ended up marrying him!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>&quot;I missed my old co-workers. The new job was lonely.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>&quot;... proud of our team effort. It was crazy but we served every customer.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>&quot;I will never forget how he humiliated me in front of all my co-workers.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

they do vary across relationship types. The most prominent types are explored below.

Leaders and followers

Many work relationships require members to meet the requirements of leadership or followership. And, of course, some employees play the role of leader in some relationships and follower in others. Leader-member relationships are defined most notably by differences in status. Status originates from a variety of sources: a designated leadership role, seniority, technical expertise, and so on. In some cases, leaders are informal or quasi-formal, as when a senior employee serves as an unofficial mentor for a newcomer or an expert teacher agrees to “coach” her less
accomplished colleagues. Despite these variations, emotional communication is always integral to the performance of leadership and followership.

**Emotional qualities of leadership**: Leadership takes many forms, all of which have been examined elsewhere in great detail (for an accessible review, see Northhouse, 2010). However, most leadership definitions include some reference to emotion. Transformational leaders are known for inspiring followers to exceed expectations and for inviting them to make radical changes in their values and aspirations (Bass and Riggio, 2006). Unlike transactional leadership approaches, which view leadership as an exchange of resources (e.g., recognition, money, effort) between leader and member, the transformational approach focuses on the emotions and developmental potential of workers.

A variety of related forms of leadership has evolved from this concept. Emotion is perhaps most implicated in the performance of charismatic leaders, who are known for their ability to make emotional connections with followers (Conger, 1999). They do so through the use of passionate, values-focused rhetoric; by making appeals to emotions such as pride, fear, or disgust; or by setting an emotionally resonant personal example. This form of leadership is sometimes associated with the American president Ronald Reagan, who frequently invoked values such as freedom and independence in his speeches and urged citizens to feel pride in American exceptionalism. Reagan was portrayed as unfailingly optimistic and cheerful.

Negative examples of charismatic leadership abound, with the most obvious being Adolph Hitler, the German leader who roused extreme feelings of disgust in a downtrodden citizenry. He did so with the technique of scapegoating, blaming whole classes of “inferior” people for Germany’s problems – Jews, homosexuals, gypsies. In this case, the consequences of emotion-driven leadership were horrible and deadly. An obvious concern with charismatic leadership is its potential to motivate unethical behavior. In fact, unethical charismatic leaders may encourage followers to ignore “moral emotions,” like guilt and humility (Haidt 2003; see also
chapter 5), which might guide them to responsible behavior. Indeed, leadership ethicist Jill Graham (1995) warned that organizational citizens sometimes sacrifice reason and moral principles in their zealous pursuit of a charismatic leader’s vision. Even the charismatic Reagan was prone to scapegoating, as he sometimes blamed “welfare mothers” for his nation’s economic ills.

In response to the potential abuses of charismatic leadership, several alternatives have been proposed. Servant leaders are inspirational, but they also express humility in their efforts to do what is best for their followers and communities (Graham, 1991). More recently, the notion of authentic leadership has been developing in the literature (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa, 2005; George, 2003). Authentic leaders are thought to be self-aware, transparent, morally responsible, and, of course, heartfelt. Their life stories often include triumph over hardship or tragedy. Emotionally, authentic leaders are said to be positive, hopeful, and resilient. Presumably, followers find leaders to be authentic based in part on the display of authentic-seeming emotion.

From even this brief discussion, it is clear that emotional communication is an important component of leadership, for better or for worse. As the research evolves, theorists are becoming more guarded about the role of emotion in leadership ethics. Rather than focus exclusively on convincing emotional performances, they seem to be viewing emotion as an indicator of the shared humanity of leader and follower. Indeed, as leadership becomes more of a shared responsibility in our decentralized organizations, this trend is likely to accelerate.

Emotional qualities of followership: The emotional requirements of followership have received less attention in the research literature, although the emotional communication competencies discussed in chapter 1 certainly apply here. I would add several other qualities. One is hardiness, the capacity to “bear up” under the emotional demands of work. Hardy followers can persevere through periods of emotional turbulence and stress and they are able to outlast leaders who are emotionally abusive or unstable. A related concept, emotional resilience, extends beyond mere
perseverance (for a detailed discussion, see Buzzanell, Shenoy, Remke, and Lucas, 2009). Resilient people make constructive adjustments in reaction to disruptive experiences. But they also find positive emotional experiences in work. Over long periods of time, they seem to thrive and flourish. Resilient followers are hopeful, optimistic, and emotionally flexible. Regarding this last characteristic, these employees are quick to abandon emotions such as despair. They take actions that produce emotions like admiration, hope, and satisfaction: building new relationships with respected peers, devising promising plans for the future, or focusing more intensely on fulfilling aspects of their work. A fourth quality, selective emotional engagement, is suggested by the work of organizational communication researcher Sarah Tracy (2009), who argues that emotionally savvy employees learn to manage stress by recalibrating their emotional involvement in work relationships and tasks. So, for example, if interactions with a difficult supervisor become too emotionally draining, they engage more intensively with mentors or peers or with non-work friends.

In recent years, scholars have begun to conceptualize the role of follower as a complex and important social identity (e.g., Collinson, 2006). Indeed, following well may be as emotionally demanding as leading well and, like leadership, followership can take a variety of forms. In a qualitative interview study of 31 lower- and mid-level employees drawn from a variety of industries, researchers examined the meanings associated with followership (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, and McGregor, 2010). The respondents described three different types of followers: passive, active, and proactive. In emotional terms, passive followers experience humility. They are obedient, emotionally reticent, and relieved that leaders are willing and able to bear the emotional stresses that come with responsibility. Active followers are more likely to express their feelings to leaders, although they too believe it is important to conform to leader expectations. They show little fear of speaking up. Proactive followers view themselves as "co-leaders." They assume some of the emotional responsibilities of leadership, assuming that it is part of their job to deflect or absorb the emotions that might otherwise be directed
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at leaders. For example, they might intervene to resolve a heated dispute among colleagues without consulting the leader and without fear of reprisal. Active and proactive followers seemed to welcome emotional aspects of work, as indicated by this quotation from an active follower, who participated in the study:

I don’t care for people who sit there and just say, “I don’t know, it wasn’t my decision, I’m just following.” I don’t mind taking the buck if I know why, and let people get angry at me if they are not happy. (Carsten et al., 2010: 553)

Power, status, and autonomy Team leaders, managers, and heads of organizations enjoy a status advantage in their relationships with less powerful co-workers. From an emotional communication perspective, status affords increased autonomy. Powerful employees are free to express a wider range of emotions, in part because they make, model, and enforce organizational norms. Informal communication rules typically prohibit low-power employees from directly expressing hostility at their leaders, and if anger happens to “slip out” they may feel compelled to apologize quickly. In contrast, supervisors may feel little compunction about expressing anger, believing it their prerogative to do so when workers need correcting or motivating. Going further, employees may even expect such displays, viewing them as a “normal” supervisory response to performance failures. When supervisors violate these emotional expectations in a positive manner, by remaining calm rather than “exploding,” displaying sympathy rather than casting blame, employees may respond with feelings of surprise, relief, or even admiration. Thus, leaders can exploit their emotional autonomy in ways that have potent and potentially long-term effects on the quality of their relationships with lower-status workers.

The behavioral repertoire of lower-status members is comparatively constrained. Nonetheless, they often use emotional communication to negotiate, rather deftly, the contours of the leader-member relationship. For example, to be effective in their jobs, members must convince their leaders to provide scarce resources, accept new ideas, or grant exceptions to rules
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(Waldron, 1994). The “upward influence tactics” that employees use for these purposes often involve the management of emotion (Waldron and Sanderson, 2011). Some leaders feel threatened by attempts to influence them, which they interpret as a usurpation of power or an effort to change the ground rules of the relationship. In response, members adopt tactics that assuage these feelings. For example, they might use flattery or ingratiation to boost feelings of liking and activate friendship obligations. The theory is that a friendly boss may feel more comfortable in granting favors. Another approach is to reduce a supervisor’s fear of change by requesting a “trial period” in which a modest request is agreed to. Once the boss feels confident that deleterious consequences are unlikely, the employee makes a larger request. On occasion, low-status employees use guilt-based influence tactics, by implying that the supervisor “owes them” due to past sacrifices (i.e., a history of hard work; willingness to work overtime). Still rarer are fear-based tactics, in which employees threaten to circumvent the boss or quit (Kassing, 2007).

Abusers and bullies: Because low-status employees are vulnerable, leader-member relationships can be sites of abuse. Organizational researcher Benjamen Tepper (2000) has documented the nature of what he labels “abusive supervision.” Among the hurtful behaviors Tepper observes is the sustained display of emotional hostility. To illustrate, he quotes these abusive lines uttered by an employer depicted in David Mamet’s 1984 play Glengarry Glen Ross.

What did I tell you the first day? Your thoughts are nothing; you are nothing... If you were in my toilet bowl I wouldn’t bother flushing it. My bath mat means more to me than you... You don’t like it here, leave!

Tepper argues that abusive supervision should be understood within an organization’s system of justice. When indignant or humiliated employees perceive that the organization will take their grievance seriously, the effects of abuse may be muted. In another line of research, abusive supervision is considered a form of bullying, which among its many exploitative forms includes public
humiliation or fear-inducing threats (Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, and Namie, 2009). Lutgen-Sandvik and colleagues report that 30–37 percent of US workers have been bullied at some point in their careers. Bullying can be initiated by peers, but, as noted in chapter 5, it is often powerful people who use emotional communication in the interest of tyranny. Victims of bullying report a variety of negative effects, including decreased self-confidence at work, stress-related illness, and the desire to quit their jobs.

Sick supervisory relationships: Employees spend long hours on their jobs, sometimes under stressful conditions, so it is not surprising that relational pathologies sometimes crop up. Surviving sick relationships is the theme of a number of popular books, such as Working for You isn't Working for Me: The Ultimate Guide to Managing Your Boss (Crowley and Ester, 2009). In some cases, the dysfunction is an extension of relational proclivities that employees developed outside of work. For example, some supervisors enact outdated gender roles, expecting female employees to be subservient and males to be highly aggressive. Other employees become emotionally dependent on work. The emotional highs and ego support they receive from their co-workers cannot be matched in their personal relationships. The result is ever-longer work hours and increasing disengagement from family and friends.

Leaders and members can develop an unhealthy emotional codependence. The spouse of a highly committed accountant (Shawn) described his relationship with a mercurial senior manager (Art). Their relationship mimics the cycle of emotional abuse that one finds in unhealthy domestic partnerships.

They both are insanely committed to the company. For them, there is nothing quite like working for [company X]. But Art has no life. He works day and night. He literally lives and breathes his work and he expects Shawn to do that too. When something goes even a little bit wrong, Art screams and yells at everyone. He calls the employees names and berates them like they were naughty kids. Shawn is like the oldest son. He is held most responsible and gets yelled at all of the time. But Art also adores Shawn and he apologizes to him and
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even gives him gifts and compliments after one of these episodes. Shawn always forgives Art for his bad behavior. Shawn says he “gets” Art. He thinks Art really wants to control his anger, but his love for [company X] just gets in the way.

Peer Relationships

Peer relationships are important sites of both positive and negative emotional communication. Indeed, the emotional tone of interactions with colleagues may be reflected in the degree of satisfaction that an employee finds in work and in life. Here I consider workplace friendships, creative partnerships, and team relationships.

Workplace friendships

It is not surprising that friendships form at work, given that employees spend much time together, inhabit common space, share organizational values, and are required to cooperate on tasks (Bridge and Baxter, 1992). Organizational communication researcher Patricia Sias has studied peer relationships extensively, finding that employees view them as sources of enjoyment, creativity, and advice (Sias, 2006). Most relevant to the current topic, Sias sees these social ties as important sources of emotional support. It is in relationships with friendly colleagues that workers share joys and vent frustrations. These interactions help workers interpret ambiguous emotional messages, make sense of their own ambivalent feelings, and recharge emotional resources (Waldron and Kassing, 2011: chapter 3). Healthy peer relationships certainly help employees weather difficult moments, but they do more than ward off emotional threats. They are central to a meaningful and vibrant working life (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003).

Emotionally difficult relationships

Unfortunately, peers can also be potent sources of emotional distress. Sias and her colleagues studied the causes of friendship
deterioration as reported by a diverse sample of employees (Sias, Heath, Perry, Silva, and Fix, 2004). Several of them related to emotional communication. One reported cause, problem personalities, involved annoying personality traits, including a proclivity for self-pity or excessive emotional sensitivity. Based on my own work on the relational dimensions of emotion, this kind of peer is hyper-vigilant for potential slights, easily offended, and frequently found to be in an "emotional huff" (Waldron, 2000).

Sias and colleagues (2004) identified promotion and betrayal as additional causes of friendship decay. The promotion of a friend occasionally resulted in problematic feelings of envy. Perceived betrayal is another potent source of workplace emotion (Waldron and Krone, 1991), particularly when presumed friends reveal confidences, engage in "back-stabbing," or take unfair credit for one's own work. These events lead to expressions of hurt and anger, and they may poison the larger social network to which the parties belong, to include common friends, family members, and leaders (Waldron, 2003). In response to these various forms of relationship deterioration, peers may choose to terminate the relationship. Sias and Perry (2004) studied these termination strategies, some of which involved emotional communication. The depersonalization approach curtailed informal communication with the peer, which presumably included the disclosure of private feelings. The cost escalation approach included the elicitation of negative emotions in the former friend through such tactics as condescension and criticism.

Other kinds of peer relationships can turn problematic. In maintaining mixed-sex relationships, workers may be particularly careful to regulate emotions to prevent peers from "getting the wrong impression." A study of the relationship maintenance tactics used by female workers suggested that, compared to males, they report being more proactive in managing emotional displays and avoiding appearances of emotional intimacy (Waldron, Foreman, and Miller, 1993). This finding is further evidence that cultural biases, including gendered ones, influence emotional labor. In most cultures, women are more likely to find their emotional behavior evaluated and "sexualized" and they are more often victims of
sexual harassment. For those reasons, female employees may be more conscious of, and controlled in, their emotional displays.

Another example of emotionally difficult communication arises when feelings of affection between colleagues turn to love (Quinn, 1977). Workplace romances are obviously fulfilling for the participants and some of these blossom to be long-term partnerships. Some organizations encourage workplace romance but most try to regulate it in some way (Belkin, 2004). One reason for caution is that failed romance sometimes leads to charges of sexual harassment (Pierce and Aguinis, 2001). The intensity of romantic connections can complicate relations with co-workers, who may be (for example) cautious about sharing confidential information with one partner for fear that the message will be shared with the other. Perceptions of favoritism are another source of bad feeling. Later, if the romance fails, the former lovers (and their co-workers) may have a difficult time negotiating feelings of hurt or hostility.

Peer relationships can be sources of other unpleasant emotions, such as jealousy or guilt. Jealousy arises when one’s relationship with a peer is threatened by co-workers who make claims on his or her time or attention. Employees feel guilty when they violate the informal rules that govern peer relations. It is an emotion that can be easily manipulated by peers (or supervisors).

Kayla, a software developer for a hard-driving start-up company “turned off her guilt meter” after she recognized that it was unnecessary to emulate the work habits of her overzealous co-workers, who toiled at the office nearly every night and weekend, but also complained about a string of failed relationships. By striking a reasonable balance between her obligations to co-workers and family members, Kayla released herself from the grip of unreasonable relational expectations.

Team relationships

Work is increasingly organized around teams, but teamwork has both “bright” and “dark” sides (for thorough reviews, see
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Seibold, Kang, Gailliard, and Jahn, 2009; Thompson and Hoon-Seok, 2006). When compared to individual efforts, work in teams can be more emotionally rewarding and more frustrating. In teams, members often collaborate to create emotional experiences. For example, to encourage a dispirited member, they might engage in a round of esteem-boosting compliments. More negatively, the team might hold an informal complaint session in order to shame those members who have failed to meet task deadlines. Members will occasionally “gang up” on poor performers, scaring them with threats and extracting expressions of remorse. The emotional impact of messages communicated by peers may account for the popularity of “360 degree feedback” programs in which workers receive performance feedback from status-equal teammates as well as leaders (Atwater and Waldman, 1998). This approach capitalizes on the well-known effects of peer pressure, which for our purposes can be conceptualized as collective efforts to intensify the emotional bonds that motivate performance.

Creative partnerships

Teams are often expected to be creative, but the collective activity that spawns creativity can be found in other relational contexts. A field study of creative organizations, including the one that developed the wildly successful “pump” shoe, revealed the central role of a diverse and loosely connected network of creative people and technical experts (Hargadon and Bechky, 2006). These sometimes involved temporary and fleeting forms of contact, including brainstorming sessions, unscheduled consultations in hallways, aggressive question-and-answer sequences, and the sharing of creativity-inducing metaphors. The principals in these “creative collectives” were united by a variety of communication practices, some of which were emotional. For example, they rarely expressed fear of ridicule, even when ideas seemed implausible. Experts were willing to put aside their scheduled tasks to help colleagues who needed creative assistance. In other words, they rarely expressed the kinds of exasperation or scorn that can squelch creative
thinking. Unhindered by envy or jealousy, members freely shared their ideas and shared the credit. Those who championed new ideas entertained thought-provoking suggestions and probing questions without having their feelings hurt. They were emotionally thick-skinned during these interactions even as they received an emotional charge from the creative process.

**Relational Functions of Emotional Communication**

Although work relationships take a variety of forms, the functions of emotional communication are relatively similar across relational types. I describe some of them below.

**Provoking**

One possible evolutionary function of emotional communication is to negotiate power relations through provocation. This is often accomplished through the communicative act of teasing (see Keltner, 2009). Gentle teasing typically elicits embarrassment, but it can also yield feelings of solidarity and belonging when the tone of the teaser is friendly and care is taken to avoid serious threat to the “victim’s” face. However, teasing can be used to provoke a reaction in targets. If they react with expressions of hostility, the teaser knows to “back off.” Phrases such as “Just teasing!” allow the teaser to deny harmful intent and, perhaps, escape retaliation. From an evolutionary perspective, these kinds of emotional exchanges allow members of an organization to negotiate boundaries without engaging in more direct and damaging conflict.

**Detecting/anticipating**

Some co-workers have an uncanny ability to detect the feelings of co-workers and anticipate the relational consequences. They are the first ones to know when a colleague is upset by a family matter. In meetings, they pay close attention to the non-verbal cues that
signal frustration, impatience, or embarrassment. This sensitivity to emotional messages, a kind of *emotional radar*, can be advantageous in work teams. Emotional radar leads to early detection of group tensions. With a humorous quip, a process-oriented suggestion ("Let's go back to that concern that Rita expressed earlier") or a face-supporting compliment, these emotional specialists can change the tone of a meeting and resuscitate team morale. As noted in chapter 1, the capacity to detect emotion is a valued aspect of communication competence, especially when other employees are emotionally impervious. It is one of the intangibles that help employees navigate the social terrain of the organization, one of the factors that make an employee "good with people."

**Maintaining**

Although emotional episodes are often implicated in relationship decline, the communication of feeling is also central in the maintenance of relationships. Relationship maintenance refers to processes that stabilize and preserve relationships, often through the ordinary and routine kinds of discourse that pervade daily life (Tepper, 1995; Waldron, 1991, 2003). In leader-member relationships, at least five relationship maintenance patterns have been identified.

- **Personal**: frequent small talk, discussion of personal plans and problems, and the use of humor are common. From the standpoint of emotion, willingness to disclose personal feelings is the defining feature.
- **Contractual**: this is a task-oriented approach with an emphasis on rule compliance and meeting of expectations. Emotional displays are limited to organizationally legitimized feelings, such as showing enthusiasm for organizational objectives and values.
- **Regulative**: the relationship is maintained by avoidance and not making a poor relationship worse. Conflict is strictly limited. Emotional displays are carefully edited.
- **Direct**: relational expectations are discussed explicitly and
perceived relational injustices are questioned. Emotion is expressed with little editing.

- *Extra-contractual*: exceeding expectations. Work relationships are prioritized over personal relationships. Personal feelings are discounted and employees engage in "deep acting," in which organizationally mandated feelings are experienced as one's own.

Workers may pay little conscious attention as they enact these patterns of communication, but relationship maintenance efforts lay the emotional groundwork upon which more taxing episodes are played out. For example, those who maintain their relationship by carefully avoiding emotional encounters (regulative tactics) may be caught off-guard when conflict situations become emotional. Unpracticed in the art of expressing their feelings in constructive ways, these employees may also be cowed by emotive colleagues. In contrast, those who disclose personal feelings routinely (personal tactics) or baldly (direct tactics) may find emotive conflict to be "normal" or even refreshing in its bluntness.

**Tipping**

The repetitive nature of organizational interactions causes low-level emotional responses to build, deepen, and intensify until they reach a relational tipping point. Interestingly, it is often these intense feelings, rather than the mild ones, that sometimes get expressed. Consider this report from "Roger," a faculty member whose initial irritation built over the course of several days until he inappropriately unloaded on a colleague.

I was trying to schedule a meeting with three other people to discuss the case of a student who had admitted to cheating. We were all on the committee that reviewed these matters. On Monday, I sent out an email asking for available days/times. At first, only one member responded that she was free on Friday afternoon. I was kind of annoyed that the others didn't respond by Tuesday afternoon, so I sent another email. No response. So I called them both and left voice
mails and I guess my tone of voice indicated my growing impatience. One of these faculty members emailed back, telling me Friday was OK for the meeting, but added in all-capital letters to “COOL YOUR JETS.” Of course, he copied all four of us on the message! Now I was feeling quite irritated and a little humiliated. So when the third member called back on Thursday to remind me that she was out of town at a conference and could not attend on Friday, I just snapped: “Fine! You plan the frigging meeting!” It was total overreaction on my part and I later apologized, but my emotion just reached a tipping point.

Intensifying

The disclosure of otherwise “private emotions” may signal affection, even intimacy, in work relationships. By sharing such feelings as envy for a co-worker, deep frustration with the job, or the joy of a successful project, workers come to know one another more deeply. These kinds of communication are not required by the work role and they suggest a developing sense of trust. Emotional sharing may in itself produce more intense emotional bonds. Indeed, it is not uncommon for co-workers to fall in love, although organizations vary in the extent to which they prohibit or regulate this particular emotion. For a thorough review of recent research on organizational romance, see Waldron and Kassing (2011: chapter 6). Of course, the putting aside of emotional regulations may indicate a less positive form of intensification, as indicated by comments of the type, “To be perfectly honest, I hate your guts.” Expressions of hostility in an otherwise cordial work environment are akin to declarations of war – the usual rules of constraint no longer apply.

Forgiving

The communication of forgiveness has received considerable attention in the literature on personal relationships (Waldron and Kelley, 2008). But researchers are increasingly considering its relevance in the workplace (Metts, Cupach, and Lippert, 2006).
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Waldron and Kelley defined forgiveness as a process of relational communication:

Forgiveness is a relational process whereby harmful conduct is acknowledged by one or both partners; the harmed partner extends undeserved mercy to the perceived transgressor; one or both partners experience a transformation from negative to positive states, and the meaning of the relationship is renegotiated, with the possibility of reconciliation. (Waldron and Kelley, 2008: 5)

According to them, emotional communication is crucial in the forgiveness process. Emotional reactions are inevitable after serious transgressions. Forgiveness rarely proceeds until emotions are acknowledged and legitimized by both parties. In addition, the expression of remorse is typically a signal that transgressors understand the harm they have created and are willing to make amends. As mentioned above, relational harm is not unusual in organizations. Organizations that create processes for workers to pursue forgiveness may increase the likelihood that frayed relational bonds can be repaired.

Soothing

A key function of emotional communication in work relationships is soothing those who are agitated, troubled, or upset. This form of communication happens frequently in interactions with customers, who may be unhappy about the quality of a service or product. Customer-service clerks calm customers by acknowledging the legitimacy of their emotions, apologizing for their inconvenience, and (often) pledging to remove or repair the circumstances that are feeding the emotion. Leaders sometimes soothe the fears of members who are disconcerted by organizational change. In another example, peers may feel compelled to offer consolation when a colleague fails to receive a promotion or suffers a personal setback. Soothing is enacted through the comforting behaviors discussed in chapter 1, but as an emotional communication practice, it may have lasting relational implications. Soothing is a humane
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act of kindness that may strengthen or confirm relational ties between organization members, beyond what might be expected if work were strictly results- and task-oriented. And, as a practical matter, soothing may convince upset employees not to vent their disappointment in ways that are destructive to their relationships and careers.

Remembering/reconstructing

Co-workers share histories, sometimes long ones, and the reconstructing of the past produces and reproduces important relational feelings. The recollection of past triumphs generates feelings of pride and bolsters hope for future achievements. Peers may ruefully recall past mistakes—times when feelings were hurt by rash comments or misunderstandings. The resulting feelings of humility counter any tendencies toward hubris and encourage more careful relational behavior in the present. The sharing of humorous anecdotes from the past serves to relieve anxiety, build affection, and make work fun.

Developing/maturing

Communication is one way that workers develop emotional maturity in their ranks. Often they do so by helping each other develop the emotional hardiness that is called for in current work circumstances. “It’s time to put on your big-girl panties,” “buck up,” and “you have to be thick-skinned,” are just three colloquial phrasings of this familiar sentiment. At other times, the emotional message conveys a sense that expectations have not been met. When a supervisor expresses “disappointment” in one of her employees, she is suggesting that her own emotions are a barometer of the employee’s development. The disappointment is often offered with a tone of relational concern, suggesting that the supervisor really cares about the employee, but expected a better performance. This kind of emotional communication can be parental in tone, as if more experienced employees see it as their duty to challenge and prepare their less emotionally savvy peers.
Organizational relationships come in a bewildering variety of forms, but they are all sustained by emotional communication. Due to space limitations some of these received little attention in this chapter. For example, mentoring relationships can be crucial sources of emotional support. The emotional regulations that govern formal leader–member relationships may be relaxed when protégés communicate with mentors. Several emotionally potent relationships were not covered here, because they are addressed in other chapters. In chapter 3 ("Emotional Occupations"), the relationship between coaches and athletes is examined. So too are the emotional connections that develop between spiritual leaders and their followers. Chapter 5 examines in more detail the abusive practices of emotional tyrants – powerful people who use communication to manipulate the feelings of others.

Almost since its inception, scholars in the field of communication have emphasized that nearly every message conveys relational meanings in addition to other information. In organizations these relational messages concern power, trust, and belonging. Emotion is complexly tied up in this relationship-sustaining role of communication. It is sometimes a reaction to communication that affirms or violates relationships with co-workers. And, just as important, by disclosing feelings co-workers intensify their bonds, maintain them, and sometimes terminate them. Emotional communication can be an instrument of relational manipulation, but it also vitalizes the complex network of human connections that forms the core of any organization.

References