



# **Growing as a Manager**

**Holistic Growth: Emotional and Psychological  
Skill Development for Managers**

CQ Dossier | Evidence-based Management

### The Author:

#### Dr. Erika Price

Erika Price is a social psychologist, writer, and statistical and methodological consultant based in Chicago, Illinois, USA. Erika's research has focused on the psychology of political tolerance and open-mindedness. In addition to conducting experimental and survey-based research on these topics, Erika helps clients use methodological and data analytic tools to answer pressing questions that challenge their organization.

---



CQ Net is the evidence-based management (EBM) team learning platform. Learn strategies & interventions that have been supported by scientific research. This CQ Dossier is part of the Evidence-Based Management Learning Team "Growing as a Manager: How can you improve your management performance?".

## Executive summary

Managing a diverse array of working professionals is an endlessly complex task. Not only is each employee multifaceted and psychologically complicated, so are the constantly evolving relationships and group dynamics present between each of them. It is no surprise, then, that some of the most common problems encountered by managers are interpersonal and psychological in nature (Ashkanasy, 2000). No matter how extensive your management experience is, you will always encounter new, complicated human conflicts; it therefore is essential that you continually expand your emotional, psychological, and interpersonal skills (Martins & Coetzee, 2007). This CQ Dossier reviews three central skills that many managers could benefit from acquiring, and the latest social science research on how to develop them.

## De-escalation

De-escalation is a conflict management method. Originally developed in activist communities, de-escalation involves reducing the emotional (and even physical) intensity of a conflict, and helping conflicting parties to become more calm and receptive to one another (Baillien et al, 2016). In extreme cases, de-escalation methods can be used to deal with physical fighting or threats of violence; however, in organizational settings, de-escalation is far more commonly used to prevent arguments and reduce resentments between conflicting parties (Gilin Oore et la, 2015).

De-escalation strategies can be used to intervene when two employees are caught in a disagreement, when an individual is opposing a larger group, or even when leadership is behaving inappropriately toward subordinates. The first step to de-escalating a workplace conflict is asserting yourself as a calming force in the conflict (Gilin Oore et al, 2015). This can be accomplished by calmly, yet confidently, disrupting the argument to make a general observation of the parties involved – for example, stepping in and saying, “It looks as though there is a disagreement for us to discuss”. The mere act of naming and drawing attention to the tension can begin to disarm it (Baillen et al, 2016).

After you have entered the conflicting situation, use calm, observational language and non-confrontational questions to try and reduce anger. For example, if a great deal of

yelling or rapid talking is occurring, slowly and loudly state, "It is hard for me to follow the discussion right now because a lot of people are talking at once. Let's make sure everyone has the opportunity to be heard.". Rather than asking for individual parties' "sides" of the story, focus on what is needed in the present (Gilin Oore et al, 2015).

Emphasize, to all parties, that the current disagreement does not need to be settled immediately. Instead, make it clear that all people involved will have an opportunity to discuss their concerns with you, and provide a variety of options for how the issue can be discussed (in a private meeting, via email, and so on; Day, 2015). If the issue must be resolved shortly, have the agitated parties address you, rather than the person they were in conflict with. Use observational language to help all parties feel seen and validated – for example, "I hear you saying that your feelings were hurt" or "I can see how these two proposals are not compatible with one another.". You may not be able to arrive at a conclusion that satisfies everyone, but you can help increase confidence in the process and limit expression of distress.

## Perspective taking

Managers should practice understanding the viewpoints and experiences of a variety of people. The process of imagining other people's experiences, goals, and feelings is often referred to as perspective taking. When a manager is able to understand the motives and feelings of their employees, they are more successful in changing problem behaviors, and are more successful in forming respectful, productive relationships (Martins & Coetzee, 2007; Mortier et al, 2016).

Research suggests that an individual's perspective taking abilities can improve with practice (Conway et al, 2017). One way to accomplish this is by focusing on one individual employee, and contemplating how they might be experiencing work and life. Consider: what do you know about this employee's home life and personal circumstances? Based on your observations, what is this employee's personality like? What job tasks or general life activities come easily to them, and which ones are hard? Practice observing and imagining your employee's attributes, and ignoring any urge to pass judgment on the qualities they have (Hattula et al, 2015).

It may also be beneficial to think of the employee as someone who is not fully in control of the particulars of their life – for example an employee may seem unmotivated early in the workday, when actually they are tired because they had trouble sleeping the night before. In actuality, you will never know all the specifics of a person's life, or why they behave as they do – the goal for this exercise is to practice curiosity and nonjudgmental reflection. This skill can also become invaluable when communicating with employees themselves (Mortier et al, 2016). For example, if an employee has recently been passed over for a promotion, and is frustrated about it, you can express to them with honesty that you have imagined how that might feel. If an employee's performance is declining, you can discuss with them, in a nonjudgmental fashion, what some of the external causes of that problem might be.

## Boundary Setting

Managers exert a great deal of influence over their employees' actions, but there are limits to the power they can wield. Managerial over-reach and over-involvement can cause discomfort and reduce employee commitment; it can also waste the manager's time. It is therefore important that managers learn how to draw appropriate boundaries between themselves and those they are overseeing. At times, managers may need to help employees to draw emotional boundaries as well.

**Management boundaries.** A clear sense of interpersonal boundaries is essential to success as a manager (Cleary et al, 2015). Take stock of how you discuss concerns with employees. Do you ask employees to change work behaviors that are harmless or irrelevant to their success? Do you find yourself paying a great deal of attention to small minutiae, such as how an employee organizes their desk or how many bathroom breaks a person takes? Do employees appear to feel "on edge" when you are around their workspaces? If so, you may be guilty of drawing inappropriate boundaries between yourself and those you are managing.

**Employee boundaries.** Employees can also have inappropriate boundaries with their managers. As the manager in the relationship, it is your responsibility to monitor this and intervene, if necessary (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). Do employees ask you for excessive help, reassurance, or guidance in completing their job duties? Does an

employee seem to be particularly dependent on your approval or attention? Do you ever feel that it would be easier to do a task yourself, rather than ask a particular person to complete it? These are signs that employees are demanding too much of you, managerially.

You should also examine your employees' emotional boundaries toward you. If your employees share a great deal of information about their personal lives, or are incredibly informal with you, the management relationship may be eroding (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). Similarly, if any employees are relying on you for friendship, emotional support, and sympathy, it may be time for boundaries to be re-asserted. As a general rule, remember that you are not your employees' parent, therapist, or friend; you are a mentor and a source of structure. You always have the ability to tell an employee that they are telling you too much, or asking too much of you. Assertion of such limits is responsible, professional, and beneficial to your organization.

### Key take-aways

- Managers can benefit from continually developing emotional and psychological skills on the job
- De-escalation strategies can be learned and applied to workplace conflicts
- Psychological perspective-taking can be practiced and used to understand employee's struggles and areas of improvement
- It is vital that managers learn how to draw appropriate boundaries between themselves and their employees; this includes prevention of micro-management, as well as avoidance of overly close relationships

### References

Alvesson, M., & Sveningsson, S. (2003). Good visions, bad micro-management and ugly ambiguity: contradictions of (non-) leadership in a knowledge-intensive organization. *Organization studies*, 24(6), 961-988.

Ashkanasy, N. M., & Tse, B. (2000). Transformational leadership as management of emotion: A conceptual review.

Baillien, E., Camps, J., Van den Broeck, A., Stouten, J., Godderis, L., Sercu, M., & De Witte, H. (2016). An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind: Conflict escalation into workplace bullying and the role of distributive conflict behavior. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 137(2), 415-429.

Cleary, M., Hungerford, C., Lopez, V., & Cutcliffe, J. R. (2015). Towards effective management in psychiatric-mental health nursing: The dangers and consequences of micromanagement. *Issues in mental health nursing*, 36(6), 424-429.

Conway, J. R., Lee, D., Ojaghi, M., Catmur, C., & Bird, G. (2017). Submentalizing or mentalizing in a Level 1 perspective-taking task: A cloak and goggles test. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 43(3), 454.

Day, G. E. (2015). Successfully managing conflict. *Leading and Managing Health Services: An Australasian Perspective*, 273.

Gilin Oore, D., Leiter, M. P., & LeBlanc, D. E. (2015). Individual and organizational factors promoting successful responses to workplace conflict. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*, 56(3), 301.

Hattula, J. D., Herzog, W., Dahl, D. W., & Reinecke, S. (2015). Managerial empathy facilitates egocentric predictions of consumer preferences. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 52(2), 235-252.

Martins, N., & Coetzee, M. (2007). Organisational culture, employee satisfaction, perceived leader emotional competency and personality type: An exploratory study in a South African engineering company. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 5(2), 20-32.

Mortier, A. V., Vlerick, P., & Clays, E. (2016). Authentic leadership and thriving among nurses: the mediating role of empathy. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 24(3), 357-365.





CQ Net is the evidence-based  
management team learning platform

From speculation to impact. Learn how  
evidence-based management can make a  
difference for you and your organization.



### Evidence-based

Our learning teams bridge the gap between social sciences and business such that evidence-based knowledge becomes accessible for managers and professionals.



### Agile learning

Our agile team learning approach connects evidence-based knowledge with real life challenges. This increases learning transfer, is a great deal of fun.



### 100% online

We apply secure cutting edge Open Source Technology for time & space independent online collaboration.



### Co-creation

The combination of evidence-based knowledge with the learning team members' individual experiences provides the perfect starting point for knowledge co-creation.

## WHO WE ARE

CQ Net is the evidence-based management (EBM) team learning platform. Learn strategies & interventions that have been supported by scientific research.

Follow us on

[Linkedin](#)/[Twitter](#)/[Facebook](#)

## WHY CHOOSE US

1. Learn what really counts based on cutting edge science.
2. Learn time & space independent in a safe online platform.
3. Learn from & with others in a team setting that motivates.
4. Learn about the most pressing "Human Factor" issues.