

# Do You Let Them Vent?

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2014, published in the *Savannah Business Journal* on Mon., March 20, 2014

What do you do when colleagues or direct reports (or even your boss, a friend, or your spouse) show up and seem overwhelmed by some negative emotion? Do you allow some safe space and let them blow off steam? Or do you quickly direct them to “get on with” some more clearly productive activity?

If you are a leader who leans toward a “command and control” style, this might sound like a setup for some soft, touchy-feely technique. In the interest of building healthy relationships, however, I’m advocating that, as a leader who seeks improved effectiveness, you let folks vent, at least for a while.

You don’t leave them there, of course. Offering a safe place for people to express their emotions--and receive some genuine empathy--is a valuable service you provide for individuals you influence.

Emotions are real and often unpredictable. Feelings can develop when people least expect them. Folks want to express their emotions, seeking compassion before they can even think logically about options they might pursue.

Further, folks want to feel that they matter. By inference, they need to feel that their emotions matter, too, not only to them, but also to someone they respect. That esteemed individual may be you!

When they are upset, discouraged, hopeless, distracted, angry, or confused (obviously, many emotions could be listed here), people want to be able to express themselves. They want to be taken seriously, to be supported, and to be given safe space to become reoriented and productive again. And they don’t want the emotional outburst to be held against them.

Let me give some credit here to my wife. After one of those times when she was struggling with an issue, I behaved poorly. I was unintentionally inconsiderate. However, I recognized the error of my ways and I asked her to spend some time talking together about how we might prevent future such incidents. She had some great ideas, and she has given me permission to include them here.

Though I’m typically not a fan of acrostics, I think that perhaps in this case, the term VENT might be a useful tool. As the leader, your willingness to show the concern evidenced by the behaviors below will pay dividends for your relationships and even for your own peace of mind. These four elements of your response are not intended to be sequential. You can do them simultaneously or in any order.

Validate/Value. You have no right to judge whether the emotions the person is experiencing are appropriate or not. You don’t have enough information to do that. You are in much safer territory if you ignore for a few minutes the content of the concerns and focus instead on your appreciation and respect for the individual. Assure the person of his or her worth in your eyes. (Note: validating the person does not imply you agree with his or her perspective.)

Engage/Empathize. Invite the individual to speak. Listen closely. Seek to understand the person’s emotional response to the situation. Paraphrase back to the person the difficult situations he or she has had to endure. Empathize with the way the person is feeling currently.

Needs/Nurture. Narrow the gap between you and the person. Move closer, at least emotionally and mentally. Allow the person time and space to focus on his or her needs without redirecting focus outward to others (colleagues, friends, customers, direct reports, etc.). There will be opportunity to redirect that focus toward a “serving others” perspective, but for the moment, let the person focus on self and feel your acceptance and nurturing.

Together. A person who needs to vent does not want to feel alone or abandoned. This step is the antithesis of separateness. The person may appear reluctant to talk or may be energetic and effusive. When the tipping point is reached, the expression of emotion will flow. It’s hard to verbalize emotions, yet understanding of his or her feelings is what the person wants. Generate a feeling of togetherness, an affirmation that the two of you will figure out jointly what to do about this situation.

After a while, the focus on emotion will fade, and the person will transition to seeking the appropriate action to take. That will be your cue to shift to collaborative ally and coach, helping the person think about long-term desired outcomes and generating and considering options for achieving them.

God gave us emotions for a reason. They serve as indicators of something being off balance. To move to troubleshooting cause-and-effect too quickly can reduce the effectiveness of this interaction due to an oversight of some very important, relevant information. In general, allow the person to determine the pace of moving emotional venting into the “So what should we do about this?” phase.