

Episode 63 – Managers Feel The Pinch

Phil Willcox: Hello and welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast, where we take a deep dive into the human condition. And it's just me today, flying solo, and the reason for that is because I was down in London recently with my colleagues Ashley Hilton and Liso Philokyprou, sorry, Lizzie Philokyprou, down at the Festival of Work. And we took with us some merch, so we took some t-shirts that were printed up talking about the different research papers that we've published over the last couple of years. And one of those was the Managers Feel The Pinch paper that we published in October 2022. And when I was walking around with my t-shirt on, there was a message on the back saying, scan me to find out more about why one in ten managers don't enjoy or find no pleasure in their work. And so I got talking to somebody about it and they said, "Oh I would love to find out more, have you got something that can help?" And I said, "Yeah, we've got the report." And they were like, "Yeah, that's okay, but I'd really like it if there was something else." So, I said, "Well, how about I do a podcast?" And the answer was, "Oh, yes, please." So that's what this episode is today. So what we're going to be doing is looking at the outcomes of the research, but more importantly, what can you say, fair listener, do about it? So whether you are a manager yourself, whether you are a people professional, so somebody who might be in HR or learning and development or organisational development, and you want to support your managers with their emotional wellbeing, what is it that you can do? How can you help? And that's what this podcast today is all about.

So what we're going to do, well, we're going to share the findings from the research, which explains why managers might be struggling with their emotional wellbeing. Also, during this episode, I'm going to pause a few times. So I'm going to deliberately pause, we're going to leave a few seconds in the audio to ask you to pause the episode as you're listening to it, so you can go do some thinking and then press play when you're ready. So we're going to give you some space and time for you to do your thinking and your explore your feelings or your experiences on this topic and plan for what you can do about it? And then if you want to discuss those thoughts, those feelings, or that plan, then you can make contact with me through my email of phil@emotionatwork.co.uk or you can come and join our community at community.emotion@work.co.uk you can come and share your thoughts, feelings and experiences in there. I'll put links to both of those things in the show notes as well. And then finally, we'll pull it all together and give you some key actions to take away.

So, it wouldn't be me and it wouldn't be a podcast if we didn't start with an innocuous question. So my innocuous question for you today, fair listener, is what has got your mind racing recently? That's, what has got your mind racing recently? So if you want to pause now, have a think about what's got your mind racing recently, when you're ready, press play and I'll share my thoughts.

[Pause]

Okay, so what's got my mind racing recently? It was when I was with the team and we were doing some planning for what's to come with one of the particular projects that we're working on and my mind was just racing with ideas. It was absolutely running at, what felt like 100 miles an hour. My mouth could not keep up with the speed of thoughts in my head, and I was just so excited about the potential and the opportunity for what we could be doing and how we could be going about it, that my mind was absolutely racing. So, that's what got my mind racing recently. I wonder what got your mind racing recently? You can let us know in the comments on the podcast episode if you want or you can tag us on social media, you can tag me @philwilcox on Twitter or you can tag me and/or Emotion at Work on LinkedIn.

So, there were a number of recommendations that came from the research then, so those are, and there's three of them, because if you know me there's always three, the first recommendation is to

take steps to help or enable managers to understand and complete emotion regulation and emotional labour. Now you might think well, what is emotion regulation and what is emotional labour? I'll come back to that in a minute. Recommendation number two is for managers above others, so above directors or colleagues, if the more that you can get stuff out of their way or if you're a manager, the more you can get stuff out of your own way, the better your emotional wellbeing will be. And then thirdly is to help managers help themselves while looking at some of the systemic solutions as well. And if you are a manager, then how can you help yourself? And again, I've got some actions and some recommendations that would come along with it.

So, what were we trying to answer? What was our research question? So our research question was what evidence-based variables can individuals, teams and organisations use or apply that contribute to maintained or enhanced emotional wellbeing for managers in the workplace? Now, I know that was quite an earful, so I'll do it again. What evidence-based variable can individuals teams and organisations use or apply that contribute to maintain or enhance the emotional wellbeing for managers in the workplace?

So let's break it down then, what were these wellbeing outcomes? Well they were the extent to which people or managers, in this example, feel stressed about work in the last four weeks? The extent to which work has kept people, or in this case managers, awake in the last four weeks and the extent to which people, in this case managers, find pleasure in their work? Now, I talked about the evidence-based variables so what we did prior to this research, is we went and looked at, what does the evidence say are some of the variables or aspects that can impact emotional wellbeing? And we found four common areas within the research. So one was about the importance of purpose and meaning, that you're working to something beyond the immediate task that you're doing, that what you're doing is serving a purpose for you, for your organisation, for your team, for society as a whole maybe. Another variable was the extent to which people have freedom to do their best work? Note of to Rob Baker at Tailored Thinking for job crafting on this one. And also, the extent to which people can express, how they feel across a range of emotions in the workplace? And then finally stuff that gets in the way?

So the outcomes we were looking at, stressed about work in the last four weeks, work keeping people awake, and the extent to which people find pleasure in their work? So what are our recommendations? Well, the first one, as I said, is take steps to help or enable managers to understand and complete emotion regulation and emotional labour. Now if you want to know more about emotion regulation, then you need to go back to the episode of the podcast with James Gross, and I'll put a link to that in the show notes, and that will tell you all about emotion regulation. So if you want to know more about what that is, then go there. Emotional labour, great place to go for that one will be either episode two with Sarah-Jane Lenny or the episode with Jo Wainwright, where we talk about emotional exploitation. So managers have to regulate their own and other people's emotions all the time. And also managers have to think carefully about what emotions they can express and how they can express them? And those two things are emotion regulation and emotional labour.

So this is the first opportunity to pause then, well I suppose the second if you include the innocuous question, so what I'd like to know is either for you as a people professional or for you as a manager or as an individual, what happens in your context or your setting for you or your managers around emotion regulation or emotional labour? So what are some of the things that happen in your workplace or in your context, or your setting, to help and support managers with the regulation of their own and other people's emotions and/or the work they need to do with their own and other people's emotions? So I'm going to pause here, you press pause on the episode, do your thinking about that question and then come back when you're ready.

[Pause]

Okay, and welcome back. So why am I asking this question? So I think often managers are, I know it's a classic kind of story I guess, the managers are promoted for being good at their job, you're good at the task and then you get promoted to be the manager of the team that does the task. And while that doesn't necessarily bring with it is the opportunity for that support or development around, so my team members are going to come to me now with emotions in play, how do I deal with that? I've now got these different people that I need to satisfy, not people please like people pleasing, but I've got these different expectations that are going to be put on me. My team will have expectations of me. My manager will have expectations of me. My peers will have expectations of me. I now have to deliver my tasks and deliver my job, as well as support, lead, develop these other people. And so often what's missing from a support to managers point of view, is this emotion regulation or emotional labour. So what can we do about it that then? Well, I thought some practical tips would be good. So there's a wonderful research paper by Christine Porath and Alexandra Gerbasi, I think, Christine's from the School of Business in Georgetown University of Washington and then Alexandra is from the Grenoble University in France, and they have done a wonderful research paper called, Does Civility Pay? And we'll put a link to the research paper in the show notes. And the answer is yes, being civil or civility absolutely pays. And using civility is a wonderful way of doing emotional labour. So, what can we do or what's included within this category of civility? So if I'm being civil, what does that mean I do? So one of those things is we thank people. So we thank people regularly and we thank people in a genuine appreciative way. I'm a massive fan of sharing appreciation. Just recently I shared some appreciation with a client of mine for some work that they're doing and the way that they described recently how work feels really heavy at the moment. And I shared some appreciation with them and thanked them for the fact that they're not passing that heaviness, they're not passing that weight on to other people. They're putting that weight down and leaving it there. They're not holding it on their shoulders and they're not carrying the weight of the world with them and they're not passing that weight onto other people to carry, what they're doing is they're taking that weight off their shoulders and they're putting it down and leaving it there. It doesn't mean that they're not doing anything but that emotional weight that comes with the expectations, that comes with the pressures, that comes with the desire to deliver what they want to deliver and what they want to do, and I guess that weight of expectation can feel heavy. So I really thanked them and appreciated the fact that they're not passing it on to other people, they're holding it and then they're putting it down, and I think that's brilliant from a senior leader within this particular team that I'm working with. So thanking people is one. Listening attentively is another. If there is the one free gift that you can give anybody is give them all of your attention. Don't be tapping away on your keyboard, don't be checking your watch, don't be looking at your phone, don't be looking over their shoulder at what's happening behind them or listening into another conversation that's going on. If there's one thing you can do that will help somebody's emotional wellbeing and their emotional labour it is to listen to them. And I often describe it as a wholehearted listening, right here, right now, I am solely here to listen to you. And that feeling of being heard can make a massive difference to individuals and sometimes I think as managers, I think back to when I was a manager, I used to think, I had to take people's emotions off them or I had to take their problems off them and go away and fix them, and do something about it. And I realised that I don't need to do that actually, when somebody comes to me because they're struggling with something, they're finding something difficult, they're stressed about a particular project or a relationship they might have in the workplace, I don't need to fix it. What I can do as a manager is listen really, really well to what's happening and what's going on? And if I can do that, that on its own is incredibly helpful for people. And you can follow that up with humbly asking questions. Is there something I can do to help you? Wow, that sounds like there's a lot going on there, is there something that you need from me? So that humbly asking questions because you're curious, because you want to find out more can be another great way to practice that civility and to help with your own and other people's emotion regulation and/or emotional labour.

And then the last two are kind of linked, so one is about sharing credit and the other one is acknowledging others. So sharing credit then is about making sure that when somebody has done something, that others know that it was that person that did it, and that, that credit is recognised somewhere. But you might be listening to that and thinking, does that mean I need to stand on a chair in the middle of the office and go, Phil did this, this is something Phil did, just let everybody know Phil did this thing? No, that's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is as a manager, if you want to help and support other people's emotions and/or all their emotional labour, is share the credit where it's due. Don't make shit up because we don't want to do that. Where somebody has put the work in and done the effort, make sure you share that credit. And then similarly it's about acknowledging others, acknowledging their contributions, acknowledging their ideas, acknowledging what they're thinking, acknowledging what they're feeling, acknowledging what they're saying, acknowledging what they're communicating. Because what that does, as well as the listening attentively bit that I talked about earlier on, that acknowledgement says I see you. So the listening bit can do the I hear you bit and the acknowledging bit does, the, yeah, I see you. I can see that you're there, I can see this is important, I can see this matter, I can see this is something you want to solve, I can see this is an area you want to work on, I can see whatever it would be. That acknowledgement is really, really important.

So earlier on, I asked you to think about what's happening in your context or setting to support managers around emotion regulation and emotional labour? I guess my advice or my tip for you now is to say civility pays. And that civility can be displayed through thanking people, listening attentively, humbly asking questions, sharing credit and acknowledging others.

And what I'd like you to do is for you to pause again and think, right, what is something in that, that I can do? So, what can I take from those five different areas to think, well how can I as a manager or how can I help managers do these things? And it might be about role modelling that behaviour which is what I'm doing with the example that I used earlier on, I'm role modelling to the director the importance of thanking people. And I'll talk to them later on about why I'm doing that and at the same time that's one example of how you can use some of these practical tips. So press pause when you're ready come back, press play and we'll move on to our second recommendation.

[Pause]

And welcome back again. So our second recommendation then was for managers above others, so above directors and colleagues, which were the two other groups we had in the research is get stuff out of the way.

So my question for you then if you are a manager or if you're a people professional that works with managers, what most often gets in your way or what most often gets in managers way?

So what most often gets in your or gets in managers way? And what I want you to do here is think about what are those common barriers that you bump up against? What are those common areas of like, oh, arghhh, what's that thing or those things that managers bump into most often? Because by identifying those, if we can get those out of the way, that will help and support the manager's wellbeing, manager's emotional regulation and their emotional labour. So get ready, I want you to pause the episode and think well, what most often gets in your manager's way or gets in your way? When you're ready press play, we'll come back and we'll go with some practical tips of what you can do to get stuff out of the way.

[Pause]

Okay, welcome back. So, when I asked this question to clients that we work with, by far and away the most common answer is meetings. “Oh, Phil, there's so many of them.” “Oh, Phil, they're a waste of time.” “Oh, Phil, my life would be so much better if I didn't have meetings in my diary because then I could get something done.” So with that in mind then I'll share with you something that I use a lot with clients to improve this and to get things out of the way. So what I can't necessarily do is take all the meetings away, but what I can do is to say what is the POST of this meeting? So what do I mean by what is the POST of this meeting? What I mean by that is what's the purpose of this meeting? What are the outcomes from this meeting? What's the structure for this meeting? And then what's the timing for it? So what might that look like in reality?

So here's an example that I put together for a monthly standup or a monthly all hands for a client that I'm working with. Because what was getting in the way here was there were too many meetings trying to cascade key information across the teams or across the projects that we were working on. So what was the purpose, the P? So the purpose was to have a direct communication with all colleagues so that everyone gets one consistent message. It will also provide the opportunity to celebrate successes, share longer term priorities in a visual and engaging way and give positive reinforcement of the behaviours that we want to see. What was the outcome? So by the end of the monthly standup then we will visually outline the priorities for the next three to six months. We will celebrate successes or achievements over the previous month and then we will highlight, reinforce and celebrate examples of the behaviours that we want to see. What's the structure? So, it needs to be relatable so that we can get the messages out clearly. All slides need to be completely free from bullets, images and visuals of the focus, and storytelling is important and needs to be not boring and not read from a script. So what's the structure? We'll have a welcome and an opening. Look at successes and achievements. Next three to six month priorities. An opportunity for a Q&A and then thanks and close. Timing in total should be half an hour long and then we've got different sections of time allocated to the different parts of the meeting. And that's it. Now we took that to the monthly standup, we've then gone on and done that for a number of other key meetings across the project. And then the recommendation we've made to all the managers on the project is to have one of these for each of the meetings they go to. And what that's done, I wouldn't say it's revolutionised the meeting culture, what it's done is it's changed the meeting culture, because what happens now is when we get together we go, why are we here and what are we trying to achieve? Which is the purpose and the outcome. And how do we get there then through the structure and the timing? And it makes those meetings much, much more efficient than they were before and that is helping the emotional regulation and the emotional labour. Why? Because managers were getting incredibly frustrated at the quantity, as in too many, and the quality, they were rubbish, of the meetings that were happening. It was stopping them getting the day job done. So we identified what was getting in the manager's way, meetings and then worked with them closely to put in a practical solution, which is using POST, Purpose, Outcome, Structure, Timings as a way to structure the meetings that they have.

So, I what want you to think about is a meeting. Think about a meeting that you either chair or that you go to, and I'd like you to write a POST for that meeting. What's the purpose? What's the outcome? What's the structure? What's the timing? Then when you've done that, when you're ready, press play and we'll go again.

[Pause]

Okay, so my third and final recommendation then was, how do we help managers help themselves? And that could be potentially looking at some of the systemic stuff. So my question for you to think about then is, how do you think or feel, you, can help yourself if you're a manager? So hearing what you've heard so far? How do you think you can help yourself or if you're a people professional within an organisation, how do you think or feel your managers can help themselves and what could you do?

Now at the risk of sounding, I don't know, trying to make myself sound a little bit clever if you can help managers help themselves, you can do that by implementing recommendations one and two, help managers take steps to understand a complete emotion regulation and emotional labour and get stuff out of your way or get stuff out of managers way. You do that, that will help managers get things out of their way. In addition to that though, what we can also do is to use some very practical phrases, phrases or frames within our communication. Because the expression of emotion is something that we've found within our manager dataset and within the broader dataset that people struggle with, and when people report the ability to share or express their emotions across a range of emotions, that has a huge impact on their emotional wellbeing. So how do we do that? So for me it's about labelling, labelling sensations and actions is one and then giving it some structure. So it might be that you as a manager or you think if you have a conversation with your manager where you say, what are you feeling? What emotions are you experiencing right now? That to give it a label would be really hard or could be potentially tricky or challenging for someone to do, to say, I'm scared or I'm angry or I'm offended or I'm disgusted, could be hard for people to do.

So one of the things I advocate for is then label the physical sensation or label the actions that the emotion is bringing forth in you. So for example I can feel a frown on my face, I can feel butterflies in my stomach, I can feel my mind racing, I can feel my shoulders rising or I can feel my shoulders tensing. I find myself smiling. I find myself balling up my fists. So, they're the sensations that you could go for or you can label the actions. Stop still and think, that got me to stop still or that got me to think. Well, that got me reaching for my pen. That jumped out at me. Or I could feel myself leaning towards that or I could feel myself leaning away from that. I feel like I want us to get moving. I feel like I want us to go somewhere. So, it's about labelling those sensations and actions, and they don't have to be emotion labels, they can be the physical sensations that we're experiencing or the actions that we want to take. And then we can give it some structure. So, some examples that I get that I've given you there, that got me to, oh, that got me to reach for my pen or that got me smiling. Or it could be when you said you disagree with me and you think we should do your option instead of mine, I could feel my shoulders tensing and my shoulders rising when you said it. Or as we discussed the way forward on that particular project, I noticed that it just made me stop still and think really hard about whether this was the right thing to do or I spotted myself smiling during the discussion about how you've developed and how you've grown. Because emotion regulation and emotional labour isn't always about, actually, the worst thing you could do is suppress or repress the emotion, the expression of it is really, really important. And if you as an individual manager or managers in your business would be unsure about or would feel reluctant to say I'm angry, this has made me angry, I'm offended, I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm scared, I'm fearful, whatever that might be, then label the sensation and the action instead.

So how could you put it all together? When you said we need to change the strategy, I felt like something has been put in my way. As we discussed that problem with the process, I noticed the heat rising in me. I spotted that I moved backwards during the discussion about how we're performing and for me that means... So this isn't about creating scripts, there's a risk that this sounds like I'm trying to create a script or scripts for you or for managers within your business and it's not about that. I'm giving you some examples of how for me, we can focus on making it really practical and really grounded by labelling sensations and actions. So if we find it hard to label emotions, brilliant label the sensation, label the action, then put it into a sentence and I've given you some examples of how you could do that.

So, the last thing I'd like you to pause and think about then is what can you do with that, either for you as an individual, as a manager or for people in your business? What could you do with that labelling sensations and actions, and then putting it into a sentence? So press pause, when you're ready, come back and I'll pull us together and close.

[Pause]

And welcome back for the final time. So we said there were three recommendations from our Managers Feel The Pinch research, one, take steps to help or enable managers to understand complete emotion regulation and emotional labour, in particular in this episode of the podcast, we talked about the importance of stability. For managers above others get stuff out of the way. And in this example, we talked about meetings, a perennial problem in organisations, we talked about what you can do with that using POST as a structure. And then how do we help managers help themselves whilst looking at some of the systemic issues as well? So we looked at how managers help themselves by using those steps to understand a complete emotion regulation and emotional labour, get stuff out of people's way and we talked about those systemic issues of, for example, can I credibly talk about an emotion and using emotional label? Maybe not. And if not, okay, let's label the sensation, let's label the action and then put it into a sentence. Why are we trying to do those things? Because managers feel the pinch, there are expectations on them from different sides, from their line managers, from their peers, from their team, and from themselves and often they feel squeezed in that way. And that can show up in managers feeling stressed about work in the last four weeks, it can show up in work keeping them awake and it can show up in the extent to which managers find pleasure in their work, with one in ten of the managers that responded to our survey saying they find no pleasure in their work at all. So, if there's stuff we can do to help then we definitely, definitely want to do that.

So I'll leave you then and say thank you for listening. If you want to find out more about what we as Emotion at Work do then you can come and join the community, community.emotion@work.co.uk and there is a place where you can come and express your thoughts and feelings around emotions in the workplace, that's exactly what it's there for you. For now though, I'll say thank you so much. Thank you for listening. Thank you for taking the time to think and reflect as we've worked our way through this episode and, yeah, I look forward to being in your ears at some point soon. Thanks very much.

You've been listening to the Emotion at Work podcasts and if you've got this far, you must be interested in the role that emotions have in the workplace either within individuals, between people in teams or in organisations as a whole. So head over to the Emotion at Work hub, which you can find at community.emotion@work.co.uk. Thanks for listening.