YOU MAY THINK it’s best to ignore emotions in tough business situations, but there are two big problems with this tactic. First, it’s hard to pull off, as anyone who has had sweaty palms or a pounding heart during a heated conversation can attest. Second, and more important, it’s not in your interest to do so. Emotional investment can improve your relationships, increase trust, and promote satisfying, enduring agreements. And in a difficult economy, when other kinds of rewards are scarce, fostering positive emotions – making people feel upbeat and engaged – can be one of the greatest sources of value for your organization.

Through academic research and consulting work with major companies and government leaders, my colleagues and I have come to understand that emotions do not just “appear.” Many of the ones that arise in your everyday communications and conflicts stem from five predictable core concerns: appreciation (recognition of value), affiliation (emotional connection to others), autonomy (freedom to feel, think, or decide), status (standing compared with others), and role (job label and related activities). By addressing those concerns proactively, you can steer a potentially negative conversation to a positive place and thus extract greater cooperation from your superiors, colleagues, and reports.

To see how this works in practice, consider two employees laid off under different circumstances. I consulted with Sam after she learned out of the blue that her division was being eliminated because of economic constraints. When her boss conveyed the news, he failed to express any appreciation for her many years of loyalty. He took away her autonomy by giving her no advance warning. And she felt both disconnected from and outright abandoned by her superiors, whom she had considered trusted allies and friends. Outraged, she threatened to sue.

Chris, a manager from another company, lost his job for similar economic reasons, but his boss elicited positive emotions by addressing the core concerns. Chris first learned that his company was facing budget problems when his manager shared the previous quarter’s sales figures and asked him for suggestions about how to increase revenue. As the market slide continued, the company decided to eliminate Chris’s job in a broader effort to cut costs. But he got to choose between staying on full-time for a month or part-time for two and was told he’d be rehired once the business turned around. His manager also offered to share networking contacts. Even though Chris lost his job, he still saw the company in a positive light. His boss appreciated him enough to ask for his ideas and respected his autonomy by offering termination options and keeping the door open for rehiring. And Chris continued to feel closely affiliated with his manager, who gave him job leads.

Constructively addressing the five core concerns is a low-cost, high-payoff approach, especially if you do it systematically. As you promote and model emotional well-being in your organization, you will get even more value out of the good times – and do a better job of overcoming the bad.

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Positive emotions are a low-cost, high-payoff source of value.

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