

Should (Female) Leaders Cry at Work?

Many years ago at my first management job, I cried while firing an employee.

It was the first time I had ever fired someone, and this employee was an older woman whose part-time job was being eliminated. She comforted me, patting my arm and offering me a Kleenex.

Although no one else saw me cry, I was extremely embarrassed and vowed then and there that I would never cry at work again. It took a few years, but I learned to control my emotions and was able to stop crying at work. It was a big step forward for me in attaining the professionalism I craved. Or was it?



Are Women Dinged for Crying at Work?

Much has been written about the negative cultural and professional interpretations of women crying at work. Tears may signal the crier is weak, vulnerable, unable to handle stress, or god forbid, hormonal!

Criticism of crying relates more to crying about work issues than crying about personal issues; most people will give a pass for crying about very bad news – an accident, death, or disaster. But crying about lesser-ranked home issues at work is not usually tolerated if it happens on a regular basis.

Leaders are held to a higher standard than other employees. At the time I cried during the firing, I believed that crying at work was not only inappropriate for a leader, but would limit

my ability to succeed in my field – a field full of strong male doctors!

Why is Crying in the Office Seen as a Women's Issue?

Anne Kreamer explains it in her book **It's Always Personal; Emotions in the New Workplace**

- 1. Women cry more than men at work.** Kreamer discovered that women cry nearly four times as often as men.
- 2. Women's tears are much more visible.** "Women have six times the amount of prolactin (the hormone that controls tears) than men do and our tear ducts are significantly larger," she says. "Additionally, women's tear ducts are anatomically different from men's which explain why women – for example – tend to gush tears while men often barely elicit a trickle."
- 3. Women often cry when they are angry or frustrated,** whereas men's tendencies lean toward physical expressions of strong emotion.

In my desire to learn to control my emotions, however, I found myself struggling to transition from my daytime persona as a cool businesswoman to the warm and nurturing mother and wife I wanted to be at home. My husband even came up with a loving way to let me know when I hadn't switched gears from work to home successfully. "Take off your manager's mask," he would say, "You're home now." Eventually I decided that I wanted to be the same person at work as I was at home, and I started the journey of allowing myself to be compassionate and show emotion while being a strong leader.

Only later did I find out that there is a name for this balancing act – it is Emotional Intelligence (EI).

What is Emotional Intelligence?

“When misused, emotions can lead people into catastrophe – yet feelings are also the key to trust, communication, motivation, and optimal decisions. The difference is **emotional intelligence** (EQ), the science of using feelings effectively.”
(www.sixseconds.com)

SixSeconds recently released a landmark analysis called “Women’s Leadership Edge: Global Research on Emotional Intelligence, Gender, and Job Level,” Over the world, 24,000 leaders and workers were surveyed and the findings were that “In key aspects of EQ, women in leadership roles are even further ahead of their male counterparts, suggesting that these differentiators may be essential for females to advance their careers. For both females and males, the new data suggests important opportunities for leveraging strengths to become more effective at people leadership.”

The answer then, is to understand your own emotions, and leverage that understanding to your advantage in the workplace.

Here are a few of my own rules:

1. Try not to cry at work because you’ll have all kinds of explaining to do. It can and will happen to almost all women, so get past it and go on. Unless you cry at work regularly, life and your career will go on.
2. If you find that your emotions are close to the surface and you think you might lose emotional control at an inopportune moment, back off and either take a few hours or a day off, get some extra sleep or if you can, work at home for the day instead of going in to the office. Just a little distance can do wonders.
3. If there is someone who seems to challenge, frustrate or anger you, always sit beside that person in a meeting. Never sit beside your supporters, no matter what.

4. Do not be afraid to share things with staff about your experiences (especially bad decisions and embarrassments) when it helps them to put things in perspective. Telling your story makes you a real person, which of course, you are.