

### REDUCING WORKPLACE ANXIETY - PART 4 - SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

When I hired her, I was genuinely excited. We shared a vision for success, and I believed she would be the key to elevating the team. Initially, everything seemed to click. We aligned on high-level goals, and I thought I had found a partner to help push the team forward.

But over time, cracks began to form. It wasn't a single, dramatic incident; it was a series of small moments. I started questioning her ideas more frequently. What began as constructive feedback morphed into a habit of challenging nearly everything she proposed. At one point, even her casual statement, "The sky is blue," would prompt me to counter, "Actually, it's often black or orange."

A pivotal moment came during a presentation she gave to our colleagues. While I appreciated the idea, I didn't agree with her approach to explaining it. Sitting at the back of the room, I failed to mask my disapproval. Afterward, she confronted me, sharing how deeply it hurt to feel undermined by her own boss in front of the team. That conversation forced me to pause and reflect on my behavior.

At the time, I rationalized my actions by believing I was pushing for better outcomes. I thought I was "challenging" her to greatness. But in reality, my behavior created an environment of anxiety and distrust. Instead of fostering her growth, I stifled it.

The turning point came when a coach helped me see my role in the dysfunction. I had been so focused on control—on ensuring everything was done "my way"—that I failed to provide the support she needed to succeed. My lack of empowerment and understanding didn't just affect her; it rippled through the entire team, eroding morale and trust.

Though we never fully repaired our relationship, the experience left me with a lasting lesson: as leaders, our responsibility is to create supportive environments where people can thrive. Without that foundation, anxiety and stress takes root, impacting not just individuals but the entire organization.

#### Why We Need to Talk About Workplace Anxiety

When we talk about anxiety at work, we're not talking about clinical diagnoses or panic attacks. We're talking about the everyday stress, worry, and pressure that so many people carry with them — especially right now. It's the creeping tension that builds up over time. It chips away at focus, connection, and energy. And left unaddressed, it can quietly erode performance, well-being, and team culture.

Workplace anxiety doesn't come from nowhere. It's not just about having a bad boss or a tough deadline. Most often, it's the result of deeper, systemic issues—things that exist across teams and organizations, baked into the culture, communication, and leadership norms.

In this series, we're exploring **seven of the biggest drivers of workplace anxiety** — themes that come up again and again in the organizations I work with and the leaders I coach. These aren't just theoretical problems. They're patterns I've seen in action, and, in many cases, lived through myself.

#### Here's what we'll be digging into over the coming months:

1. **Toxic Work Environments** - when fear replaces trust, and people feel unsafe to speak up or take risks.
2. **Imposter Syndrome** - when talented people feel like frauds, and anxiety drives perfectionism or paralysis.
3. **Lack of Supportive Relationships** - when workplace connections are strained, shallow, or absent altogether.
4. **Overwhelming Workloads & Unclear Priorities** - when everything feels urgent and nothing feels achievable.



## *PROFESSIONAL CORNER*

- 5. **Neglected Well-Being** - when people are burning out, and no one's paying attention to the toll.
- 6. **Resistance to Change** - when uncertainty isn't addressed, and the unknown becomes a threat.
- 7. **Personal and Global Stressors** - when employees bring real-life challenges into a workplace that isn't ready to support them.

Each article in this series will explore one of these drivers in depth, offering real stories, research-backed insight, and practical tools to help reduce anxiety—whether you're leading a team or just trying to get through the week with your sanity intact.

As you read in the intro, this month's article focuses on the importance of supportive relationships at work, and how without them people can really struggle. Let's dive in.

### **Research on Supportive Environments and Anxiety**

Supportive relationships in the workplace are vital for reducing anxiety and enabling high performance. When employees feel valued and understood, they're more engaged, resilient, and collaborative. Research confirms that supportive environments foster trust, commitment, and innovation while significantly lowering stress (Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Clifton & Harter, 2003).

One essential element of support is tailoring leadership approaches to individual strengths and personalities. Leaders who recognize and adapt to these differences build confidence and reduce tension. I failed to do this with my direct report—I expected her to think and work like me rather than leveraging her unique strengths. This rigid approach created unnecessary friction and anxiety. When leaders genuinely understand and value their employees, they foster environments where individuals feel secure to perform at their best.

Empathy and emotional intelligence (EI) are critical components of supportive leadership. Empathy helps leaders acknowledge both professional and personal challenges, building trust and reducing fear (Goleman, 1998). For example, when employees feel their struggles are understood rather than judged, they're more likely to contribute openly and without fear. Empathy also prevents leaders from unintentionally fostering the type of anxiety I created by consistently challenging my report's ideas instead of seeking to understand her perspective.

Clear communication further strengthens supportive relationships. Ambiguity around roles, goals, or expectations breeds uncertainty—a significant driver of workplace anxiety. Leaders who collaborate with their teams to establish clarity and mutual understanding reduce this stress and create stability (Locke & Latham, 2002). When employees understand what's expected of them, they can focus on achieving goals rather than secondguessing themselves.

Finally, honest communication ties these elements together. Leaders who encourage open dialogue build transparency and trust, reducing the anxiety that unresolved concerns or hidden expectations often create (Detert & Burris, 2007). My failure to engage in candid conversations with my direct report deepened our disconnect. Honest communication could have addressed misunderstandings early, preventing the escalation of stress and mistrust.

Supportive relationships are not optional, they're foundational for reducing anxiety and driving success. Leaders who tailor their approaches, demonstrate empathy, communicate clearly, and foster open dialogue create environments where employees feel valued, secure, and empowered.

### **Trust, Empathy, and Active Understanding**

The research is clear. Trust and empathy are the foundation of supportive relationships. Trust encourages openness, while empathy demonstrates genuine care for others' perspectives. Together, they create a safe space for collaboration and reduce anxiety.



## *PROFESSIONAL CORNER*

Beyond trust and empathy, **active understanding** is key. It's not just about hearing words but fully grasping their meaning. This involves asking three types of questions:

1. **Engaging Questions:** "What inspired this approach?" These show genuine curiosity.
2. **Clarifying Questions:** "Can you provide an example?" These prevent misinterpretations.
3. **Confirming Questions:** "So, you're proposing X over Y, correct?" These ensure alignment.

I learned the value of active understanding the hard way. Instead of listening to understand, I focused on countering my report's ideas. This created frustration and anxiety, eroding trust. If I had taken the time to understand her perspective, it could have strengthened our relationship.

Active understanding reduces anxiety by fostering clarity and trust. Even in disagreement, it shows people their input is valued, creating a supportive, collaborative environment.

### **Honest Two-Way Communication**

Once you are able to understand each other, then you can focus on improving your communication. Honest, two-way communication is essential for building supportive relationships. Without it, misunderstandings grow, trust erodes, and anxiety thrives. Effective communication requires aligning styles and ensuring clarity, especially when individuals have differing approaches—some preferring direct, black-and-white conversations, while others rely on subtler, contextual cues.

Successful communication isn't just about what's said but what's understood. Leaders can bridge gaps by asking, "Does this make sense?" or "Can I clarify anything?" These simple habits encourage engagement, reduce ambiguity, and foster alignment.

Reflecting on my experience, I avoided difficult conversations when my relationship with a direct report began to break down. By the time we addressed the issues, the damage was done, and trust was hard to rebuild. Open dialogue earlier could have prevented much of the anxiety and dysfunction.

Honest communication requires consistency, effort, and a willingness to address issues early. By fostering clarity, alignment, and open dialogue, leaders create environments where trust and collaboration thrive, reducing the anxiety that stems from miscommunication.

### **Balancing Personal and Professional Support**

In any workplace, it's unrealistic to separate personal and professional lives completely. Challenges outside of work often spill into the office, and vice versa. Supportive leaders recognize this and strive to see employees as whole individuals, balancing professional expectations with personal understanding.

Research shows that empathetic leadership and work-life balance policies significantly reduce stress and improve well-being (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Leaders who acknowledge personal challenges foster loyalty and reduce the anxiety that comes from compartmentalizing life.

Early in my career, I drew a hard line between "work me" and "personal me," expecting the same from my team. This approach created distance and hindered authentic relationships. Over time, I realized that relationships improved when I showed authenticity and recognized my team's humanity.

Support doesn't mean prying into personal lives, it means creating a culture where employees feel safe sharing when personal struggles affect their work. Simple gestures, like asking, "Is there anything I can do to help?" show care without crossing boundaries.

Balancing personal and professional support strengthens teams by reducing anxiety, building trust, and fostering loyalty. When employees feel valued as whole individuals, they bring their best selves to work, benefiting both the team and the organization.



## *PROFESSIONAL CORNER*

### **Building Supportive Relationships That Reduce Anxiety**

No matter how you look at it, supportive relationships are the backbone of thriving teams and organizations. Leaders play a pivotal role in fostering these environments by building trust, demonstrating empathy, and engaging in honest communication. When employees feel valued, understood, and supported, they experience less anxiety and are better equipped to perform at their best.

The lessons I learned from my leadership missteps have stayed with me. Support isn't about control or perfection. It's about creating a culture where people feel safe to contribute, share, and grow. It's about listening with the intent to understand, communicating clearly, and balancing professional expectations with personal care.

As leaders, we have the power to shape environments that either amplify anxiety or alleviate it. By prioritizing supportive relationships, we create workplaces where individuals and teams can truly thrive. The choice is ours. Let's choose support, empathy, and understanding.

*Cary Bailey-Findley has spent the past decade building the Human Capital within three Fortune 500 companies and was awarded the ranking of #1 development organization in the world by the Association of Talent Development. He is currently the Talent Manager for SimCorp the world's leading provider of integrated investment management solutions for investment and asset managers. He holds a Master's degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology and a Master's degree in Business Administration.*

*You can follow his blog at [www.cavemaninasuit.com](http://www.cavemaninasuit.com) or download leadership and team development tools at <https://healthyperformanceculture.com/>.*