

Driving metaphors help employees with emotional 'navigation'

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The use of driving metaphors in the workplace can help employees to take control of their "wheel" and become more emotionally resilient, an expert says.

"At the moment, people are blaming everyone for everything," says doctor, author and educator **Jane Foster**. "It's your fault, it's the government's fault, it's my organisation's fault, it's management's fault, it's HR's fault."

But it's not HR's job to try and solve everyone's problems, nor to keep everyone happy, Foster tells HR Daily.

As she says in her book, [It's in Your Hands](#), the notion that people should always be happy is a "significant misconception". It leads them to think that if they're not happy, something is wrong, which can make them feel they're failing, or look for somebody to blame.

"At present, we continually pick people up off the rough roads and place them on the smooth ones, thinking that it will make their lives better," Foster writes.

"[But by] not allowing ourselves and others to experience the rough roads, we have created a culture where many of us don't know how to drive on challenging roads, and when left alone, we often crash. Then we blame everyone and everything around us for our loss of control."

Pursuit of the "smooth road" has led some organisations to stop offering awards, or to give awards to everyone so no one feels left out, but "that's not life", Foster says.

"Life is: you have your strengths and you celebrate other people's strengths, and I think that is really important." Missing out might not feel good, but "no one feels good all the time", and acting as if they should only sets people up to feel as if they're failing.

A key question

"Who is in charge of your emotions?" Foster asks in her book. She notes that people often blame others for making them angry, but rarely for "making us love them".

In fact, just as a driver can use the steering wheel to control their car, an employee can learn to control everyday thoughts and emotions.

"You get many people saying, 'what do you mean, you can control emotions?!... [But] emotions just don't come out of nowhere; there's a thought behind an emotion," Foster says.

While it's up to individuals to take responsibility for their "everyday thoughts and emotional choices", HR can help by giving them "strategies to cope with whatever the road is, whether it's rough or smooth [and] teach them how to regain and maintain control".

Metaphors are "incredibly helpful", especially for understanding complex emotions, she adds. They can *sound* simple, but aid deep insight and have profound ramifications.

A starting point for HR is to start utilising specific metaphors to understand and explain their own emotions, thereby building their own emotional resilience and modelling a common language to talk about it.

If they don't take steps to build resilience, there's a risk that daily stressors will overwhelm them, Foster says. Or, to use another metaphor, their "glass" will fill.

"This is what worries me, actually, with HR people, because their glass fills every day. And if they don't know how to empty that glass, then it just gets fuller and fuller and then it tips over, and they lose it and they need time off or they actually have a breakdown."



Dr Jane Foster

Losing control

Just as metaphors – "my glass is full", "I'm on a rough road today" – can be easier to use than more literal explanations, gestures can be easier to use than words, Foster says.

This is because when a person starts feeling like they're losing or have lost control, words might fail them.

In these cases, a symbolic gesture can be used instead. Foster recommends using a raised hand and a bent thumb. The hand represents the prefrontal cortex, while the exposed thumb represents the amygdala, which produces fight, flight and freeze reactions, and makes accessing the creative and thinking parts of the brain more difficult.

Foster knows leaders who raise their hand with their thumb bent against their palm, in the middle of a meeting, to say, "I'm out of control", because it's become a shared language in the workplace and there's no judgement.

"Are you allowed to be out of control? Absolutely. Because if you never lose control, how do you regain it?" Foster says, noting that "the person who sits at their desk and says nothing" might be more out of control than the person raising their voice.

What matters is "the amount of time you're out of control, and how you deal with that", she adds.

"I've got one secretary to a high-flying director, and people will come and want interviews, [saying], 'I need to see him now', and she'll just say, 'he's like this' [holding up a palm with a bent thumb] and they'll say, 'I'll come back in five minutes'."

It's important for people to recognise that, "of course there are moments like that, and you're not failing if you are in that sort of moment".

If managers force themselves, or employees, to keep talking when they know they are losing control of their steering wheel, they will only make matters worse, Foster warns. It might be a hassle in the short-term to delay or reschedule a disciplinary meeting or performance conversation, for example, but it can prevent far greater problems in the long run.

An outburst can impact bystanders as well as those directly involved, she notes.

"We have mirror neurons, and those mirror neurons reflect what's happening around us. Unless we're in control and think, 'well, hang on, they're on a rough road, I actually don't have to join them', [there can be] emotional contagion."

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