Is Blubbering in Business Ever OK?

By MICHELLE GOODMAN

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Thanks to Dick Cheney's new memoir, crying in the workplace is back in the news. In it, Cheney snidely describes former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as "tearfully" conceding he'd been right about not needing to apologize for the now-infamous line in Bush's 2003 State of the Union about Iraq's alleged quest for uranium in Niger.

But you don't have to be a high-ranking official for on-the-job tears to tarnish your reputation. Among rank-and-file workers, crying at work is often met with the same negative reaction.

Sure, most people understand if you let the waterworks flow after getting a call that a relative is in the hospital. But openly sob mid-meeting over some unfavorable feedback and you're likely to get labeled a mewling milksop.

Just ask Kimberly Eberl, owner of public relations firm Motion PR in Chicago. Unaccustomed to the constructive criticism that sometimes comes with being the low worker on the totem pole, one of Eberl's summer interns burst into tears three times during her first two weeks on the job.

"I let the first time be a pass," Eberl said in an e-mail interview. But after the young hire's third sobbing session, Eberl continued, "I told her to suck it up and get a thicker skin."

How Others Perceive Your Tears

"If the crying is about something at work, it will almost always be seen as a weakness," said Ruth Mott, an executive coach based in Portsmouth, N.H., who works with both Fortune 500 and startup companies. "For the most part, people want to be supportive. But the little demon of doubt will prevail and you will be remembered for crying and not so much for your contribution."

Being labeled a weepy wimp isn't the only way that office sobbers might be perceived. Right or wrong, some colleagues might peg you as melodramatic, or worse, manipulative.

Attempting to use tears to get your way on the job doesn't work, said Michael Crom, executive vice president of Dale Carnegie Training, which helps companies improve employee performance. Not only will no one buy it, he said, you'll still get branded a weper.

The Female Factor

When it comes to blubbering on the job, the stakes are higher for women, who still face double-standards in the workplace and remain outnumbered by men in board rooms and executive suites.

"I don't think that having emotional breakdowns does anything to earn the respect of our fellow businessmen, who very well may be the ones with the potential to promote us," said Sara Schoonover, vice president of TicketKick, a website that helps motorists contest their traffic tickets.

"They want to know that they can trust us to deal with whatever situation may come up in the office, with clients or with other businesses," Schoonover said. "If you lose it even for a second, they attribute it to 'Oh, she's just another emotional woman.'"

How to Recover If You Do Cry

Male or female, some of us are more emotional than others. Some of us cry when we're frustrated or enraged or insulted. Add to the mix an excess of stress or lack of sleep, and we could easily find ourselves crying in front of the boss or colleagues.

We've all heard the advice for fighting back unwanted tears: Dig your fingernails into your palms. Bite the inside of
your lip. Take deep breaths. Speak slowly. Deepen your voice. And so on.

But what if, despite your best efforts to damn the well, the salt water starts to pour forth?

Workplace experts advise faking a coughing fit or contact lens malfunction and promptly excusing yourself from the room to cry elsewhere. That's what Desiree Bennett Forsyth, a self-professed "crier," does.

"In confrontational situations and meetings, when I hear my voice start to waiver I simply excuse myself, calmly saying I have something else to attend to but that we can continue this later in the day," explained the Los Angeles area marketing professional. "I don't care if people believe me, as long as they don't see tears of frustration streaming down my face."

If you don't make it out of the room before a colleague sees your tears of frustration, some damage control might be in order. Amy Zhang, managing member of Affinity Fund Services LLC, a hedge fund administration firm in San Francisco, suggests saying something like, "Obviously I have strong feelings about this matter," and then quickly getting back to business.

"Do not fall into the 'I feel this and that' trap and get personal, which can lead to more emotional build-up," Zhang said. Instead, she advised, say something like, "We need to resolve this problem." Then propose your solution and, if you can, suggest some action items your colleagues can begin to take.

Exceptions to No-Tears Rule

There are of course some professional scenarios where most people wouldn't fault you for getting a little misty-eyed.

"If you're a nonprofit and you've just made a major impact that involves saving people's lives, or if you're a firefighter and you've just saved a child, it's perfectly OK for your eyes to get watery," said Manhattan-based workplace coach Julie Melillo.

After many years of checking her emotions at the door, long-time neonatal nurse Theresa Kledzik now permits herself to shed a few tears during "sad and tragic moments" at work.

"A subtle reveal of emotion is more appropriate than a stoic stance for the family and for me," Kledzik said in an e-mail.

Even so, she added, there are certain lines she refuses to cross.

"Even as I am emotional, I must remain the caregiver and attend to whatever needs to be done," Kledzik explained. "I don't feel it would be appropriate for my display of emotion to draw any attention, overwhelm the patient or family or to elicit their sympathy or comforting."

Melillo agrees.

"If you must cry," she said, "let the eyes water, not pour."

This work is the opinion of the columnist, and in no way reflects the opinion of ABC News.

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