MODULE 5
Managing Conflicts & Emotional Terrain

Though we all hope you have a seamless return to work experience, there are bound to be some hiccups along the way. Try to keep in mind that change is hard for everyone — there is an adjustment period for anybody starting a new role. In this module we'll discuss tips to overcome these natural challenges: by keeping a growth mindset, demonstrating leadership, and facing obstacles head on.

Emotional Intelligence

The first step to navigating any emotional terrain and/or course correction is to practice emotional intelligence, i.e., be aware of, control, and express one's emotions, and handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically.

Every caregiver has had to develop this skill set in some capacity. In fact, emotional intelligence is one of the sought after soft skills that makes returners so valuable.

"Feelings are something you have; not something you are."

– Shannon L. Alder

And if you think you are lacking — fear not! It's never too late to develop and practice your emotional intelligence. After all, no one is simply born with these skills. When challenges arise, we each have to make the choice to practice using our emotional intelligence and in turn, fully embrace the growth mindset.

In doing so, we continuously improve our abilities to communicate effectively, empathize with others, conquer challenges, and reduce conflict; this is what makes a strong teammate and leader. Here are the four main components of emotional intelligence and how to develop them (adapted from the framework by Daniel Goldman).

Self-Awareness	
What it is:	Your ability to accurately identify your tendencies or habits, as well as identify your emotions in the moment
How to develop:	• Dedicate time to thinking about where your emotions come from and why you feel them — even when it is uncomfortable • Reflect on how your negative emotions impact others and consider changes to your behavior to create the impact you want • Don't classify feelings as good or bad; feel them and then consider solutions

Self-Management	
What it is:	Your ability to manage your emotional responses and act in a positive way that promotes a resolution rather than furthering a conflict
How to develop:	• Breathe and take a beat when things get overwhelming • Share your goals with others to keep you motivated and open the door to vital feedback • Control self-talk — try to be your own best cheerleader rather than put yourself down

Social Awareness	
What it is:	Your ability to pick up on the emotions of others and understand what's really going on with them — even if you don't have the same feelings
How to develop:	• Watch body language • Practice listening, including words, tone, speed, and volume • Use empathy — try to understand others' motivations

Relationship Management	
What it is:	Your ability to manage interactions with others in a collaborative way that promotes relationship building
How to develop:	• Be open and curious, ask questions for clarification • Take feedback well and give constructive feedback • Acknowledge and validate others' feelings

Growth Mindset and Everyday Leadership

Just as emotional intelligence isn't something one simply has or does not have, leadership is developed through mindful choices. Think about the best leaders you've met. What qualities did they have? Perhaps they were adaptable, confident, positive, focused, driven, and more. When you stop and reflect on these attributes, think about why you believe they possessed these qualities. The memories that come to mind are likely specific actions, such as a leader extending kind words during a time of hardship to demonstrate empathy.

If we frame proof of a quality as the sum of actions, we can see that anyone can become a leader through practice. In this way, challenges become opportunities to demonstrate a quality of character. Here are some examples.

Situation	Reframe it as an opportunity to...
You feel you don't fully understand the scope of your role and/or how your work plugs into the larger organization.	**Master your job.** Set regular meetings with your manager and teammates to understand expectations, as well as adjacent department members to ask how your work informs theirs and vice versa.
Your colleague gives you their procedure document to help you out, but you notice it's unclear and needs some updating.	**Be positive and proactive.** Thank your colleague for their work and suggest some edits.
Someone catches a mistake you made in your latest report. You feel mortified.	**Listen and learn.** No one expects you to know everything immediately and mistakes happen to everyone. Take the time to reflect on how the mistake happened and take proactive steps to avoid it next time, but don't dwell on the error.
You've just completed a project. You feel some things went smoothly but there were some obstacles to making it ideal.	**Understand your strengths (and weaknesses).** Take some time to seriously reflect on how you could have improved the outcome. Ask your manager or mentor for a debrief session and ask for feedback, too!
The project you're working on needs more time than you have left in your returnship. You feel pressured to deliver results, but know it's not enough time.	**Think big picture.** Create a 30/60/90 day plan to denote markers of achievable results within the time you do have. Then, add to the plan with a longer timeframe — this may help to make the case for your conversion to full-time!

Once you apply the growth mindset and see challenges as learning opportunities rather than obstacles, the workplace will likely feel kinder and more forgiving. Next time you feel overwhelmed or out of your element, try to think to yourself, "How would a great leader handle this?" You were selected for this program because of your unique perspective — trust us when we say that you know more than you think you do. And if you're really at a loss for how to proceed, then it's time to reach out for assistance.

Conflict Resolution

Now that we've framed emotional intelligence and leadership as skills to practice when hardships arise, we can apply them to resolving conflict. The bottom line here is this: if something is not right, speak up. As the old saying goes: the squeaky wheel gets the grease! Set some time with your manager, mentor, or Path Forward to go over what your challenge is and try to find a solution.

Remember to keep the collaborative approach in mind and avoid framing any issue as you vs them; rather, think of it as you and them vs the problem. Here are some common conflicts and how to use emotional intelligence to tee up those tricky discussions:

- **You have two managers that provide you with competing priorities.**
  Before the conversation: Take time to seriously consider the time allotted and the time needed for each task and identify what are the topmost priorities. Look at their calendars and propose a time to meet.
  > "Hi x and y, could we set up 30 min soon to chat about my responsibilities? I could use some guidance regarding prioritization of my current assigned tasks. I'd like to clarify expectations with the three of us together to avoid any misunderstandings or conflicts."

- **Your plate is so full, you're working far after hours just to get by.**
  Before the conversation: Reflect on what items feel like the highest priorities and which can be delegated elsewhere. Are you working on anything out of your originally specified scope? Are there any items that aren't serving you or the team? Where do you feel is the most valuable use of your time?
  > "Hi X, My workload is getting to be a bit unmanageable and I'd like to discuss solutions with you. I know the work we do is incredibly important and I take this opportunity very seriously, but the rate that I am working is simply unsustainable. Can we meet soon to run through my tasks in what I think is priority order and make sure we're aligned?"

- **You are questioning if this role (or company) is the right fit.**
  Before the conversation: Reflect on what it is you really want out of this opportunity and your next role. Consider how long you've been with the company; if you are within the first couple weeks of your program, you may want to see how things develop. It's not uncommon for us to

hear from returners that they were initially uncertain about their returnship role, but grew to enjoy it. Look into learning and development and see if there are resources for you to acquire or refresh a skill. Network with colleagues to learn more about the business and other departments; perhaps there is a better fit elsewhere and/or room for you to collaborate on a project that is better suited for you (more info on exploring opportunities is in Module 7).

If you're still feeling this way midway or towards the end of the returnship, try to focus on doing the best job that you can anyway. Whatever the circumstances, check in with yourself to make sure you're not avoiding new challenges out of fear of failure.

> "Hi X, I'm so excited about this program and this opportunity, but I feel a bit out of my element with the responsibilities I've been given. Can we meet and discuss how we can best align my workload and my personal goals?"

- **You find yourself in a disagreement with a colleague.**
  Before the conversation: Try to empathize and see their perspective, as well as clarify your stance — Why do they disagree with you? Is there a healthy middle ground? What can you offer to help them out if they take your side? What is your non-negotiable?

  > "Hi X, Could we please meet soon to discuss xyz? I can see this is important to both of us, even if we have differing opinions on execution. I'd like to find a solution where we can both move forward feeling good about the outcome."

For the resolution conversation, here are some steps you can take to find a solution that will hopefully avoid any miscommunication, assumptions or additional stress.

1. Set the stage — provide context for the situation

2. Describe the conflict — detail your challenge

3. Gain perspective — ask for your counterpart's point of view

4. Seek agreement — find the similarities in what you both hope to achieve or a compromise

5. Identify solutions — share your ideas on how to move forward

6. Develop an action plan — identify and assign next steps with deadlines if applicable

Keep in mind that these steps do not have to happen all at once, or even in this order. And in every case, coming to the conversation with suggested solutions will always be of benefit to you. If you feel the conversation is going nowhere and/or you simply need time to prepare for the next step, you can always ask for time to reset. Lastly, always remember to follow up with a thank you.

Your Inner Cheerleader

Sometimes the little voice in our head is unkind. Next time you are feeling particularly down on yourself, try to think, "If a friend were to come to me with this issue, would I speak to them the way I'm speaking to myself? How would I advise them?" Chances are, you're harder on yourself than you are on others. To aid you in reframing these negative thoughts, here are some affirmations that are closer to the truth than any negative thing you say to yourself:

- "I have the length of the program to ramp up."

- "My boss selected me for this competitive program."

- "I get to learn from some really smart people. I think they can learn from me too."

- "I'm ramping up at my own pace. It's not a race."

- "I'll learn from that mistake."

- "My project is challenging and I am going to take it one step at a time."

- "I earned my spot in this program and I add value to the team."

And after a project or even at the end of this program, it's vital to focus on the positive. Here are more truthful affirmations you can use when things are concluding:

- "I deepened my relationship with people who are helpful."

- "I gained new knowledge about the world."

- "I learned that I was stronger than I thought I was."

- "I became more accepting of others."

- "I realized I have a lot to offer other people."

- "I learned to respect others' feelings and beliefs."

- "I learned to be nicer to others."

- "I rethought how I want to live my life."

- "I was able to find more meaning and satisfaction."

- "I learned to look at things in a more positive way."

- "I learned better ways to express my feelings."

Everyone is Rooting for You!

At the end of the day, your company did not start a returnship program out of the kindness of their hearts. They put time, effort, and energy to onboard untapped, experienced, wholly qualified talent (that's you!). Your manager wants you to succeed just as much as you do; they have a vested interest in making this relationship work.

We've mentioned a few times that you add value to your team, but don't take our word for it. Listen to these voices from executives and hiring managers who have welcomed and worked with returners like you.

> "What's truly unique about returners is their life experience. For those who were out of the workforce raising a family, and when you think about what all that entails, it includes multitasking, juggling everything, getting way more done than they have time to do. They've been scheduling, managing calendars, and trying to fit together different needs and priorities, and basically acting as the CEOs of the family. For returners who took time out to care give, such as for an ill family member, they've faced a lot of different adversities and challenges, for which they've had to make tough decisions, perhaps without 100% of the information. In all of these scenarios I'm painting, all of these experiences are applicable to any career."
>
> — Patricia Boothe, Manager at Trimble

> "Oftentimes, people who come from nontraditional backgrounds had to work harder to get to where they are, and because of that are more appreciative of the role, are hungry to learn, show a lot of potential, and bring different perspectives to the team."
>
> — Lilit Div, Manager at VMware

> "The real value for a hiring manager is the quality of candidates... My returnee exceeded my expectations. She was excited about the opportunity to work for Dell and went above and beyond to make this a success. My team is stronger as a result."
>
> — Jason Hargrove, Manager at Dell Technologies

> "These returnees are fungible. They are super adaptable, they are trainable, they are easy to coach, and they are very flexible. They can learn anything and everything. They have so much grit and determination, and they push through. I've spoken to at least 150 individuals and every single candidate surprised me."
>
> — Padmaja Ayyagari, DEI Team Lead at Grubhub

Path Forward

Join Path Forward volunteers, alumni, and your fellow returners in our online community to find helpful advice, resources, networking, and more.