

Not Another Shocker! 10 tips on what to do when you are trusted with something shocking.



One of the hardest things is finding out that things under your watch, in your department, or on your team are not alright. It is even worse when the problem catches you by surprise because an employee, colleague, or team member has come to YOU with their problem.

No one prepared you for this and it feels way beyond your paygrade. In the moment, you are just worried about not making things worse. You never asked for this, but now that you are here and they, (whoever they are), are there, what are you going to do?

Stay calm and absorb these 10 tips:

Remember	The Situation	What you can say
This is a moment of trust	Even if the person who has come to you upset or angry, and even if it is you they are upset or angry with, they have made a choice to trust you with that emotion, that problem. They could have gone for a run, reached for a bottle, shouted needlessly at some hapless grocery clerk on their way home, sat in their car and cried it out, but instead they came to you. Treat that vulnerability as a gift	“Thank you for trusting me with this,”
Turn off the panic, turn on the empathy	Remember that if you freak out and lose your calm demeanor, so likely will your employee or colleague. DON’T ask them to “Calm down.” Seriously, when has being told to calm down ever made you calmer. Instead acknowledge the pain, the anxiety, the upset without adding to it. Try modeling that calm presence you want to cultivate by taking a deep breath yourself and offering something reassuring	“Wow, that’s a lot to be dealing with,” or “I can see you are really upset.”
Listen before “fixing”	You do not need to have all the answers or solutions on hand. You do not need to make the problem go away in this moment. So, LISTEN deeply not only to the concern itself but to whatever lies underneath the concern. They may be “upset” on the surface, but under that there is likely something more – maybe feeling unsafe, insecure, undervalued or unwelcome – and finding that deeper concern will help you address whatever is on the surface.	NO, SERIOUSLY, JUST LISTEN
Be curious, not “questioning”	You want to know what they have experienced, who else is affected or involved. You DO NOT want to question their authenticity, their reality, their experience. Try rephrasing the concern to make sure you have the details correct so you don’t have to ask them to repeat themselves later, but don’t suggest that they have it “wrong.” Questions like, “Are you sure they really said that?” or “Are you sure it wasn’t an accident?” “Aren’t you getting a little carried away?” can feel like gaslighting to whoever has bestowed their trust in you.	“Let me make sure I understand this correctly ...” AND “Did I miss anything?” “Is there anything more?”
Don’t make it about you	It is tempting to express empathy by relating a story of your own. Resist that urge, even if you think it is super-relevant. When we go to any expert for help, we aren’t looking for their personal story. I don’t want to know how sick my doctor was last week, or what terrible sins my minister once committed. Similarly, I don’t want to know how much worse things were when you were my age, how tiny my concern is compared to the ones you carry, or how much more hurt, damaged, insecure someone else you know felt at some time. Try using empathy to fuel your curiosity and kindness and save the stories for another day.	“I can only imagine how this feels.” AND/OR “Is there anything you need right now?”
Don’t overpromise and don’t minimize	Unless it is a truly small matter, do not promise to make the problem go away and do not dismiss it as inconsequential. Instead, try committing to finding the best possible resolution, creating a solution if needed. This might start with asking the person who came to you what they think a good resolution might look like. Just be aware of the fine line between the supportive, “What would make this better for you?” and the accusatory, “What do you expect me to do about it?”	“What would make this better (right) for you?” OR “I’m not sure what I can do, but what do you need right now?”

Be clear about what you DON'T know	The world is a fast-changing place and people come up with new and unforeseen problems all the time. Greater diversity in age, race, and identities at work increase the chances that someone has a new perspective or a problem we could not have imagined before someone came to us with it. Ask if they want to provide you with some education or if they would rather you took some time to educate yourself, then follow up accordingly.	“This is new territory for me, but I want to understand and be helpful.”
Do your research	There is so much great information out there, I see no reason to sit around waiting for your employee or colleague to do all the work. Even if they’ve helped you to understand, take the extra step to go deeper. If you’re going to help resolve the issue, find out all you can and don’t cherry-pick sources. Read as you would listen, deeply. Some places to start are listed below.	“I want to understand this better. Is there a source you would recommend?”
Plan a check-in	Set a time to design a plan forward when you are not flooded with emotions. Don’t just say “Can we revisit this later?” Put a date and time on your calendar – later that day, tomorrow, early next week – and give both of you space. Know what you need to bring with you whether it’s the results of your calls to the right offices, a review of the handbook gathering dust in your desk, or the insights you get from checking in with your own heart. Know what the other person is going to bring with them, so you both know what to expect and you can problem solve together.	“When is a good time for us to revisit this in more detail?” AND (if appropriate) “Is it alright with you if I make a few calls to ___ to check on ___?”
Get back-up	You may not want other people in your check-in meeting, but it is not “cheating” to call a coach, consultant, or good problem solver and insightful thinker to help you get a handle on the situation, think through options and creative solutions, soothe your own trauma, and/or practice a difficult conversation. You are not alone in this and you deserve support, too. Don’t have support for yourself? That’s one place where Terra Firma Cultural can help.	“Hi, Terra Firma Cultural? I think I could use some help with...”

Informative Places to Start

1. Racial Bias (<https://lifespeak.com/addressing-racial-bias-and-discrimination-in-the-workplace/>)
 2. Sexual Harassment (<https://www.themuse.com/advice/how-to-deal-with-sexual-harassment-at-work>)
 3. Physical disability (<https://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/disability-101-employment-policies-and-etiquette.aspx>)
 4. Trauma (https://www.optum.com/content/dam/optum/resources/whitePapers/5218_CIRS_White_Paper_08062014.pdf)
 5. Mental Illness (<https://nami.org/Home>)
 6. Neurodiversity (<https://exceptionalindividuals.com/>)
 7. Parenthood (<https://www.greatplacetowork.com/resources/blog/the-best-parental-leave-policies-in-america>)
 8. Gender Identity (<https://www.healthline.com/health/gender-nonconforming#learn-more>)
9. Diversity and Equity with Allyship and Appreciative Inquiry at the core: [Terra Firma Cultural](#)