

Shame Sensitivity: A Guide for Managers and Senior Leaders

Shame sensitivity involves recognising and addressing the impact of shame in the workplace. For managers, understanding how shame affects individuals and teams is critical for fostering a supportive and productive environment.

Understanding Shame

- **What is Shame?** Shame is a deep emotional response to feelings of failure, inadequacy, or rejection.
- **Workplace Triggers:** Mistakes, unmet expectations, criticism, or feeling excluded can elicit shame.
- **Impact on Individuals:** Shame can lead to withdrawal, defensiveness, low self-esteem, and impaired performance.
- **Impact on Teams:** Unaddressed shame can erode trust, communication, and collaboration.

Key Principles of Shame Sensitivity

1. Foster Psychological Safety

- **Encourage Openness:** Create an environment where employees feel safe to share ideas and admit mistakes.
- **Avoid Blame:** Focus on solutions rather than assigning fault.

2. Practice Compassionate Leadership

- **Model Empathy:** Show understanding and patience when addressing challenges.
- **Validate Experiences:** Acknowledge the emotions and perspectives of employees.

3. Use Constructive Feedback

- **Be Specific and Supportive:** Frame feedback around behaviours and solutions rather than personal shortcomings.
- **Balance Criticism with Encouragement:** Highlight strengths and achievements alongside areas for improvement.

4. Build Trust and Respect

- **Lead by Example:** Demonstrate accountability and humility.
- **Promote Inclusivity:** Ensure all voices are heard and valued within the team.

Practical Strategies for Managers

1. **Regular Check-Ins:** Use one-on-one meetings to understand individual concerns and provide support.
2. **Debrief After Mistakes:** Treat errors as learning opportunities for growth and development.

3. **Celebrate Successes:** Recognise achievements to build confidence and reduce fear of failure.
4. **Provide Training:** Offer resources on emotional intelligence and effective communication.

Benefits of Shame Sensitivity

- **Enhanced Well-Being:** Employees feel valued, reducing stress and anxiety.
- **Improved Team Dynamics:** Trust and collaboration increase when shame is addressed effectively.
- **Greater Productivity:** A supportive environment encourages innovation and engagement.
- **Stronger Retention:** Employees are more likely to stay in workplaces that prioritise their emotional needs.

Managers who cultivate shame sensitivity create workplaces where employees can thrive, fostering resilience, innovation, and collective success.