LISTEN TO SUPPORT

What people need from leaders when they are struggling

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Leaders are often expected to know what to do.

When a problem appears, they assess it, decide, and move people toward a solution. This ability is valuable. It is also why many leaders find it difficult to sit with someone who is struggling without immediately trying to fix what is happening.

We offer advice. We share what worked for us. We search for the right answer, reassure the person that everything will be okay, or begin organizing the next steps before we fully understand the problem.

Our intentions may be good. But support does not always begin with a solution.

Sometimes it begins with being willing to listen.

When people are under pressure, they do not necessarily need their leader to have the perfect response. They need to know they have been noticed, that they can speak honestly without being judged, and that what they share will be taken seriously.

Listening is not passive. Done well, it is one of the most useful forms of leadership.

KNOW THE PERSON BEFORE THE PROBLEM

It is difficult to recognize when someone is struggling if you do not know what they are typically like.

Mental health challenges do not look the same in everyone. One person may become quiet and withdrawn. Another may become impatient, critical, or unusually controlling. Someone may begin missing deadlines, arriving late, making uncharacteristic mistakes, avoiding people, or struggling to make decisions. Others may continue performing well while using enormous effort to hide what things are costing them.

A single difficult day does not necessarily mean that someone is experiencing a significant mental health concern. People become tired, frustrated, distracted, and upset. The more useful question is whether something has meaningfully changed from that person's usual functioning.

Pay attention to patterns.

Has the change been occurring frequently or for an extended period? Is it affecting the person's work, relationships, physical well-being, judgment, or ability to fulfil their responsibilities? Does the behaviour seem significantly different from how they normally show up?

The goal is not to diagnose. Leaders should not interpret every mistake, mood change, or difficult interaction as evidence of a mental illness.

The goal is to notice.

Knowing your people means understanding more than their output. What are they like when they are feeling well? How do they respond to pressure? What helps them remain grounded? What changes first when their capacity begins to erode?

You can only recognize a meaningful shift if you have taken the time to know the person behind the performance.

CREATE THE CONDITIONS BEFORE THEY NEED SUPPORT

People rarely begin an honest conversation about their mental health simply because a leader asks, "Are you okay?"

They consider what might happen next.

Will I be judged? Will this change how I am viewed? Will my leader overreact? Will they tell other people? Will they immediately try to fix me? Will this affect future opportunities? Do they have time to hear the answer?

The culture surrounding the question matters.

Leaders create the conditions for honest conversations through what they do every day. They show whether vulnerability will be respected by how they respond when someone makes a mistake, admits uncertainty, asks for help, or offers a perspective that is difficult to hear.

If every conversation is about performance, people may conclude that performance is the only part of them that matters. If leaders only check in when

something has gone visibly wrong, concern can begin to feel like surveillance.

Build the relationship before the difficult moment.

Ask how people are doing when there is no immediate problem to solve. Learn what matters to them. Notice effort, contribution, and progress. Follow up on things they have shared. Make conversations about well-being a normal part of working together.

Psychological safety does not mean people will tell their leader everything. Nor should they be expected to. It means they have enough evidence to believe that if they choose to speak, they will be treated with care and respect.

OPEN THE DOOR

When you notice a change, name what you have observed without making assumptions about what it means.

You might say, "You have seemed quieter than usual this week, and I wanted to check in," or "I've noticed that you have been carrying a lot lately. How are you doing?"

Keep the invitation simple and genuine.

The person may not be ready to talk. They may say they are fine, change the subject, or need time to decide whether they trust the conversation. Unless there is an immediate safety concern, respect their choice while leaving the door open.

You can say, "You do not have to talk about it right now. I just wanted you to know that I noticed and that I am available."

Do not ask the question if you cannot stay for the answer. Choose a time and place that offer reasonable privacy. Put away distractions. Slow down enough to signal that the conversation matters.

The way you ask can determine whether the door feels genuinely open.

BE CURIOUS ABOUT THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE

When someone is willing to talk, curiosity is more useful than assumption.

One way to understand their experience is to listen for four things: feelings, actions, sensations, and thoughts.

How have they been feeling? What have they noticed themselves doing or avoiding? What is happening physically? What thoughts are occupying their attention?

These questions should not feel like an assessment or interrogation. They are simply different doorways into understanding what the person is experiencing.

You might ask:

"How have you been feeling?"

"What has this been like for you?"

"What have you noticed changing?"

"What thoughts keep coming up?"

"How is this affecting you outside of work?"

"What feels hardest right now?"

"What would be helpful for me to understand?"

Then allow the person's response to guide the conversation.

You do not need to ask every question. You do not need to gather their entire history. Your role is to understand enough of what is happening to respond with care and help them consider what support may be useful.

LISTEN BEFORE YOU FIX

Good listening requires more than remaining silent until it is your turn to speak.

Listen to understand, not to prepare your response. Pay attention to what the person is saying, what they may be struggling to say, and what emotions are present underneath the words.

Use a calm and sincere tone. Ask open questions. Allow pauses. Be aware of your facial expression and body language. Avoid looking shocked, impatient, distracted, or uncomfortable with what you are hearing.

Reflect what you understand.

"It sounds like you have been carrying this for a while."

"I hear that you are exhausted and not sure how much longer you can keep operating this way."

"Let me make sure I understand. You are not asking me to solve this right now; you want me to know what has been happening."

Reflecting does not mean you agree with every interpretation or that you can provide everything the person wants. It demonstrates that you are making a genuine effort to understand their experience.

Resist minimizing. Statements such as "Everyone is stressed," "At least things are not worse," or "Try not to think about it" may be intended as reassurance, but they can leave the person feeling more alone.

Be careful about moving too quickly into your own story as well. Sharing a personal experience can sometimes communicate understanding, but it can also shift attention away from the person who took the risk of speaking.

Support them by staying with their experience long enough to understand it.

MANAGE YOURSELF

Difficult conversations activate leaders too.

You may feel pressure to regain control, speed things up, provide reassurance, or find an immediate solution. You may become uncomfortable and want to end the conversation. You may feel responsible for making the person feel better before they leave.

Notice your own response.

Do you need to slow down? Listen more? Ask for clarification? Offer warmth? Become clearer about what you can and cannot do? Involve someone with more expertise?

Being supportive does not mean becoming emotionally overwhelmed alongside the person. It means remaining grounded enough to stay present and make thoughtful decisions.

Ask what the person needs rather than assuming.

"Would it help to keep talking, or would you like to think about some next steps?"

"Are you looking for me to listen, help you solve something, or connect you with support?"

"What would feel most useful right now?"

The person should help guide the response wherever possible. Support is something we create with people, not something we do to them.

VALUE THE PERSON THROUGH YOUR NEXT STEPS

Listening communicates care. What happens after the conversation communicates whether that care can be trusted.

Ask the person what they believe would help. Identify what support is available and what changes may be possible. Be honest about what is within your authority and what is not.

If other people need to become involved, explain why. Whenever possible, tell the person what information will be shared, with whom, and what is likely to happen next.

Do not promise absolute confidentiality if you may need to act to protect their safety or fulfil a professional responsibility. Instead, be clear that you will respect their privacy and involve only the people necessary to help keep them well and safe.

The person may benefit from support outside the workplace, such as a family member, friend, physician, therapist, employee assistance provider, or another trusted resource. Help them think about who can be part of their circle of support.

Leaders do not need to become therapists. In fact, trying to become the person's sole source of support can create confusion, dependency, and risks for everyone involved.

Your role is to listen, respond within your responsibilities, and help build a bridge to the appropriate support.

KNOW WHEN LISTENING IS NOT ENOUGH

There are moments when a supportive conversation must become a safety response.

If you are concerned that someone may be at risk of harming themselves or someone else, ask directly about their immediate safety. Do not avoid the question because it feels uncomfortable.

You can say, "I am concerned about you, and I want to make sure you are safe. Have you been thinking about hurting yourself?"

If there is an immediate safety concern, do not leave the person alone or attempt to manage the situation

privately. Follow your organization's emergency procedures and involve qualified professional or emergency support.

Be transparent about what you are doing and why.

"I care about you, and because of what you have shared, I need to involve someone who can help us keep you safe."

Support sometimes means respecting privacy. At other times, it means having the courage to act.

FOLLOW UP AND FOLLOW THROUGH

A meaningful conversation should not be followed by silence.

Let the person know when and how you will reconnect. Then do it.

"This is important to me. I am going to check in with you tomorrow."

Following up does not require asking for every personal detail. It can be as simple as asking how they are doing, whether they were able to connect with support, and whether anything further is needed from you.

Continue to treat them as a whole and capable person. Do not allow one vulnerable conversation to become their new identity. Include them, respect their contribution, and maintain appropriate expectations while making reasonable space for what they are navigating.

People remember whether leaders followed through. A missed check-in can unintentionally communicate that the conversation was less important than it seemed in the moment.

Consistency builds trust.

BE PRESENT, NOT PERFECT

Supporting someone does not mean removing every difficult feeling, solving every problem, or knowing exactly what to say.

It means noticing when something has changed. Opening the door with care. Listening without judgment. Managing your own urge to fix or retreat. Asking what the person needs. Taking safety seriously. Connecting them with appropriate support and returning after the conversation.

You may not be able to change everything they are carrying.

But you can ensure they do not have to carry it unseen.

Know your people. Hear your people. Value your people.

Listen to support.

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood is a licensed psychologist and performance consultant with over 30 years of experience helping people thrive under pressure — from Olympic athletes to emergency responders. She is the founder of Toogood Consulting and specializes in building human-first, high-performance cultures.

WHEN SOMEONE COMES TO YOU: A QUICK GUIDE

1. Know your people

Pay attention before something is wrong. Learn how each person typically communicates, behaves, and responds so you are more likely to notice when something changes.

2. Create the conditions

Make supportive conversations normal. Choose a private space, reduce distractions, and give the person enough time to speak without feeling rushed.

3. Open the door

Describe what you have noticed without assuming you know what it means: "You haven't seemed like yourself lately. How are you doing?"

4. Manage yourself

Slow down. Stay open and regulate your own reactions. Your discomfort should not become something the other person has to manage.

5. Listen for the person's full experience

What they are feeling, what they are doing, what they are noticing in their body, and what they are thinking.

6. Listen before fixing

Resist the urge to reassure, advise, compare, or solve too quickly. Ask questions, reflect what you are hearing, and allow silence to do some of the work.

7. Ask what would help

Do not assume that support means taking over. Ask: "What would be most helpful right now; having me listen, helping you think it through, or taking action together?"

8. Pay attention to safety

If something raises concern, ask directly about safety. Do not carry a serious concern alone; connect the person with appropriate professional or emergency support.

9. Follow up

Remember what was shared and check in again. Support is rarely one perfect conversation. It is often the experience of knowing that someone noticed, listened, and came back.