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Think twice before crying on the job

Letting go may be taken as weakness

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Sen. Hillary Clinton may or may not have been on the brink of tears in a highly publicized moment on the eve of the New Hampshire primary. And that moment of emotion may or may not have helped her to a come-from-behind win at the polls.

But among workplace experts, there is no dispute: Think twice before letting go at work.

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"Tears don't work in the workplace," said Nancy Albertini, chairwoman of Patterson Blackstone, an executive search firm in San Jose, Calif. "People view tears as manipulative. When a person cries, people around them don't know what to do."

Crying on the job can be far more damaging to a woman's career than to a man's. A study at Pennsylvania State University in State College, Pa., on gender and the perception of crying found that both women and men reacted more favorably to men who teared up. And both men and women were looked at more positively when they teared up than when they cried.

The one exception: Tears were applauded in serious situations, such as the loss of a loved one.

Some analysts say that crying is becoming more acceptable at work. Tory Johnson, CEO of Women For Hire, a New York-based professional recruitment services firm, broke into tears five years ago on a business trip after a succession of mishaps, from losing her luggage to misplacing an important presentation.

"I totally lost it. I had three employees who were right there," Johnson said. "I think they would have had a lot less respect for me if I'd had no reaction. It was only human. You have to let people know you can react naturally to a situation."

But others strongly oppose crying at work, except in situations such as the retirement of a beloved boss or a death in the family. Colleagues may view an employee who cries as weak, manipulative or unstable.

Crying has been in the public eye in recent months. Ellen DeGeneres wept on national TV over the plight of an adopted dog, sparking a backlash of criticism. Emotional displays also have haunted political careers.

In 1972, disputed reports that Sen. Edmund Muskie, the front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination, had cried at a stop in New Hampshire derailed his presidential campaign. On the 2005 show "The Apprentice: Martha Stewart," Stewart told a contestant, "Women in business don't cry, my dear."


The Penn State research, by psychology professor Stephanie Shields, found that attitudes are shifting, especially since the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Compared with the 1980s, when studies showed men's tears were looked at negatively, the newer research, for a forthcoming book, suggests they are now seen as humanizing.

Still, crying is especially damaging today when job security is less certain, said Nancy O'Reilly, of Springfield, Mo., a clinical psychologist and founder of WomenSpeak.com, an online resource on issues such as health and relationships. The impact varies depending on both gender and office politics.

"If crying interferes with someone's job description, employers need to take action to get that person back to their very best," she said. "An employer may be worried that this is an employee with a problem. Let's face it, everybody's human."

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