

How to Reassure Others

by Mike Hawkins
mike@alpinelink.com



She felt abused and it wasn't the first time. In fact, it had gone on for months and so finally Julie became so frustrated with John that she had to do something. Her boss, John, was micromanaging her to the point that she was losing her self-confidence and feeling she could do nothing right. She hired a coach to help her figure out what to do.

In Julie's first discussion with her coach, Kathy, Julie told Kathy how frustrated she had become with John and his controlling behavior. She explained that John would constantly ask what she was doing, tell her she was doing it wrong, and then tell her how she should be doing it. As Julie finished venting, her coach Kathy, had a really important decision to make – how to respond to Julie's frustration and difficult circumstances.

How do you think the coach should respond to Julie's narrative of the situation? Should the coach show empathy, seek to understand, or validate Julie? Should the coach empathize with Julie's feelings of frustration? Should the coach seek to better understand the context behind what Julie was experiencing? Or should the coach validate Julie's thinking that she is being mistreated?

Of course, empathizing with Julie would be appropriate. Relating to how Julie is feeling would be a great way to let Julie know she is being heard and valued. Then seeking to better understand Julie's situation would be a good next step. But what about validating Julie's thinking that she is being mistreated? Would that be a good response? The importance of this real-time decision by the coach can't be overstated. Any validation of Julie's thinking, especially in her frame of mind, could have a lifelong impact on Julie. And not necessarily a positive one.

Have you ever listened to someone complain about their spouse? Or criticize a friend? Or a colleague or boss complain about someone else at work? How do you generally respond? Do you try to reassure people? When people are really upset, do you agree with their perspective? In your attempt to calm them down or make them feel better, do you validate their thinking?

If you are considered credible by someone or in a position of influence, the extent to which you validate people's thinking is likely to stick with them for a long time. Maybe for life. For example, if you agree with someone that they are being mistreated, they will feel instant validation. They will imprint that feeling of justification in their mind forever. Similarly, if you support someone's belief that they are being abused, disregarded, harassed, bullied, controlled, disrespected, or not valued, they will consider it permanent proof that their thinking is valid.

Of course, there are situations where a person's thinking is valid. People are mistreated. They are pressured, disregarded, controlled, and bullied. There are abusive spouses, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. By contemporary and objective standards of behavior, what people experience can be very real and bad. When it is, people should be concerned and deserve to be validated.

But what if there is more to the story? Could there be circumstances by which John is justified in micromanaging Julie such as when she is underperforming? Or could Julie be contributing to her undesirable circumstances in some way such as by not following safety protocols? If the coach were to agree with Julie that she is being abused without full knowledge of the situation, she could be doing Julie a great disservice. Instead of working on herself, Julie might simply put all the blame on John and never address her own shortcomings.

The consequences of validating a person's thinking can be very serious. Spouses get divorced, kids become estranged from their parents, neighbors become enemies, employees get fired, and companies get sued as a result of people's convictions that are validated by others—whether their convictions are true or false.

How to Reassure Others

What would be a better approach when talking to a friend, coworker, or family member who is upset with someone? How might you achieve an accurate understanding and provide the most appropriate response? Here are a few practices to follow:

1. Listen with the intent to understand, not to agree or disagree. Ask questions to get background information such as what was said and done before whatever happened. For example, were there prior expectations set? Were there unusual circumstances encountered? Was something said or done to provoke the undesirable behavior?
2. Respond with empathy for what the person is feeling without validating their thinking. If someone is upset, let them know you care about them and can relate to how upset they are. Just don't validate what they are upset about. If you do, you may be unknowingly validating their unhealthy thinking or undesirable behavior.
3. Realize that when people are upset, they generally want affirmation. They look and listen for that which they are hoping to affirm. In their emotional state, they vent and ask questions in hopes of receiving comfort that what they are experiencing isn't normal and not their fault. If a conversation goes on long enough, they usually find what they are looking for even if it wasn't explicitly said.
4. Know that every issue between two people has at least two perspectives. If others are involved, they too have perspectives. Even if you have the experience and credentials to counsel someone, be careful about taking sides, especially if you've not talked directly with everyone involved. Before finalizing and expressing a validating opinion, explore, inquire, and capture all relevant perspectives.
5. Consider there is a likelihood that the person complaining had at least some role in creating their circumstances or in how they handled their circumstances. Be careful here as people who are upset are often not ready to look in the proverbial mirror. Their role may be a topic for a later time, but it may be that part, if not a majority, of the issue is being caused by the person doing the complaining.
6. When appropriate, explore what the person might be responsible for. They may only need to own a small portion of the cause of their circumstances, but owing whatever it is could be the difference between reconciliation and the permanent end of a relationship. Gently ask questions about what they might have done for which they need to take responsibility.
7. Help the other person think through issues objectively and with balance. Help them put themselves in the other person's place. Help them think about the other person's perspective. Ask them to consider what the person was thinking at the time, what they knew at the time, and what was driving them. Help them be empathetic to the extent possible and appropriate for their situation. If someone is being physically abusive, that is clearly not okay. But other circumstances might deserve more understanding and less judgement.
8. Avoid extremes, whether in interpretation of the issue or how to resolve the issue. For example, many people have narcissistic tendencies, but are not clinical narcissists. So don't label them as narcissists and don't suggest a course of action based on them being a narcissist. Same goes for psychopathy, emotional abuse, alcoholism, addiction, harassment, and other diagnoses. Know that while some people's behaviors deserve the label, most do not.
9. When the background of the situation has been explored, the ecosystem in which the person works or lives is understood, and the expectations, motives, and mindsets underlying the behaviors by all involved have been discovered, then validate what deserves to be validated. If appropriate, include disclaimers on whatever assumptions the validation is based. If you were the coach, you might say, "Julie, based on my current understanding of your circumstances, yes, you were being inappropriately micromanaged. I can understand how you felt abused by John's controlling nature." Then, turn your attention to helping Julie deal with John's controlling nature.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

For other articles on reaching your peak potential, visit: www.alpinelink.com/blog.