

Improve Motivation and Problem Solving by Understanding Emotions Strategically

In the film “What Women Want”, Mel Gibson plays the starring role of a man who, by some freak Hollywood-style accident, gains the ability to hear the thoughts of women. All of sudden he turns into a sensitive guy, able to understand and respond well to the women around him, especially the ones he is interested in!

Imagine what it would be like if you were able really understand why your colleagues were feeling a particular way? And what if you could predict how they would be likely to feel next – the difference between feeling appreciated and motivated, or conversely angry and dejected?

This requires the skill of ‘Understanding Emotions’ - and it is not as elusive as Mel Gibson’s character’s story made it look. This aspect of Emotional Intelligence builds on the information gained from exercising the first two emotional abilities - Identifying Emotions and Using Emotions (as explored in the last two articles) and begins to take a more strategic look at how we use emotions in our work as managers and leaders.

The benefits of developing and exercising the skill of understanding emotions in the workplace are numerous and can help you to:

- Keep your staff from leaving, improve retention
- Diffuse conflict situations
- Say or do the right thing to motivate others
- Recognise the causes of problems
- Position team communications effectively

An Emotional Vocabulary

The skill of ‘Understanding Emotions’ involves being able to make good predictions about what people will feel. This becomes harder when those emotions are mixed or conflicting.

As with many areas of expertise, it is important here to know the relevant language or vocabulary to be able to accurately talk about emotions. The richer your emotional dictionary, the better chance you have of distilling and describing the essence and nuances of the emotions involved in any particular situation.

Psychologist Paul Ekman described a theory which included eight basic emotions, which include anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness and surprise. While these can be very useful, it is often the slight shades of difference and blends between these that can really help us to convey the precise meaning of an emotion. For example, consider the difference between anger, frustration and annoyance. The words are different, as is their meaning, even if they are all shades of the same feeling. Using the right ‘emotion’ word at the right time can really help us communicate and understand what is going on.

Predicting the future with emotions

As I have written before, emotions contain valuable information about people in relation to their environment. The information in a feeling can therefore tell us about the



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event or situation that led to that feeling – effectively seeing the cause and effect. For example, if we find out that a colleague has lost one of his best performing team members, we could guess that he is feeling sad or disappointed, or even fearful about how he will now achieve his team objectives. On the other hand, if we then discover that this team member was unashamedly poached by a rival manager for another project, then we may guess that our colleague is feeling angry. Depending on what happens next, we can expect the emotion to change. In our example above, depending on how the rival manager deals with the fact that he has poached our colleague’s top person will affect whether the anger will intensify (e.g. to rage) or lessen (e.g. to mild annoyance). Conversely, what our colleague chooses to do is also likely to have an effect. If he does nothing for example and stays focused on the negative outcomes, we could expect the emotion to change into a new one e.g. resentment.

So by thinking about the ‘what if’ scenario where emotions are concerned, can help us prepare the right strategy for dealing with the future. One way to develop this skill is to become familiar with some of the ‘rules’ that govern emotional changes. In his ground-breaking work on the nature of emotions, Robert Plutchik mapped out how emotions follow certain progressions and patterns. Familiarity with these rules will increase how well we think strategically about emotions, helping us to plan for change, influence and manage people.

Solving problems and understanding motivation

If we can perceive the cause of an emotion then we can gain crucial information about the causes of a problem. Likewise, having a base of knowledge about emotions helps us to intrinsically understand ourselves and others better. Considering how different people are from one another it is worth acknowledging some of the complexities that exist in emotion. It is possible to feel both excited and fearful, or happy and sad at the same time. These conflicts sometimes underlie the surface

emotions that are being expressed. This means we need to be prepared to go deeper in some of our interactions and discover what is really of value and significance to a particular individual. This vital knowledge can then help us know what to do or say to better support and motivate others. So what else can we do to improve our deeper understanding of what makes others tick?

- Make space for fuller, less hurried conversations with others where thoughts and feelings can be expressed
- Make the most of feedback to reflect on how you communicate
- Where there are bad feelings after a miscommunication, allow time to plan for a new action plan with acceptable compromises that can help transform these feelings
- Improve your listening skills
- Reflect on the things (positive and negative) that seem to produce the strongest feelings and highest motivation
- Improve your ability to empathise by „putting yourself in the other person’s shoes“; job exchanges, job shadowing, or even role-playing can be useful strategies here.

Utilising emotions strategically

With an understanding of how emotions lead on from each other we can realistically predict how a person will feel next after certain events. It can also help us to think strategically about the markets we serve, competitors and the business climate in general. Whether you work in human resources, finance, marketing, research or operations, using a ‘what-if emotions analysis’ approach to your planning can dramatically increase your effectiveness.

Whether you are considering a new product, a cost-saving strategy for the operation, or down-sizing the workforce, asking the emotionally intelligent question: “How will our employees or customers feel?”, or “How likely is it that they will feel happy, upset or indifferent...?” will inform your decision and the way you need to communicate it.

This is the fourth article in our series examining how we can build our emotional intelligence to improve performance, based on the ability-based MSCEIT model of Emotional Intelligence developed by John Mayer, Peter Salovey and David Caruso. If you would like to receive a copy of the previous articles in this series: please email info@emotionalacumen.com and we will be happy to send you a copy.

In our final article next month we will explore what to do with the emotional data gained from the first three abilities through the skill of ‘Managing Emotions’.

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