

Master Emotional Leadership by Rising to the Challenge of *Managing Emotions*

The philosopher Aristotle said, “Anyone can become angry – that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way – that is not easy.”



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In the fascinating arena of 2009 American politics, it is notable how important the ability to manage anger has become. Mr Obama’s initial success was to transform anger against the latest Bush presidency into pro-American hope. Now, with the recession deepening, and associated anger levels escalating, the challenge is for the politicians to transfer this negative emotion against the opposite party. The Republicans at Obama’s budget and tax rises, the Democrats at the rich Republicans. The trick in my opinion is how: Obama remains calm and purposeful in his rhetoric, and though times are tough, his ratings remain high. The Republican Party, without a clear leader on the other hand, seem to increasingly attract random personalities who get heard by expressing excessive amounts of anti-establishment anger.

Managing emotions is the skill of balancing the passion of our emotions with the reason of our thoughts. Given the importance and value of emotions (which we have explored in previous articles)

this means it is worth considering their use rather than just suppressing them, as we may be accustomed to doing in the workplace. Nor - like some of these ‘new’ Republicans – do we overstate them so that their meaning becomes exaggerated and hyped. Rather, in the case of anger, it can be drawn on as a guiding and motivating force to support us to speak up and influence others when the time is right.

This ability is really the crux of emotional intelligence, whereby we incorporate our own and others’ feelings into our thinking. It enables us to lift or calm peoples’ mood appropriately, inspire others and draw on emotions as a vital resource to inform decision making. Those who are good at this generally stay calm even when they are feeling strong emotions, thinking things through rather than rushing into action based on a sudden emotional impulse.

A Manager of Emotions

Although moods may arise for all kinds of subjective reasons, an emotionally intelligent manager focuses on how to leverage the information and wisdom contained within feelings in the emotional landscape around them. This includes their own as well as those of their colleagues and stakeholders. How we respond to emotional events has a corresponding effect on how successful we are in achieving our objectives. Specifically this appears to apply in how we process and remember information. At work, many of us are used to suppressing our emotions, but the effort in doing so can often prevent us from fully engaging on an in-

ter-personal level, and being emotionally open to what is going on. Research shows that there is also an impact on how well we remember a situation (Richards, J.M. and Gross, J.J., “Emotion Regulation and Memory: The Cognitive Costs of Keeping One’s Cool.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (79), 2000) and it is said that men remember less about social interactions than women because they tend to suppress their emotions more than women.

At times it may be wise to disregard a strong emotion - particularly if we lack the resources to process the feeling – so avoiding overwhelm. In many instances though, it is prudent to open ourselves to experiencing a feeling, even if it is not comfortable at first. This is because the energy we put in to avoiding the feeling also channels away our overall awareness, which can then impact decision making and problem solving. This openness to feelings can be challenging for positive as well as negative emotions. In some cultures such as Japan, it is evident that a heightened form of happiness is not appropriate in the workplace, fearing a loss of control or it leading to feelings of embarrassment. As we all know, acknowledging a success – even celebrating it – can be somehow cathartic and allow us to carry on with our work re-invigorated.

An Emotional Signalling System

Emotions act as signals to inform us that something significant is happening or will do in the future. Acting on these straight away of course can be dangerous as we do not allow ourselves the time to reflect on whether our perception of the event

that caused the emotion are correct. This is why it is so often a good idea to – in the very least – **count to ten** before we respond to an emotional trigger.

On the other hand, it is good to trust our emotions as, if we hesitate for too long we may find ourselves losing out. Being open to and quickly acting on a feeling of happiness we feel when, for example, a new opportunity is presented to us, can lead us to seize a critical moment in our development or success.

We can see here that emotions have the ability to inspire, motivate and teach us. Emotions are not passive, rather they link to an impulse to act (in fact some scientists believe this is why we have evolved an emotional system). As a strong emotion such as anger lessens over time, we can reflect on it and look for the energy or information it provides us about the situation that caused it. We can use any resulting insight or motivating energy to communicate our feelings about the situation to others.

As we discussed in our first two articles, emotional awareness is a key foundation to all of this, with perhaps the first questions being: “How am I feeling, and how are others feeling?”

Once we are open to and accept what feelings are around, we need to process and refine them. The following questions can help to associate the current feeling with the bigger picture, providing a better insight about their relevance:

- How clear or intense is this feeling?
- How much is my thinking affected by this feeling at the moment?
- How new or unusual is this feeling to me?
- Why am I feeling this way?

How to balance mind and heart

The ability to synthesise emotions and thought is the essence of an emotionally intelligent approach. By actively balancing the heart and mind we stay present to the

powerful data held by emotions which we can use to improve decision making. Likewise, being able to regulate or influence our mood and the mood of others appears to be a key component of a great manager or leader. The failure to do this is something we can all relate to.

Take the example of working on long-term goals. When we feel in a stable mood we can often continue to work on seemingly more difficult or less interesting tasks in line with an important future mission. However, even if we are really committed to this, when we feel down or de-motivated we will often seek to affect our immediate feelings. This will result in our attention moving to less important, easier-to-complete tasks, getting involved in frivolous events (emails, meetings, conversations, etc.) and so on. In short: procrastination as a means of feeling good in the short term. As natural as this is, giving in to these impulses often results in us feeling worse than we did before; our low mood returns, this time with feelings of guilt.

So what can you do to counter some of these impulses, and stay on top of your emotional game? Popular psychology and even business books these days are full of techniques to help us ‘feel happy’ or ‘beat the recession in our feelings’, but here are a few questions to help you integrate emotions with thought when deciding on how to best manage a situation:

- Are the feelings justified?
- If so, what do I want to do with this feeling?
- What is the overall desired outcome?
- Do I want others to change their behaviour?
- How do I want myself and others to feel at the end of it?

Evaluate your answers with the emotional ‘what if’ planning skill we discussed

in the last article so that you can think strategically about the likely effects of any particular course of action.

Bringing it all together

When it comes to feelings, I am sure you recognise by now that there are no two ways about it – they are inextricably woven into our everyday lives as managers, leaders, employees and stakeholders. And although it can be challenging to face and manage the emotional environment – its richness and many layers can make it an interesting and rewarding challenge.

So to conclude this article, the last in this series focusing on the four emotional abilities as defined by Mayer and Salovey (Salovey, P. and Mayer, J.D. “Emotional Intelligence” *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* (9) 1990), I’d like to remind you of the four key questions – the Emotional Blueprint – we presented in the first article.

1. What am I and others feeling about this?
2. How do I want us all to feel?
3. What is behind this feeling and how might it change?
4. What can we do to keep or change these feelings?

I encourage you to write them down somewhere and use them – not as a quick fix to complex situations – rather as a way of viewing your role as a manager or individual contributor differently, and to give you more insight to doing the right thing.

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