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Getting smart on emotions

By Jo Hawkins Donovan, for *Small Business Times*

One area that many of my clients want to develop these days is what is being called “emotional intelligence.” Daniel Goleman started all of this with his *New York Times* bestseller *Emotional Intelligence*. His 2002 book, *Primal Leadership*, reflects a refinement of his theories and is much easier to put into practice.

If any of you are fascinated by the science underlying our emotional makeup, you probably want to read Goleman’s new book, *Destructive Emotions*, which recounts research done by a collaboration of the Dalai Lama and some of our top psychologists and neuroscientists. Perfectly reasonable research team in my estimation!

Emotional intelligence refers to the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions in us and in our relationships. It has become generally accepted that emotional intelligence, or EQ, is twice as important as IQ as a basis for outstanding performance.

It would make sense if those competencies were taught throughout our school years. Instead we’re taught some pretty weird stuff about the huge array of emotional responses that make up our badge of humanity. Most of the people I meet have developed a fear of their own emotions, so much so that they fail to recognize them until they’re flooded with feeling. Then they think they’re “losing it.”

People become so afraid of their own emotional make-up that many, if not most, adults develop a default mechanism that kicks in when strong emotions are felt. It’s the old fight or flight response. The fighters turn red and go after someone or something with a vengeance.

Once they are flooded with emotion, it’s impossible to make rational choices, so they might create a storm in the office, or lash out at an innocent bystander. The ones who choose flight, leave the scene. They might literally leave, walking out the door and slamming it, or might flee the stress by shutting down, going inside, refusing to connect with anyone. You know people in both of these categories I’m sure. It helps to remember that both of these are responses to fear — ineffective and knee-jerk as they may be.

Most of the leaders I coach are people who come on strong, who are passionate about their organizations, who move from charge-neutral to blazing enthusiasm — or anger — in a matter of minutes. I love working with such fiery people. Goleman says that great leadership works through the emotions. The distinction between spreading frustration throughout an organization and bringing out everyone’s best is often, according to Goleman, “a hidden, but crucial, dimension in leadership — the emotional impact of what a leader says and does.”

This is too vital to be left to chance, too vital to be a dimension of leadership that we shrug our shoulders at and say some have it and some don’t.

Goleman and his colleagues hold that the emotional task of leadership is primal. They define two major domains of emotional intelligence as personal competence and social competence. In coaching, we facilitate development of skills within each of those areas.

No one has to sit around and wait for a coach to appear, however, in order to start enriching his or her effectiveness as a leader. Goleman’s work can be a guideline, and the people around you can be your teachers.

Self-awareness requires time for self reflection — for sanctuary, as I call it. Being alone with a sincere desire to learn more about your own emotions, how you feel them, how you express them into your environment, and the impact they have on others — that’s an excellent start.

Question people around you to learn more about gaps between your intentions and their perceptions of you. Accept that in any exchange with a colleague, follower or customer, there is an emotional component as well as an intellectual one, and that being a great sensor of the emotional content will set you apart. Ask for feedback when you have an inkling you want to check out. For example, if you start off a meeting by announcing a big order and you notice some looks of discomfort around the table, stop right there.

You might say something like, “Whoa, I’m confused here. Can you help me out? I’m jumpin’ up and down with excitement about landing this order. Yet I don’t see that same feeling in your expressions. What am I missing?”

A business friend asked me if I knew how he could get better at reading emotions in other people. He is especially interested in perceiving if someone is telling the truth. We can indeed train ourselves to pick up on microexpressions, those speedy little changes in our facial muscles that reveal our true feelings. Without training, almost no one can read those movements. Paul Ekman, director of the Human Interaction Laboratory at the University of California, does research in that area which he writes about in his upcoming book, *Emotions Revealed*.

Tuning our emotional acuity is no doubt the next frontier in professional communication. For all of us it requires mindfulness and courage. And it is not a game of perfect. Won’t it be nice, though, when we render obsolete these words of Ben Franklin, “Men take more pains to mask than mend.”

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