

Leaders Need Emotional Agility

By James Kimberly

Effective leaders come in many different personalities, from quiet and introverted, to loud and challenging. Some leaders are intuitively able to see patterns amidst the complexities of their markets, while others need hard data to be comfortable. Some leaders thrive on by-the-seat-of-the-pants pressure, and others like to carefully plan and schedule.

Despite all these personality differences, effective leaders have one thing in common: emotional agility. Emotional agility is when a leader reads the environmental cues to know what emotional tenor is needed by his or her employees, at a given time and then acts upon that in alignment with his/her personal values.

Traversing an Emotional Landscape

Having emotional agility means realizing employees are people who need respect and support. Here are two scenarios, one showing emotional agility and one where leaders are running amuck.

Emotional agility leads to effective behaviors such as:

- A young, inexperienced shop foreman who leads her manufacturing line through a difficult customer request with tremendous productivity.
- A CEO who graciously accepts feedback from the receptionist after he snubbed her during introductions to customers.
- A vice president of sales seeking and honoring input from his internal team the same way he does with customers.

Versus troubling developments such as:

- The technical expert who gets promoted to manager and but can't lead a team to finish the IT project.
- The brilliant scientist whose eye rolls and heavy sighs shut down a junior associate from participating in a quality review meeting.
- A senior vice president who plays a self-recorded "Bull****" on a portable Staples button when his staff asks a "stupid" question.
- And a senior leader who rips off his shirt and dances on the bar at a conference.

These real-life successes and challenges demonstrate the importance of aligning emotional responses to the environment to provide effective leadership. Emotionally agile leaders quickly figure out:

- When to be thoughtful and encouraging instead of prescriptive;
- When to suspend judgment and stay in learning mode;
- When to be assertive with ideas, yet still empathetic to those of others;

- When to hold back strong negative emotions and confidently project optimism.

When leaders are emotionally agile, they use the space between situation and response to listen more deeply, are more mindful of how they are thinking and feeling, and are more curious in their learning from others. When they are ready to act, they lead responsively according to the values that are most important to them and their organization. A recent study by Frank Bond at the University of London shows that emotional agility can help people alleviate stress, reduce errors, become more innovative and improve performance.

It is possible to train yourself to be more emotionally agile. If you remember and implement the phrase “Listen, Learn and then Lead,” you will be well on your way to emotional agility. Here are some tips to get started:

Listen

Listen to Yourself: It is said we have 16,000 thoughts a day, but that doesn’t mean we have to respond to every one of them. Stay in tune with your emotions and thoughts as they occur, but make a conscious choice to let some pass by. If your emotions are strong, think about how they might affect other people. Take time to analyze your core goals to make sure they are in alignment with organizational goals.

Listen to Others: We are often quick to judge the thoughts and ideas of others. As our judging thoughts race ahead, we quickly prepare our response and never really connect with the intended message. Remember to:

- Stay fully present by reducing distractions, finding privacy when needed and maintaining eye contact with the speaker. Keep body language open and relaxed so you are physically ready to receive communications.
- Suspend judgment long enough to take an inventory of the messages being received. You may not agree with the thoughts, but listening doesn’t equate with agreement. Your goal is to understand the speaker’s point of view.
- Make note of the messages as you hear them and acknowledge what you are hearing. Ask “Do I have it right?” and clarify until the speaker is confident that he or she has been heard accurately.
- Ask about the speaker’s goals. How are they in sync with the stated goals of the organization?

Learn

Leaders must be open to learning, or people will see them as closed-minded and arrogant. Remember to:

- Ask questions that allow for discovery and curiosity in yourself and others.
- Seek input from all stakeholders, even those on the periphery. Colleagues can see aspects of our challenges that we may miss because we are too close

to a situation.

- Share what you're learning about yourself and business with your team. Talk about how you learned information and your reasoning. While executives often grasp concepts quickly, they don't explain how they arrive at a conclusion, leaving some team members struggling to keep up.

Lead

The only way people know you are learning is if you lead based on that learning. What actions are you taking to show what you have heard and learned? What values do you hold most dear? Are your actions in alignment with those values? Keep in mind:

- Verbal communication is critical. People need to hear something seven times before they understand.
- People may hear what your plans are, yet research shows they primarily remember how they feel when you told them. It's how you communicate that matters more.
- The best-laid plans fall short when the delivery is not in accordance with organizational and personal values.
- Lead by example. People are watching you.
- Show progress toward goals on posters, videos, and emails. Transmit the messages over and over. Ask which methods work for different groups and adjust based on their needs, not yours.

Emotionally agile leaders listen and learn before leading, staying connected and respected by their employees, customers and communities. As more diverse work forces become the norm, our emotional agility will help us lead varied employee groups more effectively.

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