

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Emotional Intelligence At Work

Emotions

Emotions are ancient response strategies that are hard wired into your body. They have evolved over time and are present in animals as well as humans. They enable fast decision making when there is not enough time for rational consideration. As a faculty of the brain, emotions are extensions and extrapolations of the sensory apparatus and the inputs from our eyes, ears, nose, touches and tastes. Emotions are written into our postures and facial expressions. They serve a number of functions, not the least of which is the motivation for survival.

Emotions can be broadly described as being either positive or negative. Examples of positive emotions are joy, happiness and excitement. Examples of negative emotions are depression, anxiety and sadness. In addition, all emotions occur on a continuum from low to high intensity. The degree of intensity of any given emotion is a measure of how motivating it will be.

Emotions signal something important and may communicate cultural universals. One such signal is a happy face. No matter their cultural differences, people from any part of the world all react the same way to a happy smiling face. In general people approach things that elicit positive emotions and retreat from things that evoke negative emotions. Positive emotions have been found to motivate us to broaden our thinking, increase our repertoire of behaviors, see new connections and generate new or novel solutions to problems while inoculating us against negative events and people. Negative emotions call for a change in the status quo. They shrink our field of attention to a more limited range and encourage us to respond in very specific ways. For example, emotions like anxiety orient people to danger so that they can avoid it. While there may be some harmful aspects to negative emotions these emotions can also be useful in enhancing our ability to think in practical ways by becoming more motivated.

Because of the instinctual nature of emotion, it is very difficult to communicate without revealing emotion, and many communication tasks get harder to accomplish when emotion is removed from communication. It is far harder to get team members to work well together when they are required to suppress emotions; they can fail to bond and trust one another, and have difficulty reaching consensus, or feeling safe enough to share ideas. Unemotional sales people fail to make the sale. Trying to deny or disguise our emotions generally does not work very well and is fairly unnatural and difficult to learn. While we may think that we can hide our emotions the truth is that we cannot do so as well as we think we can. Those people who do manage to succeed at hiding their emotions are typically best suited to positions that require competitive dealings with strangers (e.g., negotiators, con-artists, poker players, etc.)

Emotional Intelligence

Workplace Emotional Intelligence involves learning to identify and manage emotions for both personal and organizational effectiveness. While emotions are not typically thought of as a critical element in workplace success, they are far more important than a casual observer might think. An Emotionally Intelligent Supervisor is able to use emotions to enhance reasoning and problem solving and to make more accurate judgments about people and situations.

Management of emotions is not about refusing to deal with negative emotions. Emotional management in the workplace is about being maximally effective which requires accepting a full range of emotions in one's self and in others. Purely rational decision making fails to take into consideration the emotional

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impact the decision may have on other people which may result in the decision falling short of expectation or being difficult to put into action as conceived. In fact, an attempt to engage in purely rational pursuits in the workplace (suppressing all emotions) can result in decision making errors as well as creating an atmosphere of mistrust. Instead, it is better to make decisions based on both rational and emotional grounds by respecting the valuable information emotions convey.

While emotional gestures and expressions may be universal, there are a wide variety of societal rules dictating the appropriateness of emotional use. Every society has its rules about whether or not it is okay to display certain emotions. The emotionally intelligent person tunes into these implicit rules and learns when particular emotional displays are appropriate and when they are not. For example, within the business world there are rules for emotional display that are part of the hidden organizational culture. In a very formal, upscale law firm partners and associates may be expected to behave with a great deal of emotional constraint. In contrast an advertising agency may encourage employees to openly display positive emotions.

Roles may also change based on gender. While men can be assertive and in-your-face, a woman who does the same is often considered to be too aggressive. On the other hand if a female expresses happiness in an ebullient manner her behavior is often judged as being girlish or (typically?) female. This appraisal tends to result in her being considered too soft to be an effective leader. Men, meanwhile, can high five in the hall as much as they like with no consequences. Even though these rules are not necessarily obvious or expressed in writing, they strongly influence the hiring of employees and how well employees and their work are accepted as a part of an organization, and because of this, an emotionally intelligent person will strive to map out these rules so as to use them to their personal and organizational advantage.

Basic Emotional Management Skills

Once a person agrees that emotions impart valuable information, the next question involves how to tap into this information. One way to begin to manage emotions is to explore your own emotions. You can start with these exercises:

- Pick an emotion that you are think you might tend to over-generalize or exaggerate and consider how you dealt with it in a recent situation
- Upon reflection do you think it was reasonable for you to feel the way that you did?
- On a scale of 1 to 10 how strongly did you feel this emotion?
- How did the emotion feel physically? Did you feel tense? Hot? Cold? Did you feel weighted down or light and free? Did you feel depressed? Energetic? Tired? Drained?
- Do you often feel the way you did on this occasion?
- What kinds of things do you think about when you experience this emotion? What do you usually do to make the situation better?
- Do you have any ideas about why you feel as you do or any specific triggers that might illicit these feelings in you?
- How did you interpret the event? How do you think an impartial observer might have interpreted the situation? Do you think that it might be possible that your appraisal of the situation might be incorrect?
- Think of alternatives explanations for what happened. Are any of the alternative explanations reasonable?

Next think about your feelings and the likelihood you may feel this emotion in the future. Make a list of situations that might provoke this response from you; order them from situations apt to trigger relatively minor levels of the emotion to those that you feel would trigger a major emotional outburst. Think about how you might best handle each situation. Next relax deeply and picture yourself handling the least provoking situation effectively. Gradually work your way through your list, imaging yourself dealing effectively with each situation. Then relax a bit longer and tell yourself, "I can handle these situations."

Next time you face one of your triggers take a few moments to breathe deeply and think of alternative ways to handle the situation. Remind yourself that you can do this. Then use the information the emotion gives you to help you better deal with the problem or situation at hand.