



A Lot of Companies and Leaders in Need of Some Emotional Rescue

By Rosie Steeves, Centre for Exceptional Leadership

Many people believe that separating their home lives and personalities from their office lives and personalities is not only the way to do business but makes them more effective leaders.

That approach, however, is now being challenged, as we discover the importance of being aware of our feelings and expressing them. When we leave part of ourselves at home, it's usually the softer, feeling side, but this can end up taking a toll. On a personal level, we may experience burnout and higher stress; we also miss out on an important source of intelligence that emotions offer.

Organizationally, this approach can spell disaster. Tough conversations don't happen, people problems get magnified, and creativity and innovation, which are often tapped from the same source as emotions, may be stunted.

For many, this is a hard pill to swallow, especially when you consider how many people have achieved success without letting feelings into the work arena. The very word "emotion" conjures up images of tears, yelling matches and touchy-feely love-ins. Emphasizing emotional intelligence as a leadership skill, however, is not about letting everything hang out and ignoring the need for business results.

Emotions play a critical role in the workplace, especially when it comes to developing leadership. Tapping into emotions helps people gain the self-awareness necessary to grow significantly in their abilities as a leader. When leaders are cut off from their feelings, they are significantly limited in building effective relationships, empathizing with others, facilitating teams, dealing with roadblocks and leveraging people's strengths to move a company forward.

The "perfect" leader will hit a wall in his/her development, but humility and having access to the full range of emotions can move organizational mountains. As we face increasingly complex problems, the need for emotional intelligence becomes even greater.

The challenge is shifting from knowing this to making it part of the organizational culture. One place to start is by sharing critical experiences between members of the leadership team. When this is facilitated skillfully, and individuals willingly share their highly emotional life experiences, several beneficial outcomes are possible.

The person sharing takes a risk by letting other people in and providing important information about who he or she is. The trust created between people when they take emotional risks with one another is a key to building connections and improving relationships. This exercise also gives each person a chance for self-reflection. What has made you who you are? What are the critical experiences that influence your leadership? Self-reflection and self-awareness are essential skills for great leaders.

Sharing the toughest experiences from one's past with colleagues may be the most important part of this exercise. How people handle challenge tells a great deal about them, and overcoming adverse circumstances may be a necessary requisite for great leadership. When people drop their defences to talk about their hardest struggles, there is a qualitative shift in relationships that impacts key business

measures, including productivity, turnover, efficiency, teamwork and collaboration to produce results. Having people understand you also makes work more real and much more fun.

Another tool that takes us from understanding the importance of emotions to making them a valued part of the organizational culture is an emotional intelligence assessment. Choosing the right tool may not be as critical as how the information gained is used. Enough safety and trust within the group must exist to allow people to examine any discrepancies between what they know about themselves and what shows up from the tool. Further, individuals need to be brave enough to take a critical look at themselves. Those who start muttering "this is just psychobabble" might not be ready; they are still heavily invested in their defences, which can be a roadblock on the path to becoming a great leader.

Tips for organizations:

Does your organizational culture support and encourage emotions in the workplace? Look at the data to find the answer: exit interviews, turnover statistics, work/life balance measures, team effectiveness.

■ Beware of the leadership shadow: when leaders are unwilling to access and express their feelings, followers won't either.

■ Consider using assessments as tools for understanding and improving emotional intelligence.

■ Allow people to talk about their "gut feel" or "intuition," both personally and how it relates to business decisions. This can be a tremendous source of innovation and improvement on how things are done.

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