

# LEADERSHIP IS EMOTIONAL

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My father died when I was eight year's old. At the time I thought that I would drown in my sadness, grief and anger. I decided that emotions were dangerous and that I needed to guard against them or they would overwhelm me. It has taken me many, many years to develop a more healthy and balanced relationship with my own and others' emotions.

I mention this because I have discovered two core things from working with thousands of senior managers over a long period. One thing is that when you get to know human beings they are very decent at their core. The other thing is that we humans can be a weird bunch. And possibly the weirdest thing about senior managers, the thing that they are most screwed up about, is the world of emotions! I believe that one of the great challenges for business leaders is to become more intelligent, more accepting and more skilful around emotions.

Occasionally on one of my senior leadership programs I will ask participants to share what they are feeling. A large number of senior managers, even after some coaching, will share a thought or an attitude with the group, but their actual feelings are elusive to them. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that management has indoctrinated us into "thinking". When we are asked about our emotions we often go to our conceptual thinking to find the answer. But feelings are different from thoughts – they cannot be found in thinking. And it simply is not true that thinking is always superior to emotions – few of us would allow our minds to be played on loudspeaker because most of our thinking is of such low quality we would be embarrassed if anyone else was privy to it!

Just because we cannot read our own and other's feelings does not mean that they are not there and that they are not being very influential. Indeed leaders need to learn what marketers, poets and demagogues have known for a long time - emotions help us to connect and are far more motivating than mere

ideas! And it is a huge loss for leaders to be cut off from feelings like inspiration, or joy or even love, and not to allow space for them in others.

One of the important things that I have learnt from the practice of mindfulness is that at any moment we are better off to examine our bodies to locate and understand our feelings rather than refer to our thinking. Emotions have a physical energy, sometimes subtle but more often quite strong, and we can feel them in our physical bodies. Even when we cannot immediately name the emotion we can train ourselves to experience it directly and physically in our bodies. And we can even sense other people's emotions by changes in our own bodies.

This is a very important practice for several reasons. Firstly, although it can be appropriate not to act out an emotion, such as anger, it is not helpful and it is not realistic to ignore or deny our emotions. If we try to suppress an emotion it does not go away – it finds other ways of making itself known to us such as through an involuntary explosive outburst at the executive meeting or by making us ill instead.

Secondly, if we examine emotions closely we find that they have both a feeling component and a cognitive or thought component. If we examine one of our very strong emotional reactions - and this is especially true with unpleasant, sometimes overwhelming emotions such as anger, fear and despair - we will notice that there are feelings present and there are thoughts. The thoughts can form themselves into a story. Sometimes the story is simple such as “this isn't fair”, and sometimes it is a very complex and familiar story. The story fuels the feelings which further fuel the story which further fuels the feelings and so on.

The problem of going into our heads to understand our feelings is that what we regularly will confront is the story instead, and before we know it we have bought into the story and are embellishing it and providing more fuel to our feelings. We are better off to feel into our feelings in the body and to recognize them and accept them. In the short term we have little say about them – it is as though they have a life of their own! But at the same time we also may notice all these thoughts and this story which accompanies the feelings, and ironically, if we can relax a little and watch these mindfully without buying into

them we may notice that they start to dissipate. And as our thoughts begin to dissipate we may also notice that our feelings slowly start to dissipate as well.

Sometimes we notice all this too late and discover that we are already buying into the story and our feelings are already very powerful. If we keep observing this process mindfully then we may find that our attachment to the story slowly weakens and then the story itself starts to dissipate and slowly the feelings themselves begin to dissipate. Indeed it may be possible through this process to transform a feeling such as anger which is interfering with our leadership effectiveness, into something very helpful such as compassion and courage.

Many senior managers, especially males, seem to believe that emotions are dangerous and that management and emotions should not mix. I do not wish to suggest that there are not many complexities around the issue of emotions and the workplace. Clearly some things are managed better unemotionally and it is best probably to conduct brain surgery dispassionately. There is a need to act appropriately when displaying emotion in a professional setting. There can be a cost to the effectiveness and health of leaders if they personally take on, or get caught up too much in, the emotions of their people. And there is still a strong gender bias around emotions – males tend to dominate the ranks of management and many still associate emotions with weakness and emotional invulnerability with the warrior or sporting or technocratic leader. Women managers are obviously influenced by this culture but many also struggle with the issue of maintenance of their authority and emotions.

It is time for senior managers to become more intelligent and skilful around emotions. It is time for us to realize that leadership is emotional.