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Avoid being hijacked by the amygdala

Everyone likes to be greeted with an open smile. It doesn't matter whether you're at your local bank, the reception desk of your office or boarding a cruise ship.

Thirty years ago, Arlie Hochschild, an American sociologist, conducted a survey with flight attendants at Delta Airlines. It was about the burdens of their profession. She summarized the results of her work in the following joke:

Passenger: "hey...what about a smile?"

Flight attendant: "OK, but let's do the following: you smile first, then it's my turn. OK?"

Passenger: (smiles)

Flight attendant: "Excellent, now stay like that . . . for the next 15 hours!"

Thirty years later we all continue to expect to be welcomed the same way. Is it that easy to have a big smile all the time though? For some it is, but not for all.

The solution is not to mask our strong emotions, as that would be unhealthy. The idea is to bring more intelligence to our emotions.

It's impossible to control how we feel, however it's possible to decide how we respond to a situation. That is the challenge of "Emotional Intelligence."

The following are some suggestions to develop emotional intelligence selected from several publications by Daniel Goleman as well as from an article written by Dieter Zapf titled "Under Control."

1 | Being in a good mood helps to dissipate tension

Research shows that the advantages of being in a good mood include creativity, increased problem solving capacity, more mental flexibility and more effective decision making.

How do you continue to be in a good mood when the sky is falling around you? That's the difference between being optimistic and being pessimistic. The former believes that what is happening is situational and that it's possible to make something good out of something bad. The latter adds a tone of fatality to the event, therefore paralyzing his or her self in the search for a creative way out. It's up to us to choose how to look at the problem.

Another way to re-establish the sense of humor is to laugh at ourselves. We've all been the protagonist of a scene in which the best reaction was to make fun of our own reaction and move on. In addition to reducing the tension the experience leads to powerful insights, as we distance ourselves from the scene and observe the inadequacy of our behaviors or reactions.

2 | Is it that important?

Our brain was designed to be a survival tool. The amygdala is part of the limbic system, and corresponds to our emotional memory. It is constantly screening the surroundings to check if we are in danger.

When a real or imaginary threat is detected the amygdala takes over, what Goleman calls the "Amygdala Hijack." The hijacking happens when we have a knee jerk reaction coupled with strong emotions. Later, when it's water under the bridge, we regret what we said or did.

How do we prevent the amygdala hijack?

One way to do this is to place the situation in perspective. A client who was rude to us would be rude to anyone who happened to be around in that moment. It had nothing to do with us, but with whatever was generating his frustration. If your colleague made an unethical comment while criticizing your idea in front of your manager, put the situation in perspective before reacting. "If I jump down her throat and say everything that I feel she should hear what would be the consequence of this emotional reaction?" Determine what is more important, discharging adrenaline or maintaining emotional control, and then show them who is correct when it is appropriate to do so?

3 | Exercising empathy builds bridges

Practice showing empathy when you're at a meeting where everyone seems entrenched in their own positions and unwilling to understand each other's position. Empathy means we are capable of understanding what others are saying in their perspective, not ours.

Exercising empathy does not mean we agree with their proposal. It means we understand the rationale of their idea. As we do this we build a bridge to a more productive dialogue, a dialogue that contributes to the construction of a solution which is attractive to all involved.

4 | Exercising leadership requires a strong capacity to deal with emotions – our own and others'

For decades, psychology has known the relationship between stress and performance. The brain accesses increasing levels of stress hormones as we attempt to move away from tedium and exhaustion. Goals established to realistically stretch your competence release the right amount of cortisol and/or adrenaline as well as other beneficial brain chemicals like dopamine. In this situation we can obtain our best performance.

On the other hand, when goals are established at a level above the employee's capacity of response (the panic zone) the released quantity of hormones is so high that it will negatively impact the ability to learn, perform, innovate and produce results.

The feeling of failure feeds the cycle, reducing self esteem and increasing stress. Developing and coaching your team to achieve very challenging goals is a critical part of your job as a leader.

We are constantly impacting the emotional mood of others, not only through our actions, but also, with our own emotional mood. If you want your team to reach the maximum possible performance, remember that your emotional balance will be a strong and important ally for everyone's success.

As markets become more competitive, clients more demanding and organizations more lean, pressure increases and so does individual exposure. Maintaining our contribution at a high standard and building an image that differentiates us from the rest depends, to a great extent, on our emotional intelligence.

Our feelings may be our best friends or our most feared enemies. The difference is how we deal with them.

Click on the link below to enjoy a short video where the story is told by the amygdala.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=do42brn17R0>

**See you next time. In the meantime, treat your amygdala well. Don't let it hijack you.
We welcome your feedback.**

To know more of our training programs, please send us an e-mail to:

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