

ON THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN LEADERSHIP*

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Abstract: *Being a leader does not only relate to a person's ability to lead their team towards the realization of the common goal, but also to their ability to be emotionally intelligent. An inspiring leader should be able to appropriately identify and manage their own emotions, in order to genuinely connect with their team. Leaning into their vulnerability and understanding the real causes of their impulses and reactions can contribute to the success of the whole team.*

Keywords: *emotion, emotional intelligence, triune brain, limbic system, reptilian brain, neocortex.*

Emotions play a crucial role in our life. They are what make us human. At the same time, they are the ones responsible for some of our reactions that are very often labeled as savage or wild. Whatever we do requires a certain emotional investment. In the end, as Antonio Damasio (1994) argued: "We are not thinking machines that feel, we are feeling machines that feel." Yet, it is our ability to manage our emotions properly that adds to our character and

When it comes to leadership, a leader should be able to appropriately identify and manage their emotions in order to inspire people to follow them. This is what daring leadership is all about, and this is also true for a leader with a scientist's mindset (Condrat, 2022). It becomes clear what leading from the heart implies. It is not about weakness and "irrational overriding the reasonable" (Goleman, 2020: p. 15). It rather refers to what Brown said: "Leaders must either invest a reasonable amount of time attending to their fears and feelings, or squander an unreasonable amount of time trying to manage ineffective and unproductive behavior" (2018: p. 67).

Some people still find it difficult to accept that emotions play such a crucial role in their lives as that will make them think that they do not actually control the situation. It is not their thinking brain, i.e. cognition, in charge, but it is their emotional brain, i.e. their emotions.

There is a perfectly reasonable explanation for this, and it is linked to our evolution as a human species, or better say to the evolution of the human brain. Our thinking brain, i.e. the neocortex, the one that is believed to be primarily responsible for perception, decision-making and language, the part that sets our cognitive processes in motion, is the most recently evolved area of the brain.

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Scholars suggest that the triune brain model shall be considered when describing the evolution of our brain. It is a commonly accepted way to look at the human brain as consisting of three layers. This model can help understand why instincts and emotions can be rather challenging to control. It can also help understand what can be done to become emotionally literate so that people can manage their emotions.

The most ancient layer is the reptilian brain. Simply put, this is what makes our bodies function on autopilot. It is responsible for our body temperature changes, our breathing, moderating our glucose levels – all those vital functions that happen daily in our body without us actually knowing it.

The next layer to develop was the limbic system. It is known as the emotional part of the brain. We can say that it is sitting on the reptilian brain. It developed in the first mammals. This is the part responsible for our fears, anxieties, arousals, for all the emotions that we experience.

Finally, the neocortex is the most recently evolved part of the brain. As stated, it is responsible for our logical reasoning, for our cognitive development.

In order to understand how the layers are intertwined, we can consider the following example. A person's heart rate starts beating faster than normal. It is not the reptilian brain setting the process in motion. It is the signal coming from the limbic system that activates the reptilian brain that has to adapt the body to the new situation putting in motion the survival mechanisms. This can happen because a certain emotion experienced by that person was perceived as a threat, and in that situation the reptilian brain activates the mechanisms that helped humankind survive as a species.

As seen, this does not happen in your neocortex. A person cannot control this, it happens on an instinctive level. The reptilian brain does not rationalize what happens (it has no idea). Its sole purpose is to protect the body. By increasing the levels of cortisol, it prepares the body to activate the survival responses, i.e. either to fight or to flee the “danger”. This is why the heart rate increases.

Yet, what helped our ancestors survive millions of years ago is not relevant at present. Now, we do not have to activate our fight or flight response every time the limbic system triggers fear, for example. In the jungle, when hearing a noise coming from the dark, this was essential for survival, as this was the way to react to a possible imminent threat, e.g. a predator lurking in the dark. At present, this can be extremely unhelpful.

At present a similar response can be activated when speaking in public, for example. The speaker is well-prepared; yet their heart rate beats faster, maybe they are sweating. This happens because of the fear of speaking in public the person experiences (they are afraid not to be convincing enough, for example, or that the audience will reject them). The limbic system sends the signal to the reptilian brain and the latter sets the survival mechanism in motion. As a result, the heart rate increases, the stress hormone, cortisol, is released in the blood so that the person can either fight or flight what has been perceived as a threat. The trouble is that when the instincts take over, the neocortex, the thinking brain, is shut up. This is why people can find it difficult, if not impossible, to think properly in such a situation. This is known as emotional hijacking (Golman, 2020).

It is important to understand the reasons why people experience fear of speaking in public. No matter how counterintuitive this may sound, the short answer is because people care. Being social beings, people are afraid that you might fail and as a result be rejected by their audience, and that would be perceived as an imminent threat.

Humans are social creatures (Lieberman, 2013) and they are biologically wired to be socially connected. They want to be part of the group. Hence, rejection will most probably trigger the feeling of shame in them, as if they are not good enough.

Brené Brown has researched shame, and defines it as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection” (Brown, 2018: p. 128). In a shame culture, empathy is inexistent. Whereas, the genuine connection people are naturally wired for cannot exist alongside shame. So, in most social interactions, i.e. when someone deals with people, the emotion of fear is caused by shame triggered in their limbic system.

Becoming aware of their own emotion enables people to lean into vulnerability. The process can be rather challenging. However, it is vital at present to be aware of all this, in order to develop the skills of managing the emotions, so that the reptilian brain does not activate the survival responses of the body when people are not in life-threatening situations.

It is also vital to be able to identify the emotion correctly. As seen, fear can be the umbrella term for a wide range of emotions. Upon analysis, it can actually be shame, anxiety, powerlessness, worry, etc. So, it is necessary to learn to name the exact emotions people are experiencing. By identifying the emotion appropriately, they can deal with it so that they can function in society successfully.

Let's consider another example. A leader is afraid their team will not meet the set deadline. This can be very bad not only for the leader, but for the whole team. The leader might be extremely worried, and even overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness. If they are not aware of this, they will not acknowledge and deal with this emotion properly. As a result, the reptilian brain will turn on the fight or flight response and they might end up shouting at their team. Now, the team will not know that their leader is actually afraid and will see only anger coming from their part. They will be demotivated as there will be no psychological safety, no learning culture, and no feeling of connection.

It is important to help people realize that they should not ignore their emotions. Being emotional is wonderful. What they should do is to use emotions appropriately. Numbing emotions only leads to disconnection from oneself and from the group people want to belong to.

Brené Brown says:

And when we become disembodied from our emotions to the point we literally don't recognize which physical feelings are connected to which emotional feelings, we don't gain control, we lose it. Without our understanding or consent, emotions start driving our decision making and behavior while thinking is tied up in the trunk. On the other hand, when the heart is open and free and we're connected to our emotions and understand what they're telling us, new worlds open for us, including better decision making and critical thinking, and the powerful experiences of empathy, self-compassion, and resilience. (Brown, 2018: p. 74)

People's ability to read emotions in others is primarily connected to their ability to read emotions in themselves. If they are not able to identify their own emotions properly, they cannot empathize, and genuinely connect with others.

This is what emotional intelligence is all about – it stands for the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions. In his article *What Makes a Leader?* (1998), Daniel Goleman defines emotional intelligence as “a group of five skills that enable the best leaders to maximize their own and their followers' performance.” This classification of skills has been perfected so that in the 25th anniversary of his book *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ* (2020), he distinguishes four skills:

1. self-awareness, which includes emotional self-awareness;
2. self-management, which includes emotional balance, adaptability, positivity, and achieve (this is the skill activating our motivation);
3. social awareness, which includes empathy and organizational awareness;
4. relationship management, which includes influence, conflict management, coach, teamwork, inspire. (Goleman, 2020: p. xii)

Now it becomes clear what made Alan Weiss, the American entrepreneur and renowned consultant, state: “Logic makes people think. Emotion makes them act.” I would like to quote here one of my favorite American poets, Maya Angelou who said: “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

There scholars who do not believe that emotional intelligence should be prioritized. The renowned psychologist Jordan Peterson claims: “There is no such thing as EQ. Scientifically, it's a fraudulent concept, a fad, a convenient band-wagon, a corporate marketing scheme” (Peterson). The claim can be perceived as brusque, but that is Peterson's style. With the scientist's goggles on, it is possible to see some truth in Peterson's claim. Indeed, if a person is a mechanic who has to fix a car, reading the client's emotions is not vital to their job. Yet, when leading a team, a person should be able to perceive, understand, and manage emotions appropriately so that the team succeeds.

Hence, it is worth considering Adam Grant's urge:

For now, the best available evidence suggests that emotional intelligence is not panacea.

Let's recognize it for what it is: a set of skills that can be beneficial in situations where emotional information is rich or vital. (Grant, 2021: p. 176)

His stance is interesting, taking into account his ideas previously expressed when he described a study in which people who scored the lowest on emotional intelligence test were not just the most likely to overestimate their skills, but were also the most likely to dismiss their scores as inaccurate or irrelevant – and the least likely to invest in coaching or self-improvement (Grant, 2021: p. 42).

Regardless of the side one adheres to, if they want to succeed in life and connect with others, they should be emotionally intelligent. If they aspire to become a leader, they should undeniably score high on an emotional intelligence test.

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