

## Members Quarterly

Fall 2014 Edition

### Ask the Expert

# Influence with Emotion

*Keeping your cool*



Luc Beaudry

**Q:** "I'm generally pretty good at keeping my cool, but some people still manage to push my buttons and get my blood boiling. How do I stay in control and manage those situations?"

**A:** There's nothing more frustrating than when you're having a good day, doing your work and then a co-worker pops by and before you know it... snap! Maybe they barged in and started talking even though you're with someone else. Maybe they asked you the same question they've already asked you four times this week. Either way, the next thing you know, your breathing is shallow, your shoulders and stomach tense up and you're suppressing the urge to find out what sound a Dilbert desk calendar would make if it were to come into violent contact with your co-worker's forehead.

### The facts about emotions

We all experience emotions. It's a privilege of being human. Emotions are critical to our well-being because they are a signal from our brain that says "hey, something's happening that matters to you!" The more intense the emotion, the more it engages an automatic fight or flight reaction. We become aggressive or we shut down. Neither are productive behaviours in a business setting.

Like the average two year old, emotions get louder when they are ignored and their impact is then amplified. This is true whether your emotions are on display for the world to see or whether you're as hard to read as a professional poker player. Either way, those strong feelings affect your words, behaviours and decisions.

### Separating fact from fiction

While the emotions are real, the stories that give rise to your emotions are a work of fiction. That's right. Your emotions are a reaction to a story that your brain has fabricated on your behalf. Consider this example.

You're in the middle of a meeting and suddenly, Marilyn's phone rings and she leaves the room to take the call. What does the voice inside *your* head say? Here are a few possibilities: "Seriously? That's so disrespectful!"; "That's Marilyn. Always go, go, go!"; "The boss lets her get away with anything!"; "I hope everything's ok!"; "What a waste of time. Now we'll have to wait until she's back to make a decision."

Fiction. Yes, we know it's fiction because the same set of facts (Marilyn's phone rang, she answered and left the room) leads to multiple interpretations and reactions. This is your brain processing an input (e.g. words, tone, behaviour, thought) and interpreting it using your unique filters (i.e. your values, beliefs, experiences, traits). This interpretation which is completely subjective leads to the emotion. One person finds the behaviour acceptable while someone else finds it rude. Who's right?

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#### Keeping your cool

Self-Management is a pillar of emotional intelligence. Those who excel at managing their emotions focus on what they can control. They make a deliberate choice about how to respond to a person or situation. They separate fact from fiction.

Think of a person or a situation that sets you off and try these steps:

- 1) **Acknowledge:** your emotions (“I’m frustrated”), your assumptions (“Marilyn is disrespectful and thinks we should all adjust to her needs) and the facts (“phone rang, she took the call and left the room”)
- 2) **Reframe the story:** come up with at least three possible reasons why the other person did what they did (“tight deadline”, “CEO was calling”, “personal emergency”). Yes, this is still fiction. It’s empathetic fiction that helps you stay calm while you...
- 3) **Decide how to proceed:** make a conscious choice about how you want to respond to get the best result possible.

Your deliberate response may be the same as your automatic one. The difference is that it is a purposeful response and you are in control. You are distinguishing facts from assumptions and you are adjusting your approach if it’s not working.

You can use these steps “in the moment”. They are also ideal when preparing to meet someone with whom you have difficulty managing your emotions. By anticipating, reframing and readying yourself, you’ll prevent or reduce the reaction and respond more effectively.

#### Influencing with “appropriate” emotions

Suppressing and hiding emotions is unnatural and generally quite ineffective. Humans are quite leaky with their emotions. We are also designed to (consciously and unconsciously) quickly pick up on the emotions of others. Influencing effectively requires us to leverage emotions, not dismiss them.

Once you’ve succeeded at keeping your cool, your emotions become a powerful tool.

- Use them with purpose: Maybe raising your voice is exactly what’s needed. Maybe it’s not! When you’re in control and you decide to show your emotions, you are in a state that enables you to gauge whether you are having the desired impact and if not, change your approach.
- Say it instead of showing it: When letting your emotions show doesn’t seem like the best course of action, consider stating what you’re feeling (e.g. “Marilyn, I was frustrated in today’s meeting when we had to postpone a decision because you left the room”). Notice how this is sticking to the facts? You take ownership of the emotion leaving out judgment and assumptions.

Remember that emotions are there to help you. They provide feedback about how your environment is affecting you. They represent your passions and your humanity. Harness their energy and take control of the story before it takes control of you.

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