



## **Leadership Lessons in Emotional Regulation**

**By Terry Gilbert**

News flash for employers everywhere: Upset, disheartened, worried, anxious and overloaded employees don't give you their best efforts. But perhaps not for the reasons you might think. Even if those employees wanted to do a great job for you, they can't. Distressed employees are physiologically unable to give their work their full attention, their highest quality thinking, their most profound insights or their best ideas. At the risk of over simplifying: stress makes us stupid.

And, if that stress is chronic, it makes us sick.

Our physical health, our emotional states and our cognitive abilities are intricately intertwined. Brain regions and systems once thought to be largely autonomous are now known to be inter-connected in a complex dance, and when feelings of distress lead, impaired cognitive abilities and physical health follow.

Employers who want the best from and for their employees would be well served to start paying as much attention to emotional health and safety as they do to physical health and safety in the workplace.

What is meant by emotional safety?

To answer that question, it's helpful to first understand some key brain systems or regions. This paper will refer to three:

- the limbic system, which is at the heart of emotional experience,
- the reptilian brain, which controls physical functions such as heart rate, blood pressure, hormonal systems, etc.
- and the prefrontal cortex, the thinking part of the brain that performs our highest-order cognitive work.

The limbic system scans incoming stimuli, such as sights, sounds, thoughts, etc. to see if there is something it needs to pay attention to, a nod to the early days of our evolution when our caveman forebears were preoccupied with the business of finding food and shelter or fighting or fleeing from predators. When the limbic system notices something, it immediately classifies it as either a threat or a reward — something that is potentially harmful, or something potentially helpful. For the purposes of this paper, emotionally safe means not being in a threat state.

That's a tough state to achieve, because the limbic system sees threats everywhere. A disapproving look from a colleague, an unmet expectation, uncertainty about a coming change, or more work than can be reasonably

accomplished in the time allotted — all have the potential to be interpreted as threats. Threats don't even have to be real — the limbic brain will treat a perceived or imaginary threat as though it were real. In fact, the brain can conjure up a threat just by thinking about something. For example: “my boss yawned when I was making my presentation. She's not going to recommend me for the project team.” The boss might simply be tired, but the limbic brain might interpret it otherwise.

Upon deciding something is a threat, the limbic brain immediately sends signals to the reptilian brain to prepare the body for fight or flight. This evolutionary holdover is very helpful when confronting mortal danger — say, a vehicle is about to run you down in a crosswalk — but being primed to throttle someone is something of an overreaction if the threat is that someone was late delivering a report. And it's hard on the body. We were meant to be in fight or flight mode only occasionally; being in chronic threat state, with cortisol coursing through our bodies over an extended period, contributes to physical ailments ranging from high blood pressure to suppressed thyroid function.

Only after the body is primed for fight or flight and the limbic system is in full arousal does the prefrontal cortex join the dance. Under those conditions the prefrontal cortex, finicky at the best of times, is unable to do its best work. Ask anyone if they become more articulate, more thoughtful, more reasonable when they are distressed and the answer is invariably, no, quite the opposite. Further, once in limbic arousal, we become more likely to interpret events around us as threatening, more likely to remember them inaccurately, and more likely to misread the expressions and intentions of others. Amy Arnsten, a professor of neurobiology at Yale, notes that the adult brain, when fatigued from information overload, multi-tasking, or non-stop use of the prefrontal cortex, acts like a child's brain.

This chain of events triggered by the limbic system's detection of a threat is largely automatic or reflexive (known as the X-system) — it happens beneath the level of our conscious awareness. To regulate our emotional response and effectively manage ourselves requires that we invoke the reflective system (the C-system) of which the prefrontal cortex is the major player. The ultimate irony? Fear makes us less able to do so. Just when we need it the most, our prefrontal cortex is least able to help us think reasonably, put the threat into perspective, and think ourselves out of react mode.

There is good and hopeful news in all of this. Recent research has shown that training in mindfulness — the ability to observe what one's brain is up to without getting hooked by its thoughts, wants or feelings — develops the brain's ability to be less in the grip of the reflexive X system, and enhances the functioning of the emotion-regulating reflective C system.

Further, leaders who understand this intricate dance of emotional, physical and cognitive health can do much to help their people be at their best in all three realms. Leaders who master regulation of their own emotional responses will

show up as more reasonable, more predictable and consistent, allowing their employees to divert their attention toward work, rather than toward managing the threat of a leader who is perhaps prone to outbursts or unreasonable demands. Setting employees up to experience success by helping them set reasonable and achievable goals, encouraging them to focus on one thing at a time rather than working in a state of constant distraction from emails, texts, interruptions, etc., and ensuring workload is realistic, can go a long way toward moving people out of threat state and into reward state. Research shows that happiness and a sense of well-being is associated with improved cognitive functioning and capacity, encourages insight and calms limbic activity. If stress makes us stupid, happiness and accomplishment make us smarter.

Leaders can mitigate the fear and uncertainty that accompany change by providing information and helping to put the change and its impact into perspective. Research into pain and the placebo effect tells us that simply telling people “this won’t be as bad as you might think” calms the emotional response; giving people a sense of control calms it further.

Perhaps one of the most powerful leadership actions is one of the simplest — get to know your people, spend time with them and let them know they are valued. At the start of a recent study evaluating a new analgesic against a placebo, when it was not known if the new drug posed any risks, patients were monitored for six hours to ensure there were no adverse side effects. Once it became clear the analgesic posed no harm, the six hours of monitoring was discontinued. In analyzing the results, researchers made an unexpected discovery — regardless of whether they received the analgesic or the placebo, the patients who were monitored for six hours experienced significantly less pain than those who were not monitored. Paying attention to people diminishes their pain. Leaders looking to get the best out of their employees would do well to remember that.