



# THE LEADER'S GUIDE TO **EMOTIONAL AGILITY**

HOW TO USE SOFT SKILLS TO GET HARD RESULTS



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## Praise for **The Leader's Guide to Emotional Agility**

'An excellent addition to *The Leader's Guide* series.

A valuable resource full of strategies, tactics and insights about emotional acuity to help improve your knowledge, understanding and skill.'

**Fiona Elsa Dent**, management trainer, leadership coach and author

'This book will guide you to harness values and emotions to create favourable outcomes during transactions with team members and others in the work place.'

**Aruna Anand**, Director, Continental Engineering Services N.A.

'Managing people requires emotional agility, and Kerrie Fleming provides hands-on, practical strategies on how managers can effectively manage their own and other's emotions. Whether you are looking to prevent your own burn-out or for ways to inspire your team, you will find a clear path to doing so in her book.'

**David R. Caruso Ph.D.**, co-founder, Emotional Intelligence Skills Group

'Practical, insightful and engaging, this book is a wonderful toolkit to support the development of a critical skill for today's leader.'

**Tony Sheehan**, Associate Dean, Digital Learning, London Business School

'Powerful and insightful, these seven small steps will help the reader make the huge leap from just leading to being a true leader. An essential read for leaders and those aspiring to climb up the corporate ladder.'

**Professor Vicky Vass**, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Buckinghamshire New University

'This book is a must read for leaders who believe that emotion unleashes action. For those who are sure they can reason their way to a good outcome, read something else.'

**Richard Hytner**, Deputy Chairman, Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide

**CASE STUDY****An extreme response that had a deeper cause**

Mike had worked in the marketing division at Rapido Tube Systems for eight years. He had a strong team who respected him and worked diligently for the division. He had spent many years with each member of the team figuring out their drivers and motivators and fashioning their ambitions to suit the requirements of the company. Mike had successfully created a high-performing team who trusted him implicitly and had mutual respect for one another. He was reasonably satisfied in his job and enjoyed getting on with what needed to be done. The company recently devised a rather ambitious growth strategy to triple its sales revenue over a period of five years. This could be achieved by either acquisition or exponentially reducing costs in-house. In the past month, Mike was informed by his senior team that a new manager would be arriving to help the division achieve this growth ambition. Mike's response was rather lukewarm but nonetheless he agreed to assist the new manager in whatever was needed.

When the new manager, Jonathan, arrived, the team greeted him with some suspicion but tried to make him feel welcome. Jonathan was an introvert and did not engage with anyone from the team and, for the most part, barely made eye contact with anyone from the moment he arrived. His job was to promote efficiencies, for which he was valued by head office. He set an extraordinary target for the division to achieve by the end of the quarter. Mike was stunned but didn't argue and presented the new demands to the team. They were horrified and said there was no way it could be done. Mike urged them along and said that they would all at least have to try. So they did. Jonathan's target of reducing spend by 12 per cent was achieved and beat previous records of spend reduction by 75 per cent. Mike was proud to inform Jonathan that they were all on track but Jonathan made no overt displays of gratitude and simply moved on and talked about the next quarter.

For some reason, which he couldn't understand, Mike started to feel afraid of Jonathan. It became a preoccupation of his, mulling over the way in which Jonathan managed the meetings, and it also became clear to him that the team, too, were slightly afraid or at least intimidated by Jonathan. Mike became defensive on behalf of his team and started to feel helpless when this new manager was wreaking such emotional havoc amongst his wonderful team. He started to avoid Jonathan and found himself slightly palpitating while in meetings with him. As a means to regain control, he decided to confront Jonathan about the team's excellent performance, stating that he and the team had readily achieved the goals set out. Much to Mike's surprise, Jonathan agreed and suggested that perhaps Mike deserved an increase in salary. Mike was stunned but decided to take advantage of the good mood and asked for some professional development, which Jonathan agreed to. Mike left the meeting feeling good but still irritated by the feeling of sheer discomfort and fear. He decided to sit down with his executive coach to discuss what was going on. When the coach started to explore with him as to why Jonathan was causing him so much upset he couldn't really make sense of it. In fact, when he thought about it, Jonathan had elicited a pay rise for him, which his previous manager hadn't done, and had sent him on a rather exclusive leadership programme which made him the envy of his peers. When they started to examine why Mike was feeling this way, the coach asked him if he could recall any person in the past who had evoked a similar reaction. Mike thought for a moment and said, 'My mother'. He surprised himself with such an answer but, when they began to unravel it, Mike started to realise that Jonathan had very similar traits to his mother and he had been terrified of her while growing up. She demanded a lot from him in terms of achievements and, if he didn't fulfil her ambitions for him, he was studiously ignored for a period of time, which was devastating for him as he was a child who really needed affection and endorsements that he was still a good boy.

## Figuring it out

This case study is a really good example of the importance of understanding what is going on behind an emotion. A particular feeling that can be very strong and linger for quite some time can cause huge confusion in the mind. Mike began to experience uncomfortable sensations as Jonathan displayed certain behaviours. This reaction was so strong that it swept him into a state of fear and anxiety and, ultimately, stopped him from understanding why he was having such a reaction. What is helpful for you as leader is to explore the emotion and remember where you met this emotion previously – this can help you to unravel the triggers of the emotion. For you personally, it is useful to understand that you have developed some automatic responses to certain situations and triggers.

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■

In fact, your brain has built and developed a neural pathway (that connects one part of the nervous system with another) that is a preferred path or a default reaction to an event or trigger driven by the emotional schemas we discussed in Step Three. It is akin to a number of spider webs woven across your brain. The more robust the web, the more easily a memory can be recalled, because there are many more ways in which to access the web. For Mike, this web had not been accessed in his adult life so it was more difficult for him to reach into the pathway to review and understand his reaction. Others, who regularly experience this reaction, are drawing on a previous memory for how to respond. This neural pathway is now an automatic response mechanism that has usually been developed in childhood. As you can imagine, this is not a very useful skill to have

when you are working as an adult. It is often completely inappropriate in an adult context. This was clear in the case study, as Mike's fear was hijacking what could have been a good and productive relationship between himself, Jonathan and, indeed, his team. Mike already has some skills in emotional agility as he is very tuned into the needs of his team through observing, listening and ensuring that they are well developed and happy in their tasks. Jonathan knows this and is using Mike as the conduit to build the efficiency that he needs. This is fine in the short term but may become less effective in the long term as the team are relying on Mike to translate the task and protect them from someone whom they see as quite fierce in his ambitions for cost reduction. Jonathan's transient role has ensured that he has never been left in one division of the organisation for very long and has moved on once he has achieved the appropriate cost cutting in each division. His emotional agility may be redundant in his current role but will eventually be required once he meets a situation that doesn't quite have the outcome that he needs. As you can see, emotional agility is not a quick solution but something that if developed, can help you over a period of time to respond better in situations and make decisions based on all the facts about the situation and your default response tendencies. It is a key building block to becoming a strong and sustainable leader.

## Learning through emotion

Our neuroscience in leadership work at Ashridge suggests that we can recreate these neural pathways by learning new ways to respond to adult situations. In addition, it has been demonstrated that the most powerful way to acquire new knowledge as an adult is at an emotional level rather than a cognitive level. Waller and Reitz's (2015) research on how to increase the transfer of learning during and after a leadership development programme suggests that if facilitators can

create a learning environment that allows for people to experience emotions during their learning experience, they build some new neural pathways or responses to situations that are more appropriate to adult contexts. Ashridge's flagship programme called 'The Leader's Experience' (TLE) uses emotional learning methods through the creation of critical incidents throughout the programme. This evokes strong emotional responses in the participants which are managed carefully by expert facilitators and coaches. The literature on neuroscience in leadership suggests that the stronger the emotion experienced during the learning process the more enhanced its recall is at a later point. However, if you overdo the evocation of emotions then there is a risk of complete amygdala hijack where the body and mind prepare for fight or flight.

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#### EXERCISE 4.2

##### **Reflection: how can we begin to develop some new responses?**

There are a number of steps you can take:

- Identify the emotion as it arises inside of you. Can you name it?
- Become aware of your body. You may experience a physiological change like heat or coldness. Sense and feel it happen. Name it.
- Before you open your mouth or react, try to observe silently what is happening to you. This will take superordinate strength on your part.

- Try to remove yourself from the trigger and change the context of your surroundings. Take a walk or grab a coffee.
- If you cannot do this, take a few minutes to quietly compose yourself and look for an alternative way to react to the situation.
- When you are alone, either write down what has happened or examine it in your mind and ask some of the following questions:
  - What is it about this situation that has made you react in this way?
  - When has this happened before?
  - Does it remind you of any episode from childhood? Try to recall in vivid detail if you can.

All of these steps will help you to begin the process of becoming more emotionally agile as you can develop a new response to things that usually trigger an adverse reaction.

### IN SUMMARY

This chapter offers you a means to select an alternative response to your emotions as they arise. This is a powerful skill that will outwardly manifest as someone who is measured, calm and thinks carefully and deeply about things before reacting. Incidentally, these are some of the key characteristics of successful leaders. They have developed a wisdom that has evolved from previous years of runaway emotions driving bad decision making, and have now learned to stand back and elicit more measured responses to situations. It takes courage and confidence to have such patience and is an extremely powerful skill to have both as a leader and individual. Becoming emotionally agile involves a