

3. EMOTIONAL IDENTIFICATION

Earlier this year, I taught a few seminars at a chemical company in Texas. Between classes, I provided coaching for the managers to implement what they learned. After the first session, Larry, one of the managers, sent me an e-mail that he had received from a peer. It included a copy of the original e-mail Larry sent with comments from the other manager written in capital letters in red. Most of the comments started with the word, "WRONG."

Larry was clearly upset. He wanted me to agree with him that his colleague was rude and out to get him. Fortunately, before he sent back a scathing e-mail proving she was the one who was wrong, he called me.

I asked him, "Are you absolutely sure her only purpose in writing the e-mail was to prove you are an idiot?"

He reluctantly answered that there could be a possibility of something else on her mind.

I said, "If you didn't feel like she were trying to take away your credibility, what other reasons do you see for her behavior?"

He said he wasn't sure.

"Be creative," I suggested. "What do you think this letter is really telling you about her?"

Larry said, "Obviously, she is either mad at me or someone else. I guess we have to talk about what she is upset about, not whether who is right or wrong about when the report is due."

I was then able to coach Larry on how he could best approach this conversation with his colleague, starting with asking her if she were willing to find another way to handle disagreements with him since he wasn't comfortable with the e-mailed approach. After a difficult start, Larry told me, he found out that his colleague thought she was responsible for choosing the deadline dates, not him. She felt he was trying to undermine her authority. This led to a discussion on their roles and responsibilities. They agreed on some areas, and negotiated others. Working together, they found a better way to solve their problems.

From our coaching, I knew that the next time Larry received an e-mail with emotional overtones, he would be more inclined to look for the meaning between the words before reacting to the anger he felt. Larry was upset by the way the comments were made. Yet by looking below the surface issue, he found

that his colleague was driven by her own emotional issues. A clash of reactions wouldn't help their working relationship. Instead, he opened himself to finding what was upsetting his colleague.

What does this take?

First, self-awareness so you can understand and clear your own clutter out of the way. And self-awareness helps you to develop the empathy for understanding what is at the source of the behavior in others. This takes stopping and standing in the present moment without acting on your first assumption or feelings.

Before we go on, let me explain that what you are about to read runs counter to some therapies and self-help books where behavioral change is based on changing thought patterns. Change your thoughts, you change your behavior: This technique may work well for some people in some situations. For the rest of us, in most situations where strong emotions are involved, we fail at teaching our brains new thought patterns. Although we can force different behaviors in the moment, few of us experience long-term change. Sometimes we get so discouraged we mentally beat ourselves up and worsen conditions.

What's missing?

Identifying the emotions that created the thoughts in the first place. It takes an awareness of the emotion to diffuse its power and choose to act differently. The emotion may or may not disappear, but only then can we understand and change the thoughts that create the behavior.

How do we know that understanding the source of emotions can modify behavior? By looking at how the brain functions. If we study the neurobiology and the evolution of the brain, we see that input travels through the emotional centers first, the primitive brain, activating bodily reactions before any data is sent to the logical portions. This flow acts to distort the data before our thinking brain even gets a hold of it, particularly if anger, fear, or physical attraction is aroused.

This isn't an accident of nature. The design was first created when "eat or be eaten" and survival of the species were truly the priorities of the day. Above all, the brain is on the lookout for things that may harm us. The problem is our emotional brain doesn't differentiate a threat to the physical body from a threat to the ego. Therefore, if we sense the possibility of losing respect or not being valued for our ideas

and actions, we tend to react as our ancestors did when faced with a physical threat. This response occurs before we even have a chance to assess the reality of the situation.

We can understand this more fully when we look at the evolution of the brain.

When creatures first arrived on the planet, the brain served them by functioning to regulate the body to keep it alive, and to alert the body when it needed to act in self-preservation.

Even now, all input still travels through this portion of the brain first and you can see this process in play whenever you are too hot, too cold, or too hungry to do anything else. Concentrating is a difficult task. You have to take care of your needs first to protect your body.

Then the reptiles appeared on the planet. Their brains were larger and capable of thinking, of thought limited to discerning the answer to three questions. When faced with sensory input, the brain asked:

1. Can it hurt me? If the answer is no....
2. Can I eat it? If the answer is no...
3. Can I have sex with it?

The resulting behavior, in the words of Paul Pearsall in his book, *The Heart's Code*, was based on the four Fs - flight, fight, feast, or fornicate - generally in that order. The order is important in understanding our own behavior. Even though we may be much more civilized than the reptiles (although you may know some people you swear have reptile-like brains), our body still reacts to stimuli through this center first. Much of our behavior is based either on the fear of being hurt or the need to compete. As mentioned earlier, the problem is that the primitive part of our brain reacts the same when someone looks as if they are going to hit us as when we perceive there is a possibility that someone we are with is going to hurt our feelings, test our authority or make us feel stupid. The body reacts in the same way as an animal sensing a threat, preparing us to flight or fight, releasing adrenaline, surging the blood flow to the big muscle groups, and directing thoughts toward protection.

Although we might have a more advanced, logical brain than the reptiles, our thoughts are distorted by this call for protection.

To complicate matters, the brain then evolved to include a broader array of emotions with the appearance of the mammals. The more advanced system allowed for feelings such as nurturing (mammals were the first to show affection to their young), jealousy, delight, loneliness, grief, anger and love. Mammals were the first to cry, the first to smile, and the first to kiss, which research now shows that all mammals do in their own ways.

Thus, we can add many Fs to the fight, flight feast, fornicate formula. Now we have family and favoritism, fastidiousness and fickleness, falsity and feistiness, fulfilled and fortunate, fantasy and philosophy (and a sense of fun).

Mammals can joke, lie, create dreams and regret dreams, all in one conversation.

The mammals also had a new portion of the brain, the pre-frontal lobes, what we typically refer to as the “right and left brain.” These pre-frontal lobes continued to grow as the mammals evolved. These lobes provide the functions of memory and learning, in addition to creativity and reasoning. Therefore, with mammals we see the inception of community, which in humans, led to the growth of cultures, civilization, the arts, religion and science.

With the ability to learn and remember, we also see the onset of neurosis and phobias, fear-based behaviors based on past experiences in addition to the present circumstances.

Therefore, the rational, thinking brain is also the irrational, remembering brain. We learn and we distort. The stronger the emotion felt, the greater the distortion.

The thinking brain also gave us the ability to suppress and rationalize as a means of protection because it's not always wise to fight or flee. Emotions are often stuffed in a blink of an eye, and present circumstances are seen through filters that talk us out of confronting the threat directly. And since we suppress, we are also passive aggressive and manipulative or we misplace our aggression with irrational emotional outbursts when the suppressed anger overflows, such as seen in road rage or spousal abuse.

So the evolved human brain is also on the lookout for the enemy. The vigilance goes beyond physical harm to being alert to attacks on our respect and the loss of being liked, being heard and being acknowledged.

The first question the human brain asks is if what is present is a threat. The answer is based on the sum of our life experiences, so perceived threats grow in number as we age.

What does this all have to do with emotional intelligence? The key is to accept that any event can cause an emotional trigger in our brain, even if the reaction is relief or calm or satisfaction and this emotion then sends messages to the rest of the brain and the body. If the emotion is negative, the reaction is often to suppress or rationalize.

The only way to outsmart the brain is to observe it and interrogate it, assessing if the input poses a real threat or not. You begin to see you have options instead of feeling as though you have no choice.

4. CHOICE

“I feel, therefore I think, therefore I am.”

If you don't know what emotion you are acting on, you are not in control. The first challenge is to recognize the emotional reaction, then determine the source - what caused your brain to react – so you can consider possible actions to take.

Since the root of the word “intelligence” means “to make a choice between options,” you are accessing your emotional intelligence when you perceive options. With this perception, you are free to choose.

You are in control, not your primitive brain.

I call the practice of determining the source of an emotion “peeling the onion” or delayering. You peel away the thoughts you have about a person or incident at the surface layer, the one that gives you a “good reason” for reacting with anger, vengeance, or surrender. You ask yourself, “What am I afraid of losing?” or “What do I feel has been taken away from me (such as control, being right, being liked or appreciated)?” Then you can ask if the fear or the loss is valid.

At that moment, you can see you have choices. You may choose to stay with your emotions. You may choose to take time out to process them and return later to ask for what you need when feeling more neutral or more powerful. You may choose to breathe deeply and let the emotion go, sometimes even laughing at your primitive brain.

In my last job, I spent three weeks researching and writing a proposal for building a learning center. The proposal included a large budget. I set a meeting to present this proposal to the CEO.

The day before my presentation, I dropped by my manager's office to show him my work. He quickly flipped through the proposal stopping on the last page. "You can't ask for that," he said pointing at a line item in the budget.

How do you think I responded?

I jumped into the battle, intent on proving him wrong. At one point, I think I knew he was right, but what do you think I was protecting? Of course, my ego. I didn't stop by his office to get his critique. I was searching for a compliment.

Finally, he demanded I change the budget before seeing the CEO. I grabbed the proposal in disgust. Then something clicked in my head...the real reason for my anger. I said, "Time out. You may be right. But what I really wanted was for you to acknowledge the effort I put into this project."

He answered, "What are you talking about? You always do good work. Change that one item and you have a masterpiece."

"I need to hear you tell me that once in a while."

"All right," he reluctantly said. As I turned to go, he added, "But you never tell me when I do a good job."

I was stunned. He was right. Stuck in my own need for appreciation, I couldn't see that he had the same need as I. I forgot that I had to manage up as well as down.

Since I had the presence of mind to go beyond the surface issue and ask for what I really needed, we were able to improve our relationship. Even better, I began watching him more closely.

Using my curious eye, I found that he never read anybody's reports. In fact, it didn't appear that the man liked to read. Then I noticed that he transposed words in his sentences, and often struggled with the order of letters in a word. For instance, he couldn't say "permanent," saying "pernament" instead. It then dawned on me that my boss was probably dyslexic. I imagined he had spent years learning how to hide

his disability, and had succeeded in spite of it. From that day on, I never gave him a report to read if I could instead read it to him or just highlight the contents.

This incident taught me the power of knowing what is causing my emotional reaction, then making the request for what I need to resolve the situation.

Do you choose compassion over intolerance? Love over jealousy? Intimacy over fear? Courage over complacency? Curiosity over impatience?

When you don't agree with someone or you are working toward a solution with a group, how do you want others to perceive you? How do you want your story to end? Is it more important to stick to your story, to demand others play by your rules? Or can you choose to reframe the situation and consider new possibilities?

The STIR It Up Technique is designed to assist you in getting to the source of your emotions to help you find new possibilities for actions and results. The steps to this technique can be found in Appendix C.

MAKING YOUR OWN MOVIE

"Awareness is the capacity to stand apart from ourselves and examine our thinking, our intentions, our behaviors and our effects on what is around us. As we learn to recognize and accept our relationship to the large and complex world, we accept more and more responsibility for the consequences of our actions, and even of our thoughts." The Emotional Intelligence Activity Book, published by Six Seconds, Inc.

In other words, if you could at any moment, stop and watch yourself in a movie, hearing your mental dialogue as well as observing your behavior, what would you see? Often you would witness a wonderful comedy. It could be said that emotional intelligence is measured by how quickly you can laugh at yourself. At least, you might change your mind more often.

You can order your own copy of *Outsmart Your Brain...at Work* at the Outsmart Your Brain website, <http://www.OutsmartYourBrain.com>!