

Emotion and Coaching

By Angus McLeod, Ph.D.

Emotion is a critical factor for motivated action. It may not be vocalized or even registered by the coachee, but without it, goals are unlikely to be realized. The coach therefore needs to be competent in dealing with emotion where it arises. For that reason, consultants like Hogg Robinson Skillbase, insist that all their coaches have counseling qualifications.

Coachees can be detached from their emotion and therefore from both their motivation and their issues. Conversely, coachees may sometimes be overly emotional and therefore unable to forge logical, procedural plans that will help them reach successful goals.

Emotional Intelligence

High levels of Emotional Intelligence or Emotional Quotient (EQ) help one to develop better self-awareness and self-regulation. High EQ also hones your senses and this leads to greater success in relationships and in influencing others.

EQ at work has become a talking point since the publication of Goleman's book¹ on part of the subject. In essence, the turning of attention to emotional intelligence has to do with the notion² that:

EQ + IQ = Success

Research is beginning to show that people who have a good mix of both EQ and IQ (Intelligence Quotient) tend to be more successful in their career than those who have outstanding IQ and limited EQ.

Interest in EQ started many years before Goleman's book was published. The expression Emotional Thought was coined by Leeper³ as early as 1948 and 'Emotional Intelligence' appeared in 1966 (Leuner⁴). This interest has led to a number of psychometric instruments for assessing the EI of individuals.

EQ provides better self-awareness and self-regulation. Lack of feeling can dull motivation (which is dominated by emotion, whether consciously perceived or not). Lack of feeling often results in interpersonal problems because the individual lacks insight into both themselves and others. In relationships, this can also lead to poor sensitivity. At its extreme, a manager might respond to a secretary's distress over a badly cut finger, "Oh, I suppose that means your typing will be slower?" The language is likely to be factual and typically, there is an absence of emotional expression and body-centered words.

¹ Goleman, D. (1996). *Emotional Intelligence*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing

² Patterson, K. (2000). 'An EQ Opportunity for NLPers' *Rapport* 47 47

³ Leeper, R. W. (1948). 'A Motivational Theory of Emotions to replace emotion as a dis-organized response' *Psychology Review* 55, 5-21

⁴ Quoted by: Bar-On, R. (May 2000) in *Emonet Digest* 403

Examples of Body Centered Phrases such as these:

- I feel that...
- My heart is not in this...
- This report disturbs me

Are more likely to come out like this:

- It is noted that
- I am disinclined to
- The report is disgraceful

Another linguistic clue is that the individual may not use the personal pronoun, especially if rattled. Their conversation can be littered with phrases like this:

One finds that the market is usually dull at this time of the year

You < meaning 'I' > do not expect to be asked such a question?

You < meaning 'I' > do not sign off reports just because one is asked to do so.

Over-Emotional Coachees

A high level of emotional distress can get in the way of finding a rapid solution to an issue. Emotions are designed to take-over from logical thought under stress; they are mind-body states⁵. Emotional distress also lowers effectiveness, particularly in regard to relating with others. In these situations the coach may be well advised to try to encourage the coachee to learn ways of looking at the issue from another more 'dissociated' perspective. Let's refresh the options available:

- First position (holistic experiencing of self, looking out)
- Getting in their shoes (2nd Position),
- Thinking of someone else in a similar situation (Contrived 2nd Position) and,
- The observer (3rd Position).

The level of emotional connectedness with the material is likely to be lower as one goes down this list. When wanting to reduce the coachee's emotional engagement and work with a more logical and dispassionate state, then err towards the 3rd Position.

My Chairman is Stifling Me

Mary was the President of a successful electronics business. The company had been driven by the Chairman who took technology hunches and saw them through. Now in his sixties, he had appointed Mary to run the day-to-day and to be groomed to take over the business within two years. When discussing ideas with Mary, the Chairman would often discount a prospective idea (for a new initiative) with a wave of his hand.

⁵ McLeod, A.I. (2002). 'Emotional Intelligence in Coaching' **Rapport**, 58, 53

Fifteen months into her contract Mary was prepared to leave the company because of frustrations in trying to get her policies adopted and about to resign.

The final straw had been a meeting at which the Chairman had been pushing Mary for ideas and initiatives and knocking them flat, one after the other. From the Second Position, Mary had established that her Chairman was not ready to let go of the Company and not yet confident in Mary as his successor. Her initial frustration was manifested as she became more agitated.

I asked Mary if we could explore the situation again but this time in the Third Perceptual Position, as observer. This to gain detachment and some logical processing around the issues.

Angus: "Mary, in a moment I am going to ask you to imagine yourself in that chair <pointing> at the meeting with your Chairman who will be sitting there <pointing>. The meeting will be taking place as you observe what is going on."

The Boardroom was big and we could get the distance she needed, up against a window at the far end of the room. Mary was clearly very unhappy about the situation and needed to be a considerable distance away before she could let her feelings about it subside.

Angus: "What's happening with Mary?"

Mary: "She is unhappy and increasingly reticent to talk about plans. She looks fed up. Several ideas have been blown away during the last twenty minutes. She thinks her Chairman has not noticed. She is not involving the Chairman, just trying to illustrate how bright she is."

Angus: "And what about the Chairman, what is going on with him?"

Mary: "He is unhappy too but quietly excited by some of the ideas. It is his habit to be the Devil's Advocate with everyone. He expects better arguments. Wait. All the developments in the company have his stamp on them. Mary is too possessive with her initiatives and not offering them with sufficient grace. As the major shareholder he wants to own as much as he can, until Mary proves herself."

Angus: "If the Chairman had advice for Mary, what would it be?"

Mary: "Hang in. Play it my way. I want you to succeed."

Angus: "And you, the observer, if you have advice for Mary, what is that advice?"

Mary: "Do more research, exhibit more grace, acknowledge the master, give him some of your ideas as if you have rejected them and allow him to re-possess them as his own."

Mary then came back to the room and our session. I asked her to go back to the meeting as herself. She returned once again to that appropriate chair. I asked her to accept the advice from both her Chairman and a very wise observer who had a gift for her. Using her own words, exactly as she had spoken them, I gave her the advice and asked for her reaction.

Mary: "It's good advice. I'm going to give it four more months and adopt new strategies of approach. I shall make better business plans as if I was producing for all the shareholders. I have two project ideas that I have not dared bring forward. I am going to discount their value and ask the Chairman to look at them as if I have pretty-much rejected them and see if he will take the bait. I do not care if he pushes the boat out as long as they get a good airing and the projects can be started."

It took another eighteen months before the Chairman suddenly took a back seat and retired overseas. By then, Mary's relationship with him was better. Although far from ideal, Mary was able to get on with her job without daily interference.

Distance from Emotion

In a smaller space and if visually competent, Mary could have been asked to make the scenario smaller (as if farther away) or if auditory, to make the scenario quieter and more remote. This playing with the sub-modalities⁶ of the situation provides the coachee with a level of mental control over their experience that they may not have previously enjoyed.

Where the coachee is highly associated with their emotional material, the coach may notice that breathing rate is changed and skin tones, particularly in the face, neck and upper chest may be affected. In these circumstances, the novice coach may be stressed too. If the coachee's breathing is too shallow, the coach can encourage normal respiration (and improved mental state in the coachee) by breathing deeply (slow and audibly) a few times. If that does not help, the coach may overtly invite the coachee to breath more slowly and deeply.

Coach: "I notice that your breathing seems very shallow. I think it may be helpful for you to breathe more deeply and slow. Would you like to try that? We can do it together if you like?"

Rapid, shallow breathing has the effect of reducing pCO₂ (the partial pressure of carbon dioxide in the blood stream). Low CO₂ levels affect the heart, further compounding the experience of anxiety.

Another thing to watch out for is specific bodily tensions associated with the state. I recall a coachee who had shrunk down about an inch in her chair but without showing any obvious emotion. When I asked her to exaggerate that movement she burst into tears. There was a powerful internal association between the body movement and her emotional state. We can use associations positively and to good effect in offering the coachee positive states, anchored to body sensations.

Lacking Feeling

Where people are detached from their emotional experiences, their behaviors and ability to relate to others can be dysfunctional in certain contexts.

⁶ See for example: Bandler, R., and MacDonald, W. (1988). **An Insider's Guide to Sub-Modalities**, Capitola, California: Meta Publications Inc.

Sometimes a coachee is stuck with an issue and there is high dissociation from their complete emotional experience of it. In that event, it can then be helpful to encourage them to be more associated. The feeling will provide motivation, whether to run away from, or to deal with, the issue.

Managing an Additional Department

Rob works in aviation. When I saw him, he ran a large engineering Department and was being pushed to take on another as well. Firstly, he did not want the extra work and secondly did not want some of the people in that new Department, two of whom he had previously moved out of his area because he could not 'understand what their problems were.'

Rob: "You do not want to take on responsibility that dilutes your management effort do you?"

Angus: "Are you asking me whether I want to take on responsibility that dilutes management effort?"

Rob: "No. I am saying that you do not want to take on respon..."

Angus: "You mean to say, 'I do not want to take on responsibility...?'"

Rob: "I thought I said that?"

Angus: "No. You said 'You do not want' when I think you mean, 'I do not want', is that right?"

Rob: "It's the same thing surely?"

I noticed that Rob had firmed his jaw and his eyes went down and de-focused. I waited over a minute for any response but none came. He was preoccupied. I had been hoping that he might realize the implication of his language without me needing to be explicit about it.

Angus: "Is the issue of responsibility mine or yours?"

Rob: "It's not an issue but the question is mine certainly."

Angus: "If the question is yours, could you say, 'I do not want to take on responsibility that dilutes my management effort'?"

Rob: "I do not want to take on responsibility that dilutes my management effort."

Again there was a long pause; the personal pronoun had produced a degree of association. This was reversed by the time he spoke again.

Rob: "You do not seem to understand the importance of the problem. It's not something that one can take on at this time."

Angus: "I want to understand you fully. Is the problem something that 'one' has to take on or is it a problem that you must take on?"

Rob: "It's me of course."

Angus: "I am sorry to be pedantic about the language you are using. You are talking about a problem that you say is clearly important but have been referring to it as if it were my problem or someone else's problem. I would like you to consider using 'I' and 'my' instead.

Rob: "It's easier to think as I spoke before."

Angus: "Has thinking fixed the problem for you?"

Rob: "No it has not."

Angus: "So if you agree, go along with me and see whether a different way of approaching this problem will help? Lets go back to what you said before the silence. You said <reading > 'I do not want to take on responsibility that dilutes my management effort', could you do that again?"

Rob repeated the sentence and again fell silent. I said the phrase slowly and quietly again, exactly as he had said it and waited. He was still within his issue. I said it again, more slowly and quietly. He then spoke angrily,

Rob: "He's a complete swine you know. I had not thought that Brian was involved in this but I bet he is. He is a pre-merger man. The little-company people have always resented us taking them over. This new job is just to wind me up, get his own back."

Angus: "**You may be right Rob.** This new job may be just to wind you up. Brian could be behind it to get his own back. Can you think of another possibility?"

Linguistic Tip:
'You may be right Rob'
Creating Doubt about Limiting Beliefs

I said, "You may be right Rob" although it seemed unlikely. The point of this is to re-state the perceived reality and to question it while still giving credibility and acknowledgement to the coachee. The phrase, "you may be right" has a good balance and can help the coachee re-evaluate their (limiting) belief.

Rob: "The Department they want to foist on me is a disaster area. Brian probably hopes I will make a mess of it and spoil my copybook with the CEO."

Angus: "Could the company possibly hope something else, other than you will make a mess of it?"

Rob: "The company knows I can manage that Department. Brian should too. I run eight reports and eight hundred in my Department; this new area is only two reports and fifty odd people. I am going to agree to take it on for six months provided I have a free hand on structural changes and HR agreeing to walk alongside to help carry the can. After that, one, I mean I, will be too busy in my own patch to keep on with it."

I have no idea what happened that caused Rob to arrive at a number of speculations. It was clear that gaining some internal attachment, or association, with the issue created both new perceptions (whether right or wrong) and the motivation to do something useful.

Lack of emotional intelligence can sometimes manifest in poor prioritization skills. The coachee is avoiding something which has negative feelings attached to it, not because of a lack of know-how but simply to avoid the associated emotion.

This may have been a component of the case of Rob, above, who was stuck with his decision-making until he had some real contact with the emotion attached to his issue.

Sometimes this avoidance manifests in **Displacement Activity**. In order to avoid the negative emotion, but stay busy, the executive finds other things to do. This has two immediate comforts: avoidance of the issue/emotion and placing the mind's focus on something else. The strategy is unhelpful because it is sub-conscious and unproductive. In coaching, we aim to develop Conscious Perception and choice. The novice coach or mentor will try to improve the coachee's ability to prioritize instead of dealing with the emotion. Because emotion has such motivating (and de-motivating) effects, the skills of prioritization are unlikely to be used or sustained. The emotional motivation/de-motivation needs to be addressed too.

Displacement Activity:

Displacement Activity⁷ describes those impulsive behaviors that manifest automatically (subconsciously) to refocus mental attention and avoid emotional processing. Originally, the term was applied⁸ to the mechanism of avoiding aggressive feelings but now is used more broadly to embrace 'negative thoughts'. There are many manifestations of this in the world around us and the types of activity are as broad as human nature but can include the following:

- Finger tapping
- Scratching
- Chewing
- Hand-wringing
- Driving too fast for road and traffic conditions
- Humming
- Excessive cleaning or desk tidying
- Very long telephone conversations
- Continual use of music or TV
- Inability to sit still

Angela O'Connor reminds me⁹ that sometimes, a conscious decision to divert energy can be made by distracting oneself and placing attention elsewhere. Distraction can provide relief where anxiety is high but will not solve the issue. It is important therefore to return to the issue (if likely to be repeated) with more a more resourceful state or help at later stage. Good distractions for the purposes of reducing stress include slow breathing, meditation and visualization of pleasant experiences.

⁷ See for example: Carver, C.S., & Scheier, M.F. (2000). *Perspectives on Personality* (4th Edition). p. 227. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon

⁸ Lorenz, K.Z. (1966). *On Aggression*. London: Methuen

⁹ O'Connell, A. (2003). Private communication

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Emotion is vital to motivated action. Coaches need to be trained and experienced in working with emotion to be fully effective.

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