

It's Always Personal

by Anne Kreamer - 2011

The concept of using reason over emotion has been a staple of business practice for several hundred years. We tend to view reason as good and emotion as the evil twin trying to corrupt our thinking. Modern brain science and the arrival of more women in the workplace than men have led to real questioning of this axiom. This book delves into the reasons behind this questioning and how women are different from men in their emotional makeup and reactions.

Six primary workplace emotional flashpoints:

1. Anger
2. Fear
3. Anxiety
4. Empathy
5. Happiness
6. Crying.

Emotion is a hardwired biological component of our physiology. What we call emotion is simply how we mediate between environmental stimuli and subsequent behavior, and the labels by which we mentally index those stimuli and behaviors for later reference.

Homo sapiens bodies continue to automatically process psychological threats as physical threats. The evolutionary lag in the development of more emotionally calibrated or sophisticated responses to psychological challenges is a huge contributor to what makes navigating modern life so incredibly hard. Our bodies tell us to do one thing, while our minds know that we cannot or should not do that thing.

In the larger culture we harbor paradoxical notions about the value of expressing our feelings -- bottling up our emotions is bad for us, but letting them out also can make things worse.

The Gender Factor

Women, on average, are better at remembering and articulating the details of an emotional event. They also produce higher levels of prolactin, the hormone that controls tears, meaning that most women are hardwired to cry more frequently.

Under stress women produce significantly more oxytocin, the hormone that influences what biologists call the "tend and befriend" instinct. The man's brain produces far more testosterone under stress than women and would therefore be far more likely to confront opponents. When under stress a man's field of vision narrows, allowing him to zero in on a threat, while a woman's vision widens to allow her to take in her total surroundings.

There are significant gender distinctions in how men and women are able to regulate their emotional response to stimuli. Women may have to use more effort to attempt to control emotions and they seem to need to transform negative emotions into more positive experiences.

Women at work tend to be both more emotionally intelligent (like making people feel harmonious) and more sophisticated in emotional aggression than are men.

The Anger Epidemic

We live in a culture filled with anger.

Techniques to manage anger...

- *Changing perspective* -- imagine the person screaming at you as a 2-year-old
- *When is it ok to be angry?*
 - It must be directed at the target of the anger
 - It must restore your sense of control over the situation
 - It must change the behavior of the target
 - You and your target must speak the same anger language.
- *How to let someone know you are angry*
 - Meet later and ask if the other person is ready to listen
 - Don't use undirected anger
- *How to apologize*
 - Sound and be genuine
 - Listen for anything they may want to say
 - Let go afterwards
- *Learning to step back (DING)*
 - Deep breaths
 - Imagine what the other person is feeling
 - Name emotions you both are feeling
 - Go on with your life

Being Afraid

Techniques to manage fear

- *Improve situational awareness* (knowing what is going on around you) and conduct your own analysis twice a year
- *Ask for help* -- Most of us are wired to feel better when we help others and we should use this fact
- *Build self-confidence* -- Find at least one activity that makes you feel good about yourself
- *Value courage* -- Think about times where you or others demonstrated some form of courage

Age of anxiety

Anxiety is an early-warning system, often accompanied by uncertainty, and it always raises stress levels.

Stress reduces creativity.

Techniques to manage anxiety

- *Say 'Ohm'* or get moving
- *Smell the roses* -- Have a mental or physical place to retreat to
- *What's the worst that can happen?*
- *Diagram what you need to do* -- sit down and plan out your actions

Empathy: We do get by with a little help from our friends

Empathy and compassion arise from a desire to ensure the survival of the species.

- Fear and anxiety are about avoiding harm
- Anger is about punishing harm-doers
- Empathy is about mitigating the pain of others harmed

Organizations that explicitly incorporate empathy coaching in how to treat customers and clients report higher rates of job satisfaction and productivity.

Techniques to build empathy

- *Being fired and firing*
 - Never put words into the other's mouth
 - Allow time for bad information to be processed
 - Learn to sit quietly
 - Offer a tissue
 - Talk to someone you trust
- *When the going gets too tough*
 - Don't be afraid to ask for help
 - Listen
- *Compassion mediation*
 - Quiet yourself
 - Extend thoughts to anyone you wish to have compassion for
 - Project positive feeling toward that person

Crying

From the time of Hippocrates (2400 years ago), tears have been associated with catharsis and the body's ability to cleanse itself of bad stuff - from humors, to moods, and toxins.

Women cry almost four times as often as men. Women's tear ducts are larger, resulting in a larger volume of tears. Hormonal changes can cause women to cry.

When men cry at work it is usually for personal reasons, while women cry because of something that happened at work.

Crying is not only biologically more frequent in women, but culturally we equate crying with women and weakness, while not crying is associated with maleness and strength. When a woman in a position of strength is crying we equate it with a weakness, while a man crying in a similar situation is viewed as having an emotional aspect to his personality.

Techniques to handle your emotions

- *Handling tears*
 - Take a walk outside to clear your mind and give you added perspective.
 - Ask for a moment to compose yourself - peak emotions don't last long.

Beyond the Facts of Life

When the laws regarding equal pay and discrimination were passed in the 1960's, the only people that women coming into the workforce had to model themselves after were men. Today women are modeling themselves after other women and their stereotypes are beginning to change.

There is increasing scientific evidence that both men and women in a family undergo hormonal changes with the birth of a child. This is because both need to be protective of children to ensure their growth and the continuation of the species.

Additionally, men go through seasonal cycles of testosterone, with increases in the fall and decreases in the spring. Testosterone not only increases aggressive behavior, but also risk-taking behavior.

Perhaps we should start being more analytical and empirical about emotion and the workplace, in order to allow our workplaces to function better.

The Four Profiles

People generally have a dominant emotional profile, with a secondary way in which we work. These categories do not seem to have any disproportionate gender distribution. Also, no category is a predictor of occupational success or happiness.

60% of people tended to be unable to easily shrug off or move past strong emotional reactions and tend toward pessimism.

1. *Spouters* (21%) - Charismatic and exciting, these people express their feelings and seem to be responsible for a seemingly disproportionate share of the emotional incidents. They tend to challenge themselves and blame others. They talk more than they listen and believe their success is more about luck than performance.
2. *Accepters* (39%) - Extremely concerned about details and keeping their emotions hidden, they often don't consider themselves creative or leaders. Extenuating circumstances, office politics, and client relations often create intense pressure on people, driving them to behave as Accepters.

40% of people have strong inner fortitude and emotional resilience and tend toward optimism.

3. *Believers* (27%) - Find solace by trusting in the stabilizing, civilizing power of larger principles and the greater good, they feel unhappy when those values are compromised. They possess high degrees of fortitude, but don't consider themselves natural leaders, and this group skews slightly female. They tend to listen more than they speak and prefer to tell the truth, but don't go out of their way to make a point.
4. *Solvers* (13%) - Identifying themselves as introspective and people who do their best work under stress, these people are comfortable speaking up and, compared with other groups, there are twice as many Solvers in top management. They are also, on average, between five and nine years older than members of the other groups - indicating we may grow into better emotional management as we age.

Bouncing Back

Techniques to build emotional resiliency

- *Write what you know and feel* -- Build an outline of your thoughts and feelings several times a day and review this outline to familiarize yourself with your feelings and things that are causing you stress. Identify people who support you and make you feel confident; connect with them on a regular basis.
- *Assess your physical state* -- Run a quick body scan if you are feeling unusually brittle or fragile - are you hungry, tired, or lethargic? Use deep abdominal breathing to retain/regain a sense of being in control. Smile when appropriate as this is also a means of activating emotion.

Happiness: Creativity at work

Anger is easier to talk about than joy.

Flow: The state attained when one is completely absorbed in the task at hand - The ego falls away, time flies, every action seems to flow naturally from the previous one. Often this is accomplished when working in concert with others - successful relationships are a key to human happiness.

Happiness is a state of mind characterized by contentment, satisfaction, pleasure, or joy.

There is a genetic component to happiness that relates to what is known as your biological "set point." About 50% of one's basic disposition - easygoing versus stressed-out - comes from genetic programming.

Happiness (H) = Biological set point (S) + conditions of your life (C) + voluntary activities you do (V). While your health (C) influences your life, your behavior (V) is actually a greater component and one under one's own control.

- *Good-day happiness* is about an awareness of the fortunate conditions of one's life -- stopping to smell the roses.
- *Good-life happiness* relates to conditions over which we have some control. This does not mean we have no obstacles or challenges - we need these for our achievements to have meaning.
- *Peak happiness* relates to the things we choose to do - very closely associated with the "V" in life. This becomes more elusive the older we get and the less willing we are to engage in the kinds of experiences where peak moments tend to happen. At work these experiences are often associated with the creation of something original - some aspect of the creative process.

Humor is another factor contributing to happiness. Laughter is, literally, not only contagious, but increases the creative thinking process involved in problem solving. Employing a well-timed sense of humor is the most effective and universal means of stress reduction and team-building available to a manager.

Work has entered the "conceptual age," in which "left-brain" analytic functions can be increasingly performed by computers, and successful enterprises cultivate the "right-brain" qualities of inventiveness, empathy, joyfulness, and meaning.

Two scientific studies find competing results:

- The optimal state for an individual seeking maximum creativity at work is to embrace an in-between emotional state, neither happy-go-luckily complacent nor anxiously stressed-out; a mixed emotion state that stimulates unconventional, more creative solutions.
- Purely positive states are even more beneficial than ambivalent ones for stimulating creativity. People who maintain positive emotions have a longer attention span, are more creative in problem-solving, and are more open to alternative solutions.

In either case, highly stressed environments did not produce maximum creative results.

Negative emotions tend to narrow options and spur a quick-action response to minimize a specific proximate threat, whereas positive emotions are more enduring and expansive, enlarging their field of influence.

Happiness, like laughter, is a property of groups and quickly infects teams of people, not only increasing creativity, but persistence and cooperation as well.

Techniques to build emotional creativity

- *Managing creativity is not a science, but more about how you get there.* What you learn and discover during the process is incredibly important to coming up with the solution. Be completely honest and communicate constantly.
 1. Rule #1: Anybody can say anything about the work at any time.
 2. Rule #2: While you can say anything, you must be sensitive.
 3. Rule #3: You have to give reasons.
- *Nurturing your own creativity* -- If you never take the time to open yourself to the world and fill your creative well, you will eventually run out of ideas - a narrow range of input results in the same narrow range of output. Innovation needs to be informed and sometimes provoked by the unpredictable hurly-burly of messy, surprising real life.

We may have come from Mars and Venus, but we all live on Earth

The goal of any person or organization should be to allow emotion at work, in all of its gendered nuances, its due - but not to excess - rather than to eliminate the expression of negative emotions.

If men and women were to express more emotion at work routinely and easily, then as a people we might not implode emotionally so frequently, or feel the need to gawk at others emoting in inappropriate ways.